

INTRODUCTION

Why Do People Write?

There comes a time in one's life when it becomes imperative to give a name to the problem around which one's existence has revolved. This act of naming is at the same time arrogant, definitive, and programmatic: it amounts to determining what is most important of all, what is relatively secondary, and what must be given priority in the future. Sometimes it is young people who rise up and declare vigorously that their predecessors had failed to identify the only question of importance. And I think of Albert Camus at age twenty-nine, who begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* with this provocation: "There is only one truly serious philosophical problem: suicide."¹ Brushing off the history of philosophy—Immanuel Kant and his categories, René Descartes's ontological argument—or, more precisely, postponing the resolution of questions that he judged secondary and reduced to what they perhaps are—that is, simple mind games—Camus approaches philosophy resolved to reorder the priorities. At other times it is a retrospective gaze on an existence that has receded into the twilight, a gaze that discerns, through the mass of intertwined experiences, the question that unites the hopes, the errors, the failures, and the throng of passions wound around a life. And I then recall one of the most beautiful opening sentences I've ever read: "The guillotine—more generally, capital punishment and the various methods of meting out death—has been the abiding obsession of my life."² With these words, Claude Lanzmann identifies the principal theme whose repetitions and variations wend through and organize his existence, as well as his autobiography.

That a declaration of this kind be made in the heat of a fiery youth impatient to reinvent thought, or that it be the result of the wisdom of a being who, having reached life's end, finally finds himself, briefly, at a vantage point from which he can survey a landscape whose organization finally appears intelligible to him, in both cases introspection and pretention to universality are merged. For this problem is, at the same time, one that each individual has met at every stage of his development, and one that he strives to solve because of the importance

that it assumes for everyone. Here, the in-depth examination of an innermost difficulty authorizes the individual to declare a truth for all humankind.

It is by a declaration of the same order that I would like to begin this study. There is only one really serious literary problem: the transmission of texts to posterity. The rest—the modes of renewal of a genre, the uniqueness of a style, and the dialogue between works—we can deal with all that once the contradictions implied by the quest for approval by a virtual public will have been understood.

The reader will no doubt have noted that the “one truly serious philosophical problem” of Camus and the “abiding obsession” of Lanzmann are not unrelated. The first reflects on the reasons why an individual chooses life rather than its opposite, the second on the different manners by which death is administered to us by others. In each case, it is clearly the inevitability of our disappearance that engenders both the works of the philosopher and those of the memorialist. My own investigation maintains an underlying relationship with their concerns, for it amounts to questioning the validity of the confidence granted to this form of symbolic mortality that is the inscription of our name, of the memory of our existence, and of the results of our thought in the memory of this anonymous, distant, indeterminate public that we call posterity. For the ambition that consists of obtaining the esteem of the latter is nothing more than one manifestation among others of a need that is profoundly anchored in the heart of all men and women: to identify at least one reason to believe that we are more than animals doomed to disappear and be forgotten.

At the Beginning Is Death

“The worm at the core of the human condition” is how Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski describe the capacity of each of us to anticipate our disappearance. “The awareness that we humans will die,” they write, “has a profound and pervasive effect on our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in almost every domain of human life—whether we are conscious of it or not.”³ *The Paradoxes of Posterity* are based on the same premise: at the beginning is death. Of course, one will observe that it is also found at the end of our lives, unless we confront this obvious fact—as philosophers have been doing since antiquity—with the no less pertinent fact that, properly speaking, death is to be found nowhere, given that it is a nonevent, the cessation of our experiences and not the last of them. In another sense, however, it is indeed there, from the beginning, anchored in our consciousness when, around the age of three, we learn that we and all of the beings that we love will disappear one day.⁴ This revelation is a scandal. Not only do the little beings, who overestimate their objective importance owing to the pampering and consideration of adults who are more

powerful than they, suddenly deduce that they are not and never have been the center of the world; they realize also that they are just a perishable fragment of a community that is subject to the same implacable laws. But they become no less conscious, for the first time, that all those they love are also condemned. This experience, common to all humankind, hastens the adoption of what I will call a final value.

By this expression I wish to designate a personal solution to the problem of our mortality. Sometimes we change that solution, but most often, having seen it adopted by an authority figure suffices for us to remain faithful to it until the end of our life. We are going to die, of course, and our grandparents, parents, brothers, and sisters also. But we believe that it is possible to oppose to this annihilation a form of permanence that denies or at least relativizes it by preserving something of ourselves that will not disappear. Perhaps the spiritual part of our person will survive, and earning an eternity of divine grace will become the most important thing in our life. This value is named “God.” Perhaps we believe in the permanence of our consciousness during successive lives, so we attempt to transmit to our future incarnations a body of thoughts, words, and good deeds that will guarantee happiness and tranquility in our subsequent existences. This value is “karma.” Or we try to bequeath to our offspring not only our name, our genetic and material patrimony, but also principles that will help them in the conduct of their life. This value is called “progeny.” That is, of course, unless we transform the thirst for wealth into a quest for the absolute, forgetting that money only has the value we attribute to it, and that it is people’s decisions alone that “determine the value of this fetish that masks nothingness, the horizon of their being-for-death.”⁵ This value is called “money.” Or we desire to leave the memory of our person to our successors by accomplishing something that has never been done before: we are the first person to establish a record, or we have created a business, a machine, or a body of work that, like the ambassadors sent by the great Khan, will represent us at the court of future centuries. Diverse in appearance, these behaviors are all determined by the adoption of the same value: posterity.

Entries in the catalog of solutions to render the perspective of our mortality tolerable are scarce, and stating them amounts to an intellectually trivial undertaking given that, at some time or other, we have considered all of them separately, sometimes to adopt them, sometimes to dismiss them—unless we had chosen to simply combine them. These solutions are indeed not mutually exclusive: I can bequeath my fortune to a charitable organization in the hope that it will take my name without giving up my belief in spiritual immortality. But what is less evident is the decisive and concealed role that these values play in the decisions, both big and small, that circumscribe our daily existence and become the purpose we attribute to our existence. Because, regardless of

whether we are conscious of it, the idea of death never really leaves us; it is called to mind a hundred times a day: the news on the radio in the morning speaks of the victims of an attack; driving to work we see an animal crushed to death on the side of the road; our colleague has lost his wife, and an occasional pain in our stomach leads us to fear, each time it occurs, the slow growth of a cancer. The very urgency of our physical needs makes us aware that they can only be ignored at the risk of our life.

Faced with these constant reminders that we are going to die, we resort to behaviors whose true purpose only appears to us occasionally. The workers who put in sixty hours week after week are comforted by the thought that their labor is guaranteeing the well-being of their family, but behind this immediate purpose is concealed another—that is, the idea that their very existence is justified by being put in the service of their family. The businesswoman who foregoes marriage and children, who denies herself vacations or leisure activities to devote all her energies to the management of a multinational company, is motivated by ambition, the desire for wealth, power, and prestige—but also by the desire to leave a durable mark on the business with which she has identified herself. The mountain climber who is the first to accomplish a perilous ascent will be hard put, once he has returned to normal life, to explain an unproductive enterprise that could have been interrupted by death at any time. Like Sir Edmund Hillary, he will answer that he climbed Mount Everest “because it was there,” or like Reinhold Messner, he will say that he went into the mountains “to live.” Behind these cryptic statements, however, the motivation is perfectly clear: these athletes wanted to transmit to their successors the memory of an extraordinary act, for there is no human activity that does not have both its exceptional and its commonplace history, its heroes to live it, and its heralds to sing about it. Thus the value whose adoption allows me to believe that I will not die *entirely* may be called “final,” because it is the ultimate justification of my actions, discovered anew each time that I eliminate mentally the secondary values that obscure it in my consciousness.

The problem thus becomes to determine why this value and not another. Why does one choose to try to get around the thought of our mortality through the belief that God will receive our soul in paradise or by transmitting the memory of our person to future generations of which we can know nothing? It is true that responses vary, but what we all have in common is the need to seek a solution to the great problem: why are we living (and this “why” is a questioning of the purpose, not the cause) if it is true that we are destined to disappear? In our quest to solve this problem, we often see others as obstacles. Individuals who adopt posterity as their final value are apt to interpret the attempts of others to leave their mark on the collective memory as a threat. For if there are several of us who covet an athletic record, only the best of us will win first place, thus

stealing the symbolic immortality from competitors who had a no less burning need. If several of us wish to mark history by our art, the genius of a competitor is more than a questioning of a vocation founded on a clearly inferior talent; it is a negation of our very person, since it is painfully clear to competent but minor artists that their exceptional contemporary will be the subject of future centuries while they will be forgotten by everyone. In the context of Western society where the affirmation of the uniqueness of each person determines antagonistic behaviors, the ego battles would not be so fierce if the true stake were not metaphysical.

These rivalries between individuals who have adopted the same final value are accompanied by other struggles with those who, on the contrary, have chosen an entirely different one. If I go to mass every week, for instance, and am convinced that obeying a series of precepts handed down from the pulpit will bring me spiritual immortality, what do I have in common with someone who cannot see beyond this life and believes that it will be a success to the extent that it leaves a trace in a history book? What does an artist who works alone have in common with individuals who identify with a certain group whose well-being is their principal concern? And what do all those who have a sufficiently flattering idea of their person to wish that people will be interested in them after their death, have in common with the mass of people who see neither so high nor so far but feel that their life is a success each time a flash of happiness brightens their child's face? We all seek to be worth more than our death, but we go about it in different ways. And whereas this disagreement on the means often inclines individuals toward antipathy and violence, the adoption of a different final value by others appearing as a criticism of the use they are making of their own existence, we would in fact, on the contrary, feel great compassion and affection for others if only we were aware of the common goal we pursue, the futility of the means we adopt, and the ultimate failure of our undertaking.

This mutual compassion and affection are only conceivable if we are able to give up the illusion we choose to harbor. In order for me to accept, authentically, this distinct solution to the problem of mortality that another has chosen, I have to realize that it is no more valid than my own: it is just the manner that person has found to render tolerable an intolerable prospect, and if it proves to be effective for him or her, that is fine. In other words, the ultimate equivalence of final values can only be understood if we have first become aware of their mutual futility. Thus a tolerance founded on the consciousness of a common destiny may only be possible once we have managed to recognize final values for what they are: a means to mask the unbearable whose effectiveness is more or less durable but that, strictly speaking, never yields what we expect from it—that is, complete tranquility at the prospect of death and an immortality that is neither spiritual nor symbolic, but literal.

The Trace of Works and the Network of Memoirs

I have observed that posterity is among the final values to which individuals have recourse in order to tolerate the idea of their disappearance. To declare the foregoing amounts to determining a use of posterity without specifying its significance. So, what do we mean by this term each time we use it throughout this book? It is time to examine more closely a concept whose apparent transparency masks many misconceptions.⁶

To reflect on posterity is tantamount to adopting the role of Oedipus investigating the death of Laius, since we are the posterity of those who came before us. It is a strange concept whose definition leads us to look to ourselves rather than attempt to seize the contours of an abstraction. Not only the public of our contemporaries, we are also the public to which the entirety of our predecessors is speaking. “We”: in fact, all of humankind, since the act of publishing a work destines it to everyone unreservedly, an author being able to dream of an ideal readership without having the possibility of addressing it exclusively, and every individual having the freedom to open any work written in the past. Of course, we who represent posterity will die in our turn, and others will assume after us, vis-à-vis our contemporaries who have now become their predecessors, the function of evaluation and recall of works that is currently ours. Posterity is thus recomposed at the same time that it loses its members, much like an organism whose cells are renewed throughout its existence.

As years pass, the responsibility of posterity increases, its moral burden grows heavy, its memory assailed by new entreaties since other candidates for posthumous recognition transmit the fruits of their labors. But what is the nature of this memory in which the authors from the past attempt to make their impression without either “the wrath of Jove, nor fire, nor sword, nor the gnawing tooth of time”⁷ being able to destroy them? A work that passes on to posterity is not only one whose copies escape destruction: the words of the deceased author must also be embodied in the mind of a living person; in short, it must be brought to life through reading in order to transcend *potentiality* and be *activated*.⁸ If each of us is a parcel of posterity, it is a *network of memories* that composes posterity’s mnemonic faculties. And within each of these individual memories, the place occupied by authors from the past varies radically.

Certain authors have transmitted the memory of their work to the quasi totality of humankind. Who has never heard of *Romeo and Juliette* and of the playwright who gave life to this couple? However, while the intimate familiarity of certain specialists with the body of Shakespeare’s work extends to the world in which he wrote his oeuvre, other individuals are only familiar with isolated lines from his plays and will never have heard of the titles of his less frequently staged works.⁹ Nonetheless, the literature professor at Harvard and the casual

reader are both actively involved in Shakespeare's posterity, although, if the playwright has escaped oblivion, he is very diversely present in individual memories. Consequently, a posterity may only be called universal from a statistical standpoint (the memory of a body of work is found in a vast sample of the world population), whereas individuals taken separately will only ever recall a variable proportion of an author's production. We will thus speak of a *memorial imprint* to designate the space, more or less extensive and necessarily fluid, that a work occupies in the memory of an individual. And provided that we change the scale and consider abstractly the network of memories in its entirety, it will appear that the place occupied by the great authors from the past will only ever represent a very tiny percentage of the collective memory that, like a colossal hard disk, is occupied by an enormous contingent of memories, given that writers are far from having a monopoly on posterity—artists and athletes, women politicians like men of action, generals and scientists, all demand their share of posthumous recognition.

Conversely, while a work may not have any current readers, it is nonetheless preserved in a private collection or on a digital platform. One might consider that it is waiting to be rediscovered by one of the future incarnations of posterity: who knows if one day people will not recognize its merits despite the fact that it is on the verge of obliteration? If its memorial imprint is for the moment minimal, reduced to existence in the minds of a few specialists, its potential resurgence will persist as long as there are people who may become interested in it. Published in 1792, immediately banned by the Girondin government, then republished eight years later without provoking the slightest reaction, Claude-François de Lezay-Marnésia's *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* is one of those works that we might be tempted to say did not "pass on to posterity." And nonetheless, as a result of pure chance and a series of individual undertakings, they were republished in 2017 for the first time in two centuries.¹⁰ To be sure, the memory of this work and of its author, Lezay-Marnésia, is only shared by a handful of readers, but the possibility of a growing memorial imprint is now open: how many forgotten works have ultimately joined the canon? Long forgotten, Françoise Graffigny's *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* are now part of the treasured works of the French Enlightenment. It is always possible that as a result of the progressive reorganization of posterity, through imperceptible changes, the memorial space occupied by an author will increase progressively as well. And if the authors who have long held the attention of posterity have a greater chance of seeing their preeminence grow even more over time, any position is at risk of likewise being eroded, renegotiated, or threatened by the evolution of posterity, given enough time.

Finally, within the body of an author's production, the successive forms of posterity are apt to grant posthumous recognition to distinct works. Voltaire's

place in posterity is largely owed to texts that he did not view as the principle illustrations of his talent, and those of us who admire the *Philosophical Tales* will perhaps be replaced one day by spectators who will once again applaud his play *Zaire*. Thus the memorial imprint left by the collective works of an author may retain its scope, whereas the individual works that compose it are apt to receive over the course of time varied attention from the public, posterity granting its esteem to certain of them while preferring others when its membership changes. While the expression “reaching posterity” leads us to think of the transmission of texts as if it were a fateful meeting between a will and an obstacle (authors appear before posterity like travelers stopping before a precipice, not knowing if they will cross it or if they will disappear in its abyss never to be seen again), there are an infinite number of intermediary positions between the poles of universal celebration and complete oblivion, intermediary positions that are never definitively fixed. Moreover, while this expression leads us spontaneously to imagine posterity as an abstract and single entity, it is important to emphasize that it comprises the multitude of current and potential recipients of a work.

It is thus preferable to abandon the “passage” (into posterity) metaphor for what I will call a “cyber” metaphor. Let us imagine posterity as the connection of all the mnemonic capacities of humankind. Taken together, this memory is subjected to a continual variation of its content, given that the appearance and disappearance of the memories associated with the network constantly modifies the store of memories. Each individual memory is occupied in its own way by the memory of a given work, as the example of Shakespeare’s readers demonstrates above: an author’s posterity is composed of the average of the individual memories that preserve her or his work. This average is in constant evolution owing to a number of factors that may come into play to engrave the recollection of an author’s work in additional individual memories: inclusion of a work in the program of a high school or university, a new edition, or the transposition into another artistic form—without forgetting the political events that may provoke renewed interest in a text.¹¹ Other factors may nonetheless play the opposite role: an author may have become famous for a form of writing that no longer corresponds to the aesthetic tastes of posterity (we scarcely read anymore the twenty-page poems that enchanted the nineteenth-century readership), or posterity may reproach authors for a political position that casts a retrospective shadow on their writing (discovered after his death, the collaborationist past of Paul de Man now weighs heavily on the reception of his works).¹²

Moreover, the cyber metaphor leads to an additional distinction that also applies to the data preserved by posterity: the opposition between saved files and files that are being composed. Indeed, the memory of a computer may be occupied by files that are never consulted or modified, whereas there are documents to which the users return constantly to add new elements or to revise the existing

text. It is no different with books, certain of which are the objects of passive knowledge, perpetuated notably by schools, whose persistence in the collective memory produces neither transcriptions in other artistic forms nor rewritings, while other texts continue to stimulate imaginations and bring forth new works that, while distinguishing themselves from their model, bring an additional proof of its existence and constitute an indirect invitation to rediscover it. In this global network of connected memories, it is thus necessary to distinguish between works that occupy part of the memorial space without being rewritten and those that generate the production of new texts.

The cyber metaphor, finally, invites a variation of scale that further destabilizes the representation of posterity as a court of justice possessing only two sentences: the crown of immortality and the condemnation to oblivion. It is in fact possible to imagine a distinction between the trace left by an author on diverse geographical spaces (what is the posterity of François Mauriac in the Bordeaux region as compared to Brittany?), on national communities (what is the mark left by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa on Uruguay?), or on linguistic communities (what trace has Fyodor Dostoevsky left on Italian-speaking populations?). These changes of scale allow us to contest the clichéd representation of the “great writer preserved by posterity,” given that there is no posthumous existence whose scope does not vary broadly when spaces as well as historical periods are taken into consideration. Since the network of memories is in constant metamorphosis, posterity is never a reward that is earned once and for all: it consists in a memorial imprint that fluctuates with the flow of time.

The Posterity of Writers

The posterity of writers is the sole subject of the preceding reflections. Nonetheless, it is abundantly clear that the desire to inscribe the memory of a former existence in the network of memories is shared by individuals for whom action in the world, and not writing, is the means to that end. Since antiquity, statesmen and military leaders have been transmitting the memory of their existence to future centuries, and the passion to be mentioned in history books is just as voracious as that which consists in jotting one’s name down on the covers of novels or essays. However, the linguistic nature of symbolic immortality turns the investigation of the posterity of literary figures into a query whose conclusions concern all those who seek it, including through their acts. For, ultimately, it is always through a discourse that we are remembered, whether it is the one engraved on the walls of a monument, stated by professors to their students, or printed on the pages of a book. In order not to disappear completely, politicians need biographers who will recount their efforts and measure their impact on the

world; once their term in office is over, they often become diarists themselves to add a block to their own monument. Likewise, artists who produce works of art would not be satisfied if nothing but those works remained after their death. They hope that their signature in the corner of the painting will draw attention to themselves, and that their work will be an invitation to discover—in the words of a biographer, a critic, or an encyclopedia editor—the linguistic summary of their life. Likewise, mathematicians who formulate eternal truths in which nothing of themselves is conveyed still associate their name with their discovery: a theorem or a conjecture will be indissolubly bound to their person, and it is once again through language that they will be remembered as the source of this revelation. In short, if it is possible to present a variety of claims to the esteem of the mutating publics that compose in their turn posterity, claims obtained outside literature—in one of those arenas that politics, war, fine arts, sports, and science design around human ambitions—it is patent that future generations will only remember an individual after his or her reduction to a linguistic state.

Consequently, the problems that directly affect writers also concern those whom they evoke in their writing in order to assure the latter that they will not be forgotten in the future. One of these problems is the fragility of languages: I will describe the paradox that is inherent in the activity of a writer who produces a work intended for future centuries while it is nestled in a linguistic system that may not prove to be indefinitely intelligible.⁵³ This fragility does not constitute a threat for writers alone but rather for the entire body of pretenders to symbolic immortality: if the great exploits of a general are only recorded in a language that has become indecipherable, posterity will know nothing of him. Similarly, the ephemeral character of the material format of texts has repercussions both on the permanence of literary reputations and on the memory of real personalities presented in biographies. When the last copy of the life of a famous woman disappears, it simultaneously destroys a work and the memory of its subject. It results from the preceding that reflection on literary posterity produces both problems and, perhaps, reasons to hope for all of the candidates for symbolic immortality, given that each literary figure is a universal, unique case. Unique because they are all confronted by obstacles that apply to them exclusively (just as the politician or the athlete have their particular adversaries to conquer to prove that they are worthy of remembrance), but universal, too, for these victories belong to all those whose posthumous memory, in the last resort, depends on their use of words.

But we still need to introduce those who enter into the category of men or women of letters. I would like to confer a broad definition on this group, including all those for whom the goal of writing is the achievement of symbolic immortality. It goes without saying that this definition automatically includes practitioners of literature, in all of its diverse generic manifestations. But it is

enough to be familiar, even superficially, with specialists in the social sciences to understand that they are, no less than novelists, poets, playwrights, or memoirists, obsessed by the fetishizing of the printed word. This introduction is not the place to muse about the sociology of university professors and even less about their psychology, but a simple fact demonstrates that they are of one mind with writers in the choice of an identical final value. Indeed, the care they all take to list the totality of their written work on their curriculum vitae and on the pages of their websites demonstrates that these publications are at the same time titles to the esteem of contemporaries and to future generations.

Of course, these scholarly publications, articles, editions, and monographs are endowed with immediate, generous, and practical goals. On the one hand, they add to the body of knowledge when they appear and are published with altruistic intentions, whether it be to draw their contemporaries' attention to a particular problem or to a thinker who has been unjustly forgotten and whose works have something useful to offer them. On the other, it is true that they play a role in the career of the professors to the extent that they are a source of job security or of promotion to a higher rank, with the accompanying symbolic and material advantages. However, these goals have their exact equivalent in the realm of literary writing: essayists may well revolt against some injustice of their times without disdaining the comfortable income their works bring them, in addition to present and future glory. I am thus not claiming here that university and literary writing have no immediate and practical goals, but rather that both of them are, in addition, a way to pass on to coming generations the trace of an irreplaceable person and body of thought. To oppose to the universal passage, to the omnipresent ephemerality, the permanence of a text that will not change: this is the dream of all writers and scholars, of all those for whom the book is a last resort.

The Reversibility of Behaviors

There is scarcely any doubt that writers long for posthumous recognition. However, it seems impossible to identify a behavior whose goal would be to guarantee a place in posterity and that would lead to it invariably, any new initiative determined by the quest for symbolic immortality having a chance to succeed, whereas the imitation of an approach similar to one that worked previously may result in failure. Let us take the example of the relationship between celebrity and posterity and of the use of the former in order to obtain the latter. According to Horace there is no gap between current and posthumous fame. When authors have earned the esteem of the experts of their own time because they succeeded in combining the “useful” and the “agreeable,” in “pleasing” and “edifying” at the same time, the progressive widening of the circle of their

admirers will continue after they have drawn their last breath.¹⁴ On the basis of this thesis, it would be possible to propose a kind of mathematical model in which the postmortem notoriety of authors would depend on that which they had achieved during their life. However, while multiple examples illustrate the idea that literary celebrity may well translate into posthumous recognition, others lead us to assert instead that there is no cause and effect relationship between them, nor even any form of continuity. To be sure, the entombment of Victor Hugo in the Pantheon only followed by a few days the disappearance of this illustrious figure, and the international fame of his works, adapted to stage and screen, has grown incessantly since he passed away. But the case of William Blake demonstrates, conversely, that an author who was unrecognized during his lifetime may be resurrected as a major author after a rescue mission led after his death by a handful of admirers who, through their patient efforts, drew ever greater number of readers to his cause.¹⁵

Such a disjunction between “celebrity” and “posterity” may be emphasized to the point that we see them as opposites. Historically, the value attributed to the “damned poet” figure during the Romantic period has accentuated the gap between them. If we theorize that posthumous recognition is the reward for radical originality, the emergence of a new voice must necessarily clash with the public that discovers it, and often only the passage of a considerable length of time is capable of fostering its proper appreciation. In the context of this conception of the artistic act, in which the break with tradition produces increased valuation, celebrity is necessarily suspicious: it may indicate a conformity between a certain form of writing and contemporary expectations, thus dooming the authors confined to anonymity beyond the frontiers of their period. To summarize, the behavior exhibited by writers who desire celebrity during their lifetime in the hope that it will be transformed into posterity after their death has as many chances of obtaining the desired effect as does its opposite.

Other behaviors display a similar reversibility. To be embraced by posterity, does a writer have to produce a large body of works or a small one? Insofar as literary tastes may evolve, signing a large number of texts and practicing a variety of genres seems a guarantee of security, the successive versions of posterity being able to choose in the body of works of a deceased writer the texts that best correspond to its fluctuating preferences, values, and concerns. It is not the Jorge Luis Borges of the volumes of poetry that we read most frequently today, but rather the survivor of the terrible accident of 1938, the writer who ventured onto the terrain of metaphysical fiction.¹⁶ Conversely, other authors only ever practiced one genre for the good reason that they only wrote one book: such is the case, for instance, of Jean de La Bruyère and Alain-Fournier, whom we read years, decades, or centuries after their death. While the narrowness of their corpus has not prevented the above writers from inscribing their name in the

network of memories, many prolific authors, on the contrary, are regularly suspected of glibness (provoking the uncharitable thought that “they would publish less if they worked more on their texts”), if they are not accused of maintaining a mercenary relationship with literature that deprives them of their legitimacy as an artist. Consequently, the volume published by a given author may just as well be the sign of creative genius as of unfortunate verbosity.

What about the situation of authors in relationship to their peers? To transmit the memory of their work to posterity, is it better to belong to a group (literary school, circle, salon, coterie . . .) or to practice their art in solitude? Since the transmission of a literary work consists in registering it in a mutating network of memories, it is naturally preferable for authors to surround themselves with a large number of disciples whose writings will be additional testimonies to their existence and relays of their aesthetic ideas. Whether the disciples walk in the authors’ tracks or end up breaking with them, they will exhibit no less the influence that they have exercised on them, and the more violent their rebellion, the more it will prove the difficulty of the efforts they had to make to free themselves from the yoke of their authority (I am thinking of Huysmans taking leave of Émile Zola). But since reading a book is receiving in one’s mind the author’s words, the latter does not need to be your contemporary for you to be his or her disciple.

Epicurus had been dead for two centuries when Lucretius became the eloquent propagator of his theses, and while the author of the *Letter to Menoecius* had imitators during his lifetime, he had many others after his death. Conversely, and according to the time-honored expression, it is always possible for students to overtake the masters and surpass them: in grouping young talents around oneself, you always risk finding a superior genius among them, and your only claim to glory, in the eyes of posterity, consists in having recognized the promise that, in any case, would have blossomed elsewhere and without you (e.g., that is how we remember Leigh Hunt, the mentor of John Keats). Furthermore, an author may choose to live like a hermit, discouraging friendships and making enemies of those who were ready to adulate him; he can travel from one hermitage to another and repulse anyone who approaches him and nonetheless leave his mark on the history of ideas: I am referring, of course, to the extravagant, inescapable Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In short, having connections may be a quality cultivated by authors, and the constitution of a group around them does indeed increase the number of discourses bearing the stamp of their thought, but one can drive everyone away and nevertheless find a legion of admirers after one’s death.

Finally, what may we say about the subjective relationship of the individual to posterity? Does it reward those who desire it or those who renounce it? Robert Southey declared that all his efforts were directed toward conquering the esteem of posterity: the latter showed him no gratitude for such constancy. John Keats died convinced that his name would leave no trace; if it is not engraved on his

tomb, at least we find it everywhere else. Therefore, although the esteem of posterity is generally coveted by those who write, no one has ever identified an infallible way of obtaining it, and that is the conclusion reached by Heather J. Jackson at the end of a study devoted to authors who, in Great Britain and in the Romantic period, set themselves the goal of conquering symbolic immortality: “Thus, the principal lesson of this book consists in asserting that it is useless to struggle for immortality—there is nothing that a writer, a publisher, or an advertising agency can do to guarantee it—and this lesson applies to the writers of our age as well as to those of the past.”¹⁷

Chance and Posterity

Nonetheless, does this mean that the esteem of posterity is only awarded by chance? An answer to this question comes immediately: there is a correlation between posthumous recognition that honors a work and its literary *merit*. The definition of “merit” varies, of course, in each period, and the genres and works that charm one of the iterations of posterity are not sure to please its following set of members. However, if there is no consensus on the exact nature of literary merit, writers bear within themselves a standard by which they measure their work, since they are the one who determines the moment when, after all the rewritings of their text, no further modification of any kind seems necessary to them—the moment when any further change would be a detriment.¹⁸ But not even they would be able to say, abstractly and in general, what constitutes “literary merit,” for they know very well that their own evaluation of works does not necessarily correspond to that of their contemporaries, and they no doubt become indignant, at times, when people call a “masterpiece” a work that they consider mediocre. People who write, however, people who have the liberty to modify and eliminate sentences that they themselves have recorded, are people who are measuring their work against a standard they are unable to define, a standard that has become ingrained in them in the course of their artistic practice, to such an extent that any variation in relationship to this standard produces something like a painful sensation that will only dissipate when the text is amended appropriately. As a result, if it is impossible to establish a timeless and universal norm for literary merit, writers bear in themselves a norm for evaluating their own work and only publish it—unless they are forced to do so by some necessity, in particular an economic one—when it has passed the test of their innermost demands. We conclude from the foregoing remarks that in striving to make the result of their efforts correspond to the undefinable but deeply affecting idea that they have of literary merit, writers are at the same time working on the production of an oeuvre that is worthy of being passed on to posterity.

Indeed, no one believes seriously that posterity's attention is unmotivated: otherwise, all one need do is produce a text, no matter which or how, publish it anywhere, and hope that it will win the prize of posthumous recognition despite the fact that the wager is out of all proportion with its recompense. On the contrary, literary sculpting of an oeuvre is clearly the way to confer on it a superior aesthetic form and thus to increase the chances that it will meet the approbation of future generations. Likewise, if the act of publishing a text surely does not guarantee its transmission to posterity, a contrario, the probability that a work left in a drawer will join the pantheon of literary masterpieces is still weaker. Publishing it, and if possible with a publishing house capable of disseminating it as widely as possible, a house that has managed to create for itself that undefinable aura—prestige—increases substantially the probability of this transmission. And for works to be well received by important publishers, the authors' interpersonal skills, their social position, their connections, their ability to offer in return symbolic or real services are also important, symbolic immortality thus being partially a function of practical virtues that are not directly related to the production of the work itself. Since passing on to posterity is not a matter of pure chance, writing a work with the goal that it be read by future generations is hardly absurd: I will say, more precisely, that it is paradoxical.

Paradox and Posterity

An absurd behavior consists in desiring what we know with absolute certainty we will not obtain: it amounts to pursuing an effort designed to reach an inaccessible goal. Thus it is possible to grant the absurd its dignity when it expresses a revolt against the limits of the human condition. When Cyrano de Bergerac continues to twirl his rapier while death is carrying him away, we are witnessing an absurd behavior that we call "panache." The man who attacks a machine gun nest with a knife likewise accomplishes an absurd act, but this act is characterized as heroism because in choosing to sacrifice himself, he asserts the superiority of his will over the fear of death.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it is rarely in this sublime light that we experience the absurd, which appears to us every time that our actions achieve a result that, far from justifying them, demonstrates their profound inanity. Such is the experience of the worker whose activity does not improve the condition of his or her material and spiritual existence but only perpetuates it. In this game where the winnings are equal to the wager, life goes by without producing anything that transcends it. For their behavior to be authentically absurd, however, authors would have to write novels and, at the end of each chapter, burn the fruits of their labors. Only the destruction of their text would constitute an out-and-out renunciation of the quest for symbolic

immortality. But provided that they avoid this extreme and publish their texts instead of destroying them, there is always a possibility, no matter how tenuous, that posterity will revive their thought through the act of reading. Their action thus ceases to be absurd: it becomes paradoxical.

What creates the difference between absurdity and paradox is the possible, eventual, justification of the latter. Absurdity consists in continuing a behavior whose results will never justify it. Such is the etymological meaning of the word “absurd,” which designates a dissonance: that which shocks our reason is absurd. The concept of paradox is similar, on its face, to that of absurdity, so these two terms are often used as synonyms: both designate what runs counter to common sense. They are distinguished, however, by the necessity that characterizes absurdity and the potential appearance of contingency in paradox.

An absurd act will forever remain what it always was. The repetition of the same conduct will inevitably produce an identical result, and it is precisely the suppression of the possibility of anything else that leads to the demise of those who have no other perspective than the relentless repetition of the same behavior. A paradoxical act, on the other hand, may well produce an unexpected result, for paradox is what shows itself to be contrary to the general opinion, which is itself capable of being mistaken. Going against conventional wisdom does not in fact mean that one is wrong, and it is possible to maintain a paradoxical thesis that ultimately gains acceptance as the truth. Denis Diderot’s famous “paradox of the actor,” according to which the actor must not be moved himself if he wishes to move others, is no longer, properly speaking, a paradox: it belongs to the tenets of dramatic art that every budding actor will learn at some moment or other in his apprenticeship (so that it would now be paradoxical to assert that only actors who have experienced the emotions they are acting out are capable of inspiring them in spectators). What characterizes paradox is thus the surprise it provokes at its initial formulation, given that it sets itself against established opinion without appearing to be impossible. Since paradox is linked to surprise, it is inseparable from the philosophical activity that also begins with astonishment; it is precisely because paradox is capable of challenging what we were wrong to take as a given that it functions as a revealer of truth. Conversely, absurdity reveals nothing that we did not know already; it is inseparable from the result whose inexorable appearance is familiar to us even before it occurs.

From this perspective, the behavior that consists in conveying the memory of a work to posterity is not absurd. Indeed, the consideration that we see granted to authors who passed away centuries ago shows that there are exceptions to the rule linking disappearance and oblivion. This proves to be paradoxical, however, insofar as our reason is shocked by the continuation of an effort whose probability of achieving success is minimal. We will therefore find many manifestations of the paradox that haunts the search for posterity, namely the fear that an effort

maintained during a whole lifetime will produce nothing durable, and that by trying too hard to achieve posthumous recognition, we will have our life stolen by posterity.

However, the concept of paradox does not only refer to what is considered unreasonable by the general public; it also includes a logical contradiction between the terms of the statement that formulates it. This is the case of the famous liar's paradox: "A man says that he is lying. Is what the man says true or false?" If he is lying, this man is telling the truth. If he is not lying, he is expressing a lie. Logical paradoxes like this one are not the staging of irreparably undecidable situations; they are rather a stimulus for the mind that forces it to find a solution in order to escape the impasse in which its author is trying to imprison us. Since antiquity, there have been a long succession of propositions that attempt to eliminate the apparently intractable logical contradiction between the terms that compose the liar's paradox.²⁰

Throughout the chapters of this book I will attempt to identify the paradoxes that the quest for transmission of a literary work to posterity comes up against. These paradoxes may be grouped in three categories, which are the paradoxes of belief, the paradoxes of identity, and the paradoxes of mediation. The paradoxes of belief wrap themselves around posterity when the characteristics traditionally attributed to the divinity are transferred to it: posterity finds itself endowed with functions that belong to God, since it confers symbolic immortality just as God guarantees spiritual immortality. The paradoxes of identity, for their part, result from the tension between the infinite complexity of an individual and the representation—simplified, altered, or out-and-out fictionalized—that posterity makes of her or him after their death. The paradoxes of mediation, finally, show that there is no memory of a work that is not entrusted to intermediaries—cultural, material, and human—whose essential impermanence threatens the sustainability of posthumous memories. This tripartition of the book corresponds to the principal objects of study: "The Paradoxes of Belief" is concerned with the representation of *posterity* by the authors, "The Paradoxes of Identity" with the representation of the *authors* by posterity, and "The Paradoxes of Mediation" with the modes of inscription and preservation of the *works* in the network of memories.

The Metaphysical Thread

The metaphysical preoccupation is never far from reflection on posterity: how many individuals turn their hopes, not toward the immortality of their soul and the resurrection of their body, but rather toward symbolic permanence? Some of them write on Sunday mornings like others go to mass, and they all have their

eyes fixed on something in themselves that will last longer than their lives. It is this metaphysical thread of reflection on posterity that I would like to follow in the course of this study, and it is what will lead us periodically to Enlightenment thought. For it is in the eighteenth century that the hope of survival in the memory of future generations established itself in the Western world as a possible alternative to belief in the immortality of the soul, with posterity becoming, according to Michel Delon, a “secular substitute for Christian eternity.”²¹ The spreading of philosophical materialism in Europe played a decisive role in this substitution by calling into question the belief in the immortality of the soul and by developing, under the influence of scientific discoveries, a completely secular conception of human beings.²² The quest for a substitute immortality became a way to conceal the terror linked to definitive annihilation, not only of my own person around which the world is organized (since any effort of empathy and curiosity can never change the fact that it is *I* who am accomplishing it) but also of those whom my love endows with a value so irreplaceable that I wish it were in my power to spare them being destroyed and forgotten. Unlike Christian eternity, which only concerns the individual him- or herself (I earn my salvation by my good works, but I am incapable of obtaining it for another, who will have to answer alone for his or her acts on Judgment Day), the secular rewriting of this quest for immortality is endowed with an altruistic side: the immortalizing power that artists solicit in their name is also the power to assign to eternity the memory of their fellow creatures. We will never forget Madame de Warens as long as we read Rousseau, and the memory of Henriette will survive as long as the memoirs of Giacomo Casanova.