
LIGHTNESS

I will devote my first lecture to the opposition between lightness and weight, and will uphold the values of lightness. This does not mean that I consider the virtues of weight any less compelling, but simply that I have more to say about lightness.

After forty years of writing fiction, after exploring various roads and making diverse experiments, the time has come for me to look for an overall definition of my work. I would suggest this: my working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language.

In this talk I shall try to explain—both to myself and to you—why I have come to consider lightness a value rather than a defect; to indicate the works of the past in which I recognize my ideal of lightness; and to show where I situate this value in the present and how I project it into the future.

I will start with the last point. When I began my career, the categorical imperative of every young writer was to represent his own time. Full of good intentions, I tried to identify myself with the ruthless energies propelling the events of our century, both

collective and individual. I tried to find some harmony between the adventurous, picaresque inner rhythm that prompted me to write and the frantic spectacle of the world, sometimes dramatic and sometimes grotesque. Soon I became aware that between the facts of life that should have been my raw materials and the quick light touch I wanted for my writing, there was a gulf that cost me increasing effort to cross. Maybe I was only then becoming aware of the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world—qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them.

At certain moments I felt that the entire world was turning into stone: a slow petrification, more or less advanced depending on people and places but one that spared no aspect of life. It was as if no one could escape the inexorable stare of Medusa. The only hero able to cut off Medusa's head is Perseus, who flies with winged sandals; Perseus, who does not turn his gaze upon the face of the Gorgon but only upon her image reflected in his bronze shield. Thus Perseus comes to my aid even at this moment, just as I too am about to be caught in a vise of stone—which happens every time I try to speak about my own past. Better to let my talk be composed of images from mythology.

To cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on the very lightest of things, the winds and the clouds, and fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror. I am immediately tempted to see this myth as an allegory on the poet's relationship to the world, a lesson in the method to follow when writing. But I know that any interpretation impoverishes the myth and suffocates it. With myths, one should not be in a hurry. It is better to let them settle into the memory, to stop and dwell on every detail, to reflect on them without losing touch with their language of images. The lesson we can learn from a myth lies in the literal narrative, not in what we add to it from the outside.

The relationship between Perseus and the Gorgon is a complex one and does not end with the beheading of the monster. Medusa's blood gives birth to a winged horse, Pegasus—the heaviness of stone is transformed into its opposite. With one blow of his hoof on Mount Helicon, Pegasus makes a spring gush forth, where the Muses drink. In certain versions of the myth, it is Perseus who rides the miraculous Pegasus, so dear to the Muses, born from the accursed blood of Medusa. (Even the winged sandals, incidentally, come from the world of monsters, for Perseus obtained them from Medusa's sisters, the Graiae, who had one tooth and one eye among them.) As for the severed head, Perseus does not abandon it but carries it concealed in a bag. When his enemies are about to overcome him, he has only to display it, holding it by its snaky locks, and this bloodstained booty becomes an invincible weapon in the hero's hand. It is a weapon he uses only in cases of dire necessity, and only against those who deserve the punishment of being turned into statues. Here, certainly, the myth is telling us something, something implicit in the images that can't be explained in any other way. Perseus succeeds in mastering that horrendous face by keeping it hidden, just as in the first place he vanquished it by viewing it in a mirror. Perseus's strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden.

On the relationship between Perseus and Medusa, we can learn something more from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Perseus wins another battle: he hacks a sea-monster to pieces with his sword and sets Andromeda free. Now he prepares to do what any of us would do after such an awful chore—he wants to wash his hands. But another problem arises: where to put Medusa's head. And here Ovid has some lines (IV.740–752) that seem to me extraordinary in showing how much delicacy of spirit a man must have to be a Perseus, killer of monsters: “So that the rough sand should

not harm the snake-haired head (*anquiferumque caput dura ne laedat harena*), he makes the ground soft with a bed of leaves, and on top of that he strews little branches of plants born under water, and on this he places Medusa's head, face down." I think that the lightness, of which Perseus is the hero, could not be better represented than by this gesture of refreshing courtesy toward a being so monstrous and terrifying yet at the same time somehow fragile and perishable. But the most unexpected thing is the miracle that follows: when they touch Medusa, the little marine plants turn into coral and the nymphs, in order to have coral for adornments, rush to bring sprigs and seaweed to the terrible head.

This clash of images, in which the fine grace of the coral touches the savage horror of the Gorgon, is so suggestive that I would not like to spoil it by attempting glosses or interpretations. What I *can* do is to compare Ovid's lines with those of a modern poet, Eugenio Montale, in his "Piccolo testamento," where we also find the subtlest of elements—they could stand as symbols of his poetry: "traccia madreperlacea di lumaca / o smeriglio di vetro calpestato" (mother-of-pearl trace of a snail / or mica of crushed glass)—put up against a fearful, hellish monster, a Lucifer with pitch-black wings who descends upon the cities of the West. Never as in this poem, written in 1953, did Montale evoke such an apocalyptic vision, yet it is those minute, luminous tracings that are placed in the foreground and set in contrast to dark catastrophe—"Conservare la cipria nello specchietto / quando spenta ogni lampada / la sardana si farà infernale" (Keep its ash in your compact / when every lamp is out / and the sardana becomes infernal). But how can we hope to save ourselves in that which is most fragile? Montale's poem is a profession of faith in the persistence of what seems most fated to perish, in the moral values invested in the most tenuous traces: "il tenue bagliore strofinato / laggiù non era quello d'un fiammi-

fero" (the thin glimmer striking down there / wasn't that of a match).*

In order to talk about our own times I have gone the long way around, calling up Ovid's fragile Medusa and Montale's black Lucifer. It is hard for a novelist to give examples of his idea of lightness from the events of everyday life, without making them the unattainable object of an endless *quête*. This is what Milan Kundera has done with great clarity and immediacy. His novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is in reality a bitter confirmation of the Ineluctable Weight of Living, not only in the situation of desperate and all-pervading oppression that has been the fate of his hapless country, but in a human condition common to us all, however infinitely more fortunate we may be. For Kundera the weight of living consists chiefly in constriction, in the dense net of public and private constrictions that enfolds us more and more closely. His novel shows us how everything we choose and value in life for its lightness soon reveals its true, unbearable weight. Perhaps only the liveliness and mobility of the intelligence escape this sentence—the very qualities with which this novel is written, and which belong to a world quite different from the one we live in.

Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future

In the boundless universe of literature there are always new

*The English translation of these lines from Montale's "Little Testament" has been provided by Jonathan Galassi.

avenues to be explored, both very recent and very ancient, styles and forms that can change our image of the world But if literature is not enough to assure me that I am not just chasing dreams, I look to science to nourish my visions in which all heaviness disappears. Today every branch of science seems intent on demonstrating that the world is supported by the most minute entities, such as the messages of DNA, the impulses of neurons, and quarks, and neutrinos wandering through space since the beginning of time

Then we have computer science. It is true that software cannot exercise its powers of lightness except through the weight of hardware. But it is software that gives the orders, acting on the outside world and on machines that exist only as functions of software and evolve so that they can work out ever more complex programs. The second industrial revolution, unlike the first, does not present us with such crushing images as rolling mills and molten steel, but with “bits” in a flow of information traveling along circuits in the form of electronic impulses. The iron machines still exist, but they obey the orders of weightless bits.

Is it legitimate to turn to scientific discourse to find an image of the world that suits my view? If what I am attempting here attracts me, it is because I feel it might connect with a very old thread in the history of poetry.

The *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius is the first great work of poetry in which knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a perception of all that is infinitely minute, light, and mobile. Lucretius set out to write the poem of physical matter, but he warns us at the outset that this matter is made up of invisible particles. He is the poet of physical concreteness, viewed in its permanent and immutable substance, but the first thing he tells us is that emptiness is just as concrete as solid bodies. Lucretius’ chief concern is to prevent

the weight of matter from crushing us. Even while laying down the rigorous mechanical laws that determine every event, he feels the need to allow atoms to make unpredictable deviations from the straight line, thereby ensuring freedom both to atoms and to human beings. The poetry of the invisible, of infinite unexpected possibilities—even the poetry of nothingness—issues from a poet who had no doubts whatever about the physical reality of the world.

This atomizing of things extends also to the visible aspects of the world, and it is here that Lucretius is at his best as a poet: the little motes of dust swirling in a shaft of sunlight in a dark room (II.114-124); the minuscule shells, all similar but each one different, that waves gently cast up on the *bibula harena*, the “imbibing sand” (II.374-376); or the spiderwebs that wrap themselves around us without our noticing them as we walk along (III.381-390).

I have already mentioned Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, another encyclopedic poem (written fifty years after Lucretius’), which has its starting point not in physical reality but in the fables of mythology. For Ovid, too, everything can be transformed into something else, and knowledge of the world means dissolving the solidity of the world. And also for him there is an essential parity between everything that exists, as opposed to any sort of hierarchy of powers or values. If the world of Lucretius is composed of immutable atoms, Ovid’s world is made up of the qualities, attributes and forms that define the variety of things, whether plants, animals, or persons. But these are only the outward appearances of a single common substance that—if stirred by profound emotion—may be changed into what most differs from it.

It is in following the continuity of the passage from one form to another that Ovid displays his incomparable gifts. He tells how a woman realizes that she is changing into a lotus tree: her feet

are rooted to the earth, a soft bark creeps up little by little and enfolds her groin; she makes a movement to tear her hair and finds her hands full of leaves. Or he speaks of Arachne's fingers, expert at winding or unraveling wool, turning the spindle, plying the needle in embroidery, fingers that at a certain point we see lengthening into slender spiders' legs and beginning to weave a web.

In both Lucretius and Ovid, lightness is a way of looking at the world based on philosophy and science: the doctrines of Epicurus for Lucretius and those of Pythagoras for Ovid (a Pythagoras who, as presented by Ovid, greatly resembles the Buddha). In both cases the lightness is also something arising from the writing itself, from the poet's own linguistic power, quite independent of whatever philosophic doctrine the poet claims to be following.

From what I have said so far, I think the concept of lightness is beginning to take shape. Above all I hope to have shown that there is such a thing as a lightness of thoughtfulness, just as we all know that there is a lightness of frivolity. In fact, thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy.

I could not illustrate this notion better than by using a story from the *Decameron* (VI.9), in which the Florentine poet Guido Cavalcanti appears. Boccaccio presents Cavalcanti as an austere philosopher, walking meditatively among marble tombs near a church. The *jeunesse dorée* of Florence is riding through the city in a group, on the way from one party to another, always looking for a chance to enlarge its round of invitations. Cavalcanti is not popular with them because, although wealthy and elegant, he has refused to join in their revels—and also because his mysterious philosophy is suspected of impiety.

Ora avvenne un giorno che, essendo Guido partito d'Orto San Michele e venutosene per lo Corso degli Adimari infino a San Giovanni, il quale spesse volte era suo cammino, essendo arche grandi di marmo, che oggi sono in Santa Reparata, e molte altre dintorno a San Giovanni, e egli essendo tralle colonne del porfido che vi sono e quelle arche e la porta di San Giovanni, che serrata era, messer Betto con sua brigata a caval venendo su per la piazza di Santa Reparata, vedendo Guido là tra quelle sepolture, dissero: "Andiamo a dargli briga"; e spronati i cavalli, a guisa d'uno assalto sollazzevole gli furono, quasi prima che egli se ne avvedesse, sopra e cominciarongli a dire: "Guido, tu rifiuti d'esser di nostra brigata; ma ecco, quando tu avrai trovato che Idio non sia, che avrai fatto?"

A' quali Guido, da lor veggendosi chiuso, prestamente disse: "Signori, voi mi potete dire a casa vostra ciò che vi piace"; e posta la mano sopra una di quelle arche, che grandi erano, sí come colui che leggerissimo era, prese un salto e fusi gittato dall'altra parte, e sviluppatosi da loro se n'andò.

One day, Guido left Orto San Michele and walked along the Corso degli Adimari, which was often his route, as far as San Giovanni. Great marble tombs, now in Santa Reparata, were then scattered about San Giovanni. As he was standing between the porphyry columns of the church and these tombs, with the door of the church shut fast behind him, Messer Betto and his company came riding along the Piazza di Santa Reparata. Catching sight of Guido among the tombs, they said, "Let's go and pick a quarrel." Spurring their horses, they came down upon him in play, like a charging squad, before he was aware of them. They began:

“Guido, you refuse to be of our company; but look, when you have proved that there is no God, what will you have accomplished?” Guido, seeing himself surrounded by them, answered quickly: “Gentlemen, you may say anything you wish to me in your own home.” Then, resting his hand on one of the great tombs and being very nimble, he leaped over it and, landing on the other side, made off and rid himself of them.

What interests us here is not so much the spirited reply attributed to Cavalcanti (which may be interpreted in the light of the fact that the “Epicurianism” claimed by the poet was really Averroism, according to which the individual soul is only a part of the universal intellect: the tombs are *your* home and not mine insofar as individual bodily death is overcome by anyone who rises to universal contemplation through intellectual speculation). What strikes me most is the visual scene evoked by Boccaccio, of Cavalcanti freeing himself with a leap “*sí come colui che leggerissimo era,*” a man very light in body.

Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness, and that what many consider to be the vitality of the times—noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring—belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars.

I would like you to bear this image in mind as I proceed to talk about Cavalcanti as the poet of lightness. The dramatis personae of his poems are not so much human beings as sighs, rays of light, optical images, and above all those nonmaterial impulses and messages he calls “spirits.” A theme by no means “light,” such as the sufferings of love, is dissolved into impalpable entities that move between sensitive soul and intellective soul, between

heart and mind, between eyes and voice. In short, in every case we are concerned with something marked by three characteristics: (1) it is to the highest degree light; (2) it is in motion; (3) it is a vector of information. In some poems this messenger-cum-message is the poetic text itself. In the most famous one—“*Per ch’i’ no spero di tornai giammai*” (Because I never hope to return)—the exiled poet addresses the ballad he is writing and says: “*Va’ tu, leggera e piana, / dritt’ a la donna mia*” (Go, light and soft, / straight to my lady). In another poem it is the tools of the writer’s trade—quills and the knives to sharpen them—that have their say: “*Noi siàn le triste penne isbigottite / le cesoiuzze e’l coltellin dolente*” (We are the poor, bewildered quills, / The little scissors and the grieving penknife). In sonnet 13 the word “*spirito*” or “*spiritello*” appears in every line. In what is plainly a self-parody, Cavalcanti takes his predilection for that key word to its ultimate conclusion, concentrating a complicated abstract narrative involving fourteen “spirits,” each with a different function, and all within the scope of fourteen lines. In another sonnet the body is dismembered by the sufferings of love, but goes on walking about like an automaton “*fatto di rame o di pietra o di legno*” (made of copper or stone or wood). Years before, Guinizelli in one of his sonnets had transformed his poet into a brass statue, a concrete image that draws its strength from the very sense of weight it communicates. In Cavalcanti the weight of matter is dissolved because the materials of the human simulacrum can be many, all interchangeable. The metaphor does not impress a solid image on us, and not even the word *pietra* (stone) lends heaviness to the line. Here also we find the equality of all existing things that I spoke of in regard to Lucretius and Ovid. The critic Gianfranco Contini defines it as the “*parificazione cavalcantiana dei reali,*” referring to Cavalcanti’s way of putting everything on the same level.

The most felicitous example of Cavalcanti’s leveling of things

we find in a sonnet that begins with a list of images of beauty, all destined to be surpassed by the beauty of the beloved woman:

Biltà di donna e di saccente core
e cavalieri armati che sien genti;
cantar d'augelli e ragionar d'amore;
adorni legni 'n mar forte correnti;

aria serena quand'apar l'albore
e bianca neve scender senza venti;
rivera d'acqua e prato d'ogni fiore;
oro, argento, azzuro 'n ornamenti

Beauty of woman and of wise hearts, and gentle knights in armor; the song of birds and the discourse of love; bright ships moving swiftly on the sea; clear air when the dawn appears, and white snow falling without wind; stream of water and meadow with every flower; gold, silver, azure in ornaments.

The line “e bianca neve scender senza venti” is taken up with a few modifications by Dante in *Inferno* XIV.30: “Come di neve in alpe senza vento” (As snow falls in the mountains without wind). The two lines are almost identical, but they express two completely different concepts. In both the snow on windless days suggests a light, silent movement. But here the resemblance ends. In Dante the line is dominated by the specification of the place (“in alpe”), which gives us a mountainous landscape, whereas in Cavalcanti the adjective “bianca,” which may seem pleonastic, together with the verb “fall”—also completely predictable—dissolve the landscape into an atmosphere of suspended abstraction. But it is chiefly the first word that determines the difference between the two lines. In Cavalcanti the conjunction *e* (and) puts the snow on the same level as the other visions that precede and

follow it: a series of images like a catalogue of the beauties of the world. In Dante the adverb *come* (as) encloses the entire scene in the frame of a metaphor, but within this frame it has a concrete reality of its own. No less concrete and dramatic is the landscape of hell under a rain of fire, which he illustrates by the simile of the snow. In Cavalcanti everything moves so swiftly that we are unaware of its consistency, only of its effects. In Dante everything acquires consistency and stability: the weight of things is precisely established. Even when he is speaking of light things, Dante seems to want to render the exact weight of this lightness: “come di neve in alpe senza vento.” In another very similar line the weight of a body sinking into the water and disappearing is, as it were, held back and slowed down: “Come per acqua cupa cosa grave” (Like some heavy thing in deep water; *Paradiso* III.123).

At this point we should remember that the idea of the world as composed of weightless atoms is striking just because we know the weight of things so well. So, too, we would be unable to appreciate the lightness of language if we could not appreciate language that has some weight to it.

We might say that throughout the centuries two opposite tendencies have competed in literature: one tries to make language into a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses. The other tries to give language the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations.

At the very beginnings of Italian, and indeed European, literature, the first tendency was initiated by Cavalcanti, the second by Dante. The contrast is generally valid but would need endless qualification, given Dante's enormous wealth of resources and his extraordinary versatility. It is not by chance that the sonnet of

Dante's instilled with the most felicitous lightness ("Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io") is in fact addressed to Cavalcanti. In the *Vita nuova* Dante deals with the same material as his friend and master, and certain words, themes, and ideas are found in both poets. When Dante wants to express lightness, even in the *Divina Commedia*, no one can do it better than he does, but his real genius lies in the opposite direction—in extracting all the possibilities of sound and emotion and feeling from the language, in capturing the world in verse at all its various levels, in all its forms and attributes, in transmitting the sense that the world is organized into a system, an order, or a hierarchy where everything has its place. To push this contrast perhaps too far, I might say that Dante gives solidity even to the most abstract intellectual speculation, whereas Cavalcanti dissolves the concreteness of tangible experience in lines of measured rhythm, syllable by syllable, as if thought were darting out of darkness in swift lightning flashes.

This discussion of Cavalcanti has served to clarify (at least to myself) what I mean by "lightness." Lightness for me goes with precision and determination, not with vagueness and the haphazard. Paul Valéry said: "Il faut être léger comme l'oiseau, et non comme la plume" (One should be light like a bird, and not like a feather). I have relied on Cavalcanti for examples of lightness in at least three different senses. First there is a lightening of language whereby meaning is conveyed through a verbal texture that seems weightless, until the meaning itself takes on the same rarefied consistency. I leave it to you to find other examples of this sort. Emily Dickinson, for instance, can supply as many as we might wish:

A sepal, petal and a thorn
Upon a common summer's morn—

A flask of Dew—A Bee or two—
A Breeze—a caper in the trees—
And I'm a Rose!

Second, there is the narration of a train of thought or psychological process in which subtle and imperceptible elements are at work, or any kind of description that involves a high degree of abstraction. To find a more modern example of this we may turn to Henry James, opening any of his books at random:

It was as if these depths, constantly bridged over by a structure that was firm enough in spite of its lightness and of its occasional oscillation in the somewhat vertiginous air, invited on occasion, in the interest of their nerves, a dropping of the plummet and a measurement of the abyss. A difference had been made moreover, once for all, by the fact that she had, all the while, not appeared to feel the need of rebutting his charge of an idea within her that she didn't dare to express, uttered just before one of the fullest of their later discussions ended. ("The Beast in the Jungle," chap. 3)

And third there is a visual image of lightness that acquires emblematic value, such as—in Boccaccio's story—Cavalcanti vaulting on nimble legs over a tombstone. Some literary inventions are impressed on our memories by their verbal implications rather than by their actual words. The scene in which Don Quixote drives his lance through the sail of a windmill and is hoisted up into the air takes only a few lines in Cervantes' novel. One might even say that the author put only a minimal fraction of his resources into the passage. In spite of this, it remains one of the most famous passages in all of literature.

I think that with these definitions I can begin to leaf through

the books in my library, seeking examples of lightness. In Shakespeare I look immediately for the point at which Mercutio arrives on the scene (I.iv.17–18): “You are a lover; borrow Cupid’s wings / And soar with them above a common bound.” Mercutio immediately contradicts Romeo, who has just replied, “Under love’s heavy burden do I sink.” Mercutio’s way of moving about the world is plain enough from the very first verbs he uses: to dance, to soar, to prick. The human face is a mask, “a visor.” Scarcely has he come on stage when he feels the need to explain his philosophy, not with a theoretical discourse but by relating a dream. Queen Mab, the fairies’ midwife, appears in a chariot made of “an empty hazelnut”:

Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners’ legs,
The cover, of the wings of grasshoppers;
Her traces, of the smallest spider web;
Her collars, of the moonshine’s wat’ry beams;
Her whip, of cricket’s bone; the lash, of film

And let’s not forget that this coach is “drawn with a team of little atomies”—in my opinion a vital detail that enables the dream of Queen Mab to combine Lucretian atomism, Renaissance neo-Platonism, and Celtic folklore.

I would also like Mercutio’s dancing gait to come along with us across the threshold of the new millennium. The times that form a background to *Romeo and Juliet* are in many respects not unlike our own: cities bloodstained by violent struggles just as senseless as those of the Montagues and Capulets; sexual liberation, as preached by the Nurse, which does not succeed in becoming the model for universal love; ventures carried out in the generous optimism of “natural philosophy,” as preached by Friar Laurence, with unsure results that can yield death as much as life.

The age of Shakespeare recognized subtle forces connecting macrocosm and microcosm, ranging from those of the Neo-Platonic firmament to the spirits of metal transformed in the alchemist’s crucible. Classical myths can provide their repertory of nymphs and dryads, but the Celtic mythologies are even richer in the imagery of the most delicate natural forces, with their elves and fairies. This cultural background—and I can’t help thinking of Francis Yates’s fascinating studies on the occult philosophy of the Renaissance and its echoes in literature—explains why Shakespeare provides the fullest exemplification of my thesis. And I am not thinking solely of Puck and the whole phantasmagoria of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or of Ariel and those who “are such stuff / As dreams are made on.” I am thinking above all of that particular and existential inflection that makes it possible for Shakespeare’s characters to distance themselves from their own drama, thus dissolving it into melancholy and irony.

The weightless gravity I have spoken of with regard to Cavalcanti reappears in the age of Cervantes and Shakespeare: it is that special connection between melancholy and humor studied by Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl in *Saturn and Melancholy* (1964). As melancholy is sadness that has taken on lightness, so humor is comedy that has lost its bodily weight (a dimension of human carnality that nonetheless constitutes the greatness of Boccaccio and Rabelais). It casts doubt on the self, on the world, and on the whole network of relationships that are at stake. Melancholy and humor, inextricably intermingled, characterize the accents of the Prince of Denmark, accents we have learned to recognize in nearly all Shakespeare’s plays on the lips of so many avatars of Hamlet. One of these, Jacques in *As You Like It* (IV.i.15–18), defines melancholy in these terms: “but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and indeed the sundry contemplation

of my travels, which, by often rumination, wraps me in a most humorous sadness." It is therefore not a dense, opaque melancholy, but a veil of minute particles of humours and sensations, a fine dust of atoms, like everything else that goes to make up the ultimate substance of the multiplicity of things.

I confess that I am tempted to construct my own Shakespeare, a Lucretian atomist, but I realize that this would be arbitrary. The first writer in the modern world who explicitly professed an atomistic concept of the universe in its fantastic transfiguration is not found until some years later, in France: Cyrano de Bergerac.

An extraordinary writer, Cyrano, and one who deserves to be better known, not only as the first true forerunner of science fiction but for his intellectual and poetic qualities. A follower of Gassendi's "sensism" and the astronomy of Copernicus, but nourished above all by the natural philosophy of the Italian Renaissance—Cardano, Bruno, Campanella—Cyrano is the first poet of atomism in modern literature. In pages where his irony cannot conceal a genuine cosmic excitement, Cyrano extols the unity of all things, animate or inanimate, the combinatoria of elementary figures that determine the variety of living forms; and above all he conveys his sense of the precariousness of the processes behind them. That is, how nearly man missed being man, and life, life, and the world, the world.

Vous vous étonnez comme cette matière, brouillée pêle-mêle, au gré du hasard, peut avoir constitué un homme, vu qu'il y avait tant de choses nécessaires à la construction de son être, mais vous ne savez pas que cent millions de fois cette matière, s'acheminant au dessein d'un homme, s'est

arrêtée à former tantôt une pierre, tantôt du plomb, tantôt du corail, tantôt une fleur, tantôt une comète, pour le trop ou le trop peu de certaines figures qu'il fallait ou ne fallait pas à désigner un homme? Si bien que ce n'est pas merveille qu'entre une infinie quantité de matière qui change et se remue incessamment, elle ait rencontré à faire le peu d'animaux, de végétaux, de minéraux que nous voyons; non plus que ce n'est pas merveille qu'en cent coups de dés il arrive un raffle. Aussi bien est-il impossible que de ce remuement il ne se fasse quelque chose, et cette chose sera toujours admirée d'un étourdi qui ne saura pas combien peu s'en est fallu qu'elle n'ait pas été faite. (*Voyage dans la lune*, 1661, Garnier-Flammarion edition, pp. 98–99)

You marvel that this matter, shuffled pell-mell at the whim of Chance, could have made a man, seeing that so much was needed for the construction of his being. But you must realize that a hundred million times this matter, on the way to human shape, has been stopped to form now a stone, now lead, now coral, now a flower, now a comet; and all because of more or fewer elements that were or were not necessary for designing a man. Little wonder if, within an infinite quantity of matter that ceaselessly changes and stirs, the few animals, vegetables, and minerals we see should happen to be made; no more wonder than getting a royal pair in a hundred casts of the dice. Indeed it is equally impossible for all this stirring not to lead to something; and yet this something will always be wondered at by some blockhead who will never realize how small a change would have made it into something else.

By this route Cyrano goes so far as to proclaim the brotherhood of men and cabbages, and thus imagines the protest of a

cabbage about to be beheaded: “Homme, mon cher frère, que t’ai-je fait qui mérite la mort? . . . Je me lève de terre, je m’épanouis, je te tends les bras, je t’offre mes enfants en graine, et pour récompense de ma courtoisie, tu me fais trancher la tête!” (Man, my dear brother, what have I done to you, to deserve death? . . . I rise from the earth, I blossom forth, I stretch out my arms to you, I offer you my children as seed; and as a reward for my courtesy you have my head cut off!).

If we consider that this peroration in favor of truly universal *fraternité* was written nearly one hundred and fifty years before the French revolution, we see how the sluggishness of the human consciousness in emerging from its anthropocentric parochialism can be abolished in an instant by poetic invention. And all this in the context of a trip to the moon, in which Cyrano’s imagination outdistances his most illustrious predecessors, Lucian of Samosata and Ludovico Ariosto. In my discussion of lightness, Cyrano is bound to figure chiefly because of the way in which (before Newton) he felt the problem of universal gravitation. Or, rather, it is the problem of escaping the force of gravity that so stimulates his imagination as to lead him to think up a whole series of ways of reaching the moon, each one more ingenious than the last—for example, by using a phial filled with dew that evaporates in the sun; by smearing himself with ox marrow, which is usually sucked up by the moon; or by repeatedly tossing up a magnetized ball from a little boat.

As for the technique of magnetism, this was destined to be developed and perfected by Jonathan Swift to keep the flying island of Laputa in the air. The moment at which Laputa first appears in flight is one when Swift’s two obsessions seem to cancel out in an instant of magical equilibrium. I am speaking of the bodiless abstraction of the rationalism at which his satire is aimed and the material weight of the body: “and I could see the

sides of it, encompassed with several gradations of galleries, and stairs at certain intervals, to descend from one to the other. In the lowest gallery I beheld some people fishing with long angling rods, and others looking on.” Swift was a contemporary and adversary of Newton. Voltaire was an admirer of Newton, and he imagined a giant called Micromégas, who in contrast to Swift’s giants is defined not by his bulk but by dimensions expressed in figures, by spatial and temporal properties enumerated in the rigorous, impassive terms of scientific treatises. In virtue of this logic and style, Micromégas succeeds in flying through space from Sirius to Saturn to Earth. One might say that, in Newton’s theories, what most strikes the literary imagination is not the conditioning of everything and everyone by the inevitability of its own weight, but rather the balance of forces that enables heavenly bodies to float in space.

The eighteenth-century imagination is full of figures suspended in air. It is no accident that at the beginning of that century Antoine Galland’s French translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* opened up the imagination of the West to the Eastern sense of marvel: flying carpets, winged horses, genies emerging from lamps. In this drive to make the imagination exceed all bounds, the eighteenth century reached its climax with the flight of Baron von Münchhausen on a cannonball, an image identified forever in our minds with the illustrations that are Gustave Doré’s masterpiece. These adventures of Münchhausen, which—like the *Thousand and One Nights*—may have had one author, many authors, or none at all, are a constant challenge to the laws of gravity. The baron is carried aloft by ducks; he pulls up himself and his horse by tugging at the pigtail of his wig; he comes down from the moon on a rope that during the descent is several times cut and reknotted.

These images from folk literature, along with those we have

seen from more learned literature, are part of the literary repercussions of Newton's theories. When he was fifteen years old, Giacomo Leopardi wrote an amazingly erudite *History of Astronomy*, in which among other things he sums up Newton's theories. The gazing at the night skies that inspires Leopardi's most beautiful lines was not simply a lyrical theme: when he spoke about the moon, Leopardi knew exactly what he was talking about. In his ceaseless discourses on the unbearable weight of living, Leopardi bestows many images of lightness on the happiness he thinks we can never attain: birds, the voice of a girl singing at a window, the clarity of the air—and, above all, the moon.

As soon as the moon appears in poetry, it brings with it a sensation of lightness, suspension, a silent calm enchantment. When I began thinking about these lectures, I wanted to devote one whole talk to the moon, to trace its apparitions in the literatures of many times and places. Then I decided that the moon should be left entirely to Leopardi. For the miraculous thing about his poetry is that he simply takes the weight out of language, to the point that it resembles moonlight. The appearances of the moon in his poetry do not take up many lines, but they are enough to shed the light of the moon on the whole poem, or else to project upon it the shadow of its absence.

Dolce e chiara è la notte e senza vento
e queta sopra i tetti e in mezzo agli orti
posa la luna, e di lontan rivela
serena ogni montagna.

O graziosa luna, io mi rammento
che, or volge l'anno, sopra questo colle
io venia pien d'angoscia a rimirarti:
e tu pendevi allor su quella selva
siccome fai, che tutta la rischiari.

O cara luna, al cui tranquillo raggio
danzan le lepri nelle selve . . .

Già tutta l'aria imbruna,
torna azzurro il sereno, e tornan l'ombre
giù da' colli e da' tetti,
al biancheggiar della recente luna.

Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? Dimmi, che fai,
silenziosa luna?
Sorgi la sera e vai,
contemplando i deserti, indi ti posi.

Soft and clear is the night and without wind, and quietly
over the roofs and in the gardens rests the moon, and far
away reveals every peaceful mountain.

O gentle, gracious moon, I remember now, it must be a
year ago, on this same hill I came to see you; I was full of
sorrow. And you were leaning then above that wood just as
now, filling it all with brilliance.

O cherished moon, beneath whose quiet beams the hares
dance in the woods . . .

Already all the air darkens, deepens to blue, and shadows glide
from roofs and hills at the whitening of the recent moon.

What do you do there, moon, in the sky? Tell me what you
do, silent moon. When evening comes you rise and go con-
templating wastelands; then you set.

Have a great number of threads been interwoven in this lecture? Which thread should I pull on to find the end in my hand? There is the thread that connects the moon, Leopardi, Newton, gravitation and levitation. There is the thread of Lucretius, atomism, Cavalcanti's philosophy of love, Renaissance magic, Cyrano. Then there is the thread of writing as a metaphor of the powder-fine substance of the world. For Lucretius, letters were atoms in continual motion, creating the most diverse words and sounds by means of their permutations. This notion was taken up by a long tradition of thinkers for whom the world's secrets were contained in the combinatoria of the signs used in writing: one thinks of the *Ars Magna* of Raymond Lully, the Cabala of the Spanish rabbis and of Pico della Mirandola Even Galileo saw the alphabet as the model for all combinations of minimal units And then Leibniz

Should I continue along this road? Won't the conclusions awaiting me seem all too obvious? Writing as a model for every process of reality indeed the only reality we can know, indeed the only reality *tout court* No, I will not travel such roads as these, for they would carry me too far from the use of words as I understand it—that is, words as a perpetual pursuit of things, as a perpetual adjustment to their infinite variety.

There remains one thread, the one I first started to unwind: that of literature as an existential function, the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living. Perhaps even Lucretius was moved by this need, perhaps even Ovid: Lucretius who was seeking—or thought he was seeking—Epicurean impassiveness; and Ovid who was seeking—or thought he was seeking—reincarnation in other lives according to the teachings of Pythagoras.

I am accustomed to consider literature a search for knowledge. In order to move onto existential ground, I have to think of literature as extended to anthropology and ethnology and my-

thology. Faced with the precarious existence of tribal life—drought, sickness, evil influences—the shaman responded by ridding his body of weight and flying to another world, another level of perception, where he could find the strength to change the face of reality. In centuries and civilizations closer to us, in villages where the women bore most of the weight of a constricted life, witches flew by night on broomsticks or even on lighter vehicles such as ears of wheat or pieces of straw. Before being codified by the Inquisition, these visions were part of the folk imagination, or we might even say of lived experience. I find it a steady feature in anthropology, this link between the levitation desired and the privation actually suffered. It is this anthropological device that literature perpetuates.

First, oral literature: in folktales a flight to another world is a common occurrence. Among the “functions” catalogued by Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968), it is one of the methods of “transference of the hero,” defined as follows: “Usually the object sought is in ‘another’ or ‘different’ realm that may be situated far away horizontally, or else at a great vertical depth or height.” Propp then goes on to list a great number of examples of the hero flying through the air: on horseback or on the back of a bird, disguised as a bird, in a flying boat, on a flying carpet, on the shoulders of a giant or a spirit, in the devil's wagon.

It is probably not pushing things too far to connect the functions of shamanism and witchcraft documented in ethnology and folklore with the catalogue of images contained in literature. On the contrary, I think that the deepest rationality behind every literary operation has to be sought out in the anthropological needs to which it corresponds.

I would like to end this talk by mentioning Kafka's “Der Kübelreiter” (The Knight of the Bucket). This is a very short story written in 1917 in the first person, and its point of departure is

plainly a real situation in that winter of warfare, the worst for the Austrian Empire: the lack of coal. The narrator goes out with an empty bucket to find coal for the stove. Along the way the bucket serves him as a horse, and indeed it takes him up as far as the second floor of a house, where he rocks up and down as if riding on the back of a camel. The coal merchant's shop is underground, and the bucket rider is too high up. He has a hard time getting his message across to the man, who would really like to respond to his request, but the coal merchant's wife wants nothing to do with him. He begs them to give him a shovelful of even the worst coal, even though he can't pay immediately. The coal merchant's wife unties her apron and shooes away the intruder as if he were a fly. The bucket is so light that it flies off with its rider until it disappears beyond the Ice Mountains.

Many of Kafka's short stories are mysterious, and this one is particularly so. It may be that Kafka only wanted to tell us that going out to look for a bit of coal on a cold wartime night changes the mere swinging of an empty bucket into the quest of a knight-errant or the desert crossing of a caravan or a flight on a magic carpet. But the idea of an empty bucket raising you above the level where one finds both the help and the egoism of others; the empty bucket, symbol of privation and desire and seeking, raising you to the point at which a humble request can no longer be satisfied—all this opens the road to endless reflection.

I have spoken of the shaman and the folktale hero, of privation that is transformed into lightness and makes possible a flight into a realm where every need is magically fulfilled. I have spoken of witches flying on humble household implements, such as a bucket. But the hero of Kafka's story doesn't seem to be endowed with the powers of shamanism or witchcraft; nor does the country beyond the Ice Mountains seem to be one in which the empty

bucket will find anything to fill it. In fact, the fuller it is, the less it will be able to fly. Thus, astride our bucket, we shall face the new millennium, without hoping to find anything more in it than what we ourselves are able to bring to it. Lightness, for example, whose virtues I have tried to illustrate here.