

## § 1 Encountering the Imaginary

Blanchot, Maurice. "Encountering the Imaginary," and "The Book to Come." *The Book to Come*. 1959. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford U Press, 2003.

The Sirens: it seems they did indeed sing, but in an unfulfilling way, one that only gave a sign of where the real sources and real happiness of song opened. Still, by means of their imperfect songs that were only a song still to come, they did lead the sailor toward that space where singing might truly begin. They did not deceive him, in fact: they actually led him to his goal. But what happened once the place was reached? What was this place? One where there was nothing left but to disappear, because music, in this region of source and origin, had itself disappeared more completely than in any other place in the world: sea where, ears blocked, the living sank, and where the Sirens, as proof of their good will, had also, one day, to disappear.

music

What was the nature of the Sirens' song? Where did its fault lie? Why did this fault make it so powerful? Some have always answered: It was an inhuman song—a natural noise no doubt (are there any other kinds?), but on the fringes of nature, foreign in every possible way to man, very low, and awakening in him that extreme delight in falling that he cannot satisfy in the normal conditions of life. But, say others, the enchantment was stranger than that: it did nothing but reproduce the habitual song of men, and because the Sirens, who were only animals, quite beautiful because of the reflection of feminine beauty, could sing as men sing, they made the song so strange that they gave birth in anyone who heard it to a suspicion of the inhumanity of every human song. Is it through despair, then, that men passionate for their own song came to perish? Through a despair very close to rapture. There was something wonderful in this real song, this common, secret song, simple and everyday, that they had to recognize

right away, sung in an unreal way by foreign, even imaginary powers, song of the abyss that, once heard, would open an abyss in each word and would beckon those who heard it to vanish into it.

This song, we must remember, was aimed at sailors, men who take risks and feel bold impulses, and it was also a means of navigation: it was a distance, and it revealed the possibility of traveling this distance, of making the song into the movement toward the song, and of making this movement the expression of the greatest desire. Strange navigation, but toward what end? It has always been possible to think that those who approached it did nothing but come near to it, and died because of impatience, because they prematurely asserted: here it is; here, here I will cast anchor. According to others, it was on the contrary too late: the goal had already been passed; the enchantment, by an enigmatic promise, exposed men to being unfaithful to themselves, to their human song and even to the essence of the song, by awakening the hope and desire for a wonderful beyond, and this beyond represented only a desert, as if the motherland of music were the only place completely deprived of music, a place of aridity and dryness where silence, like noise, burned, in one who once had the disposition for it, all passageways to song. Was there, then, an evil principle in this invitation to the depths? Were the Sirens, as tradition has sought to persuade us, only the false voices that must not be listened to, the trickery of seduction that only disloyal and deceitful beings could resist?

There has always been a rather ignoble effort among men to discredit the Sirens by flatly accusing them of lying: liars when they sang, deceivers when they sighed, fictive when they were touched; in every respect non-existent, with a childish nonexistence that the good sense of Ulysses was enough to exterminate.

It is true, Ulysses conquered them, but in what way? Ulysses, with his stubbornness and prudence, his treachery, which led him to enjoy the entertainment of the Sirens, without risks and without accepting the consequences; his was a cowardly, moderate, and calm enjoyment, as befits a Greek of the decadent era who will never deserve to be the hero of the *Iliad*. His is a fortunate and secure cowardliness, based on privilege, which places him outside of the common condition—others having no right to the happiness of the elite, but only a right to the pleasure of watching their leader writhe ridiculously, with grimaces of ecstasy in the void, a right also to the satisfaction of mastering their master (that is no doubt

the lesson they understood, the true song of the Sirens for them). Ulysses' attitude, that surprising deafness of one who is deaf because he is listening, is enough to communicate to the Sirens a despair reserved till now for humans and to turn them, through this despair, into actual beautiful girls, real this one time only and worthy of their promise, thus capable of disappearing into the truth and profundity of their song.

After the Sirens had been conquered by the power of the technique that always tries to play safely with unreal (inspired) powers, Ulysses was still not done with them. They reached him where he did not want to fall and, hidden in the heart of *The Odyssey*, which has become their tomb, they engaged him, him and many others, in this fortunate, unfortunate navigation, which is that of the tale, the song that is not immediate, but narrated, hence made apparently inoffensive: ode becomes episode.

#### THE SECRET LAW OF THE NARRATIVE

That is not an allegory. There is an obscure struggle underway between any narrative and the encounter with the Sirens, that enigmatic song that is powerful because of its defect. It is a struggle in which Ulysses' prudence, whatever human truth there is in him—mystification, stubborn aptitude not to play the game of the gods—was always used and perfected. What we call the novel was born from this struggle. With the novel, the preliminary voyage is foregrounded, that which carries Ulysses to the point of encounter. This voyage is an entirely human story; it concerns the time of men, it is linked to the passions of men, it actually takes place, and it is rich enough and varied enough to absorb all the strength and all the attention of the narrators. Now that the tale has become a novel, far from seeming to be impoverished, it assumes the richness and amplitude of an exploration that sometimes embraces the immensity sailed, sometimes limits itself to a small square of space on the deck, sometimes descends into the bowels of the ship where one never knew the hope of the sea. The watchword that is imposed on the sailors is this: any allusion to a goal or a destination must be excluded. With good reason, certainly. No one can begin a journey with the deliberate intention of reaching the Isle of Capraea, no one can head for this island, and whoever decided to would still go there only by chance, a chance to which he is linked by a connection that is difficult to penetrate. The watchword is thus silence, discretion, oblivion.

We must acknowledge that predestined modesty, the wish to aim at

nothing and to lead to nothing, would be enough to make many novels praiseworthy books and the novelistic genre the most agreeable of genres, the one that has given itself the task of forgetting, by dint of discretion and joyous nullity, what others degrade by calling essential. Diversion is its profound song. To keep changing direction, to set off as if by chance and shun any goal, by a movement of anxiety that is transformed into pleasant distraction—that was its original and surest justification. To make a game of human time, and of the game a free occupation, stripped of any immediate interest and usefulness, essentially superficial and able, by this surface movement, nonetheless to absorb the entire being—that is not a negligible thing. But it is clear that if the novel today lacks this role, it is because technique has transformed the time of men and their ways of being diverted from it.

The narrative begins where the novel does not go but still leads us by its refusals and its rich negligence. The narrative is heroically and pretentiously the narrative of one single episode, that of Ulysses' meeting and the insufficient and magnetic song of the Sirens. Apparently, outside of this great and naïve claim, nothing has changed, and the narrative seems, by its form, to continue to answer to ordinary narrative calling. Thus, Nerval's *Aurélia* presents itself as the simple relation of an encounter, as does Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer* [A season in hell], and Breton's *Nadja*. Something has taken place, something one has lived through and then tells about, just as Ulysses needed to live through the event and survive it to become Homer, who tells about him. It is true that the narrative, in general, is the narrative of an exceptional event that escapes the forms of daily time and the world of ordinary truth, perhaps of all truth. That is why, with so much insistence, it rejects all that could link it to the frivolity of a fiction (the novel, on the contrary, which says nothing but what is credible and familiar, wants very much to pass as fiction). In the *Gorgias*, Plato says: "Listen to a good story. You will think it's a fable, but according to me it's a story. I will tell you as a truth what I am about to tell you." What he recounts, however, is the story of the Last Judgment.

Yet the nature of narrative is in no way foretold, when one sees in it the true account of an exceptional event, which took place and which one could try to report. Narrative is not the relating of an event but this event itself, the approach of this event, the place where it is called on to unfold, an event still to come, by the magnetic power of which the narrative itself can hope to come true.

That is a very delicate relationship, no doubt a kind of extravagance, but it is the secret law of narrative. Narrative is the movement toward a point—one that is not only unknown, ignored, and foreign, but such that it seems, even before and outside of this movement, to have no kind of reality; yet one that is so imperious that it is from that point alone that the narrative draws its attraction, in such a way that it cannot even "begin" before having reached it; but it is only the narrative and the unforeseeable movement of the narrative that provide the space where the point becomes real, powerful, and alluring.

#### WHEN ULYSSES BECOMES HOMER

What would happen if, instead of being two distinct people conveniently sharing their roles, Ulysses and Homer were one and the same person? If Homer's narrative were nothing other than the movement completed by Ulysses in the heart of the space that the Song of the Sirens opens to him? If Homer could narrate only when, under the name of Ulysses, a Ulysses free of shackles but settled, he goes toward that place where the ability to speak and narrate seems promised to him, just as long as he disappears into it?

That is one of the strange qualities, or should we say one of the aims, of narration. It "relates" only itself, and at the same time as this relation occurs, it produces what it recounts, what is possible as an account only if it actualizes what happens in this account, for then it possesses the point or the framework where the reality that the narrative "describes" can endlessly join with its reality as narrative, can guarantee it and find in it its guarantee.

But isn't this naïve folly? In one sense. That is why there is no narrative, that is why there is no lack of narrative.

To hear the Song of the Sirens, he had to stop being Ulysses and become Homer, but it is only in Homer's narrative that the actual meeting occurs in which Ulysses becomes the one who enters into that relationship with the power of the elements and the voice of the abyss.

That seems obscure; it evokes the predicament of the primal man as if, in order to be created, he himself needed to utter, in an entirely human way, the divine *Fiat lux* [Let there be light] that can open his own eyes.

This way of presenting things, in fact, simplifies them very much: hence the kind of artificial or theoretical complication that emerges from it. It is indeed true that it is only in Melville's book that Ahab encounters

Moby Dick; but it is also true that this encounter alone allows Melville to write the book, such an overwhelming, immoderate, and unique encounter that it goes beyond all the levels in which it occurs, all the moments one wants to place it in; it seems to take place well before the book begins, but it is such that it also can take place only once, in the future of the work, in the sea that the work will have become, a limitless ocean.

Between Ahab and the whale there plays out a drama that could be called metaphysical in a vague sense of the word, the same struggle that is played out between the Sirens and Ulysses. Each of these pairs wants to be everything, wants to be the absolute world, which makes coexistence with the other absolute world impossible; and yet each one has no greater desire than this very coexistence, this encounter. To unite in the same space Ahab and the whale, the Sirens and Ulysses—that is the secret wish that makes Ulysses Homer, makes Ahab Melville, and the world that results from this union the greatest, most terrible, and most beautiful of possible worlds, alas a book, nothing but a book.

Between Ahab and Ulysses, the one who has the greatest wish for power is not the most out of control. There is, in Ulysses, that premeditated tenacity that leads to universal empire: his ruse is to seem to limit his ability, to seek coldly and with calculation what he can still do, faced with the other power. He will be everything, if he keeps a limit, a gap between the real and the imaginary, precisely the gap that the Song of the Sirens invites him to cross. The result is a sort of victory for him, somber disaster for Ahab. We cannot deny that Ulysses heard a little of what Ahab saw, but he held firm in the midst of hearing, while Ahab lost himself in the image. One denied himself the metamorphosis into which the other penetrated and disappeared. After the ordeal, Ulysses finds himself as he was, and the world is found to be perhaps poorer, but firmer and surer. Ahab does not find himself again and, for Melville himself, the world endlessly threatens to sink into this worldless space toward which the fascination of one single image draws him.

#### THE METAMORPHOSIS

The narrative is linked to this metamorphosis to which Ulysses and Ahab allude. The action it makes present is that of metamorphosis on all the levels it can attain. If, for the sake of convenience—for this assertion is not exact—we say that what moves the novel forward is day-to-day, collective, or personal time, or more precisely, the wish to give a voice to

time, then, in order to advance, the narrative has that *other* time, that other voyage, which is the passage from the actual song to the imaginary song, the movement that causes the real song, little by little although right away (and this “little by little although right away” is the very time of metamorphosis), to become imaginary, enigmatic song, which is always far away, and which designates this distance as a space to travel, and the place to which it leads as the point where singing can stop being a lure.

The narrative can travel this space, and what moves it is transformation, which the empty fullness of this space demands, a transformation that, acting in every direction, of course powerfully transforms the one who writes, but transforms the narrative itself no less, and all that is in play in the narrative, where in one sense nothing happens except this very transition. And yet, for Melville, what is there more important than the encounter with Moby Dick, an encounter that takes place now, and is “at the same time” always yet to come, so that he never stops going toward it by a relentless and disorderly pursuit, but since it seems to have no less a relationship with the origin, it also seems to send him back to the profundity of the past: an experience under the fascination of which Proust lived and in part succeeded in writing.

Some will object: but it is to the “life” of Melville, of Nerval, of Proust that this event of which they speak first belongs. That is because they have already encountered Aurélia, because they have stumbled on the uneven pavement, seen the three steeples that first set them to write about it. They use much art to communicate their actual impressions to us, and they are artists in that they find an equivalent—of form, image, story, or words—to make us participate in a vision close to their own. Things are unfortunately not so simple. All the ambiguity stems from the ambiguity of time, which enters into play here, and which allows us to say and feel that the fascinating image of the experience is, at a certain moment, present, while this presence does not belong to any present, and even destroys the present into which it seems to introduce itself. It is true, Ulysses actually sailed and, one day, on a certain date, he encountered the enigmatic song. He can thus say: now, this is happening now. But what has happened now? The presence of a song only still to come. And what has he touched in the present? Not the event of the encounter become present, but the opening of this infinite movement that is the encounter itself, an encounter that is always apart from the place and the moment in which it is spoken, for it is this very apartness, this imaginary distance, in which absence is realized

and only at the end of which the event begins to take place, a point where the real truth of the encounter occurs, from which, in any case, the language that utters it wants to take birth.

Always still to come, always already past, always present in a beginning so abrupt that it cuts off your breath, and still unfurling as the return and the eternal new beginning—"Ah," said Goethe, "in times lived before, you were my sister or my wife"—such is the event for which narrative is the approach. This event turns the concordances of time upside down, but still asserts time, a particular way for time to be accomplished, time unique to the narrative that is introduced into the lived life of the narrator in a way that transforms it, time of metamorphoses in which, in an imaginary simultaneity and under the form of the space that art seeks to realize, the different temporal ecstasies coincide.

## § 2 The Experience of Proust

### I. The Secret of Writing

Can there be a pure narrative? Every narrative seeks to hide itself in novelistic density, even if only out of discretion. Proust is one of the masters of this dissimulation. While the imaginary journey of narrative leads other writers into the unreality of a scintillating space, for Marcel Proust everything happens as if it were fortunately superimposed onto the journey of his actual life, the life that has brought him, through the world's hazards and the work of destructive time, to the fabulous point where he encounters the event that makes every narrative possible. Moreover, this encounter, far from exposing him to the void of the chasm, seems to provide him with the only space where the movement of his existence can be, not only understood, but also restored, actually experienced, actually accomplished. It is only when, like Ulysses, he is within sight of the island of Sirens, where he hears their enigmatic song, that his whole long, sad wandering is fulfilled in the form of the true instants that make it, although past, present. This is a fortunate, surprising coincidence. But how, then, can he ever "get to that point," if he must be there already in order for the sterile previous migration to become the real, true movement capable of leading him there?

By a fascinating confusion, Proust draws peculiarities from the time proper to the narrative, singularities that penetrate his life, resources that allow him, too, to save actual time. There is in his work a perhaps deceptive but wonderful interweaving of all the forms of time. We never know—and very quickly he himself can no longer tell—to what time the event he recalls belongs, if it is happening only in the world of narrative