After Fiction?
Democratic Imagination in an Age of Facts

§1 Philosophical reflection on the relationship between democracy and literature tends to take the novel as its privileged object of analysis, albeit for different reasons in the Francophone and Anglophone contexts. For Jacques Rancière, the genre (or rather non-genre) of the novel exemplifies the democratic disturbance that is the very principle of literature: “La maladie démocratique et la performance littéraire ont même principe: cette vie de la lettre muette-bavarde, de la lettre démocratique qui perturbe tout rapport ordonné entre l’ordre du discours et l’ordre des états”. In contrast to this model of disruption to the existing order of representations, Anglophone philosophers often locate the democratic dimension of the novel in its promotion of shared understanding, a kind of training in liberal solidarity through imaginative identification.

§2 My aim here is not to detail the similarities and differences between these approaches, but rather to confront these views with the current instability of the link between the genre of the novel and democratic community. The literary field in the 21st century is increasingly troubled by a new kind of democratic disorder. With the proliferation of information and narrative forms, factual modes of writing increasingly become the privileged site of literature’s engagement with the real. This “factual turn”, which in the Anglophone world has led to large claims for the powers of literary nonfiction, is also visible, although differently articulated, in contemporary French literature. We may wonder whether this development signals a renewed involvement of literature in public discourse, or a failure of the imaginative capacity to transform the actual.

Democratic Imagination

§3 An important current in recent American philosophy emphasizes the democratic potential of literature, and more precisely the novel, as a genre that holds a central place in public discourse and entails a set of ethical commitments. This is the view developed by Martha Nussbaum, whose work on literature has moved from inquiry into the ancient Greek ethical vision in The Fragility of Goodness (1986), to a focus on the value of the novel for democratic citizenship. Nussbaum’s work unites an Aristotelian understanding of human flourishing with literature’s sense of the vulnerability of human life and moral agency to the force of circumstance. The introduction to Love’s Knowledge (1992) emphasizes the novel’s “attention to particularity and emotion”, its involvement of readers in “feeling concerning their own possibilities as well as that of the character”, and its keen awareness of “the small movements of the inner world”. These preoccupations, in Nussbaum’s view, are inseparable from the formal features of the works she examines (by Dickens, James, Proust, and Beckett). This approach to the ethical dimension of fiction harmonizes, despite differences in particular readings, with other philosophical studies of literature, such as Robert Pippin’s Henry James and Modern Moral Life (2000), or Stanley Cavell’s study of literature’s inquiry into our knowledge and acknowledgement of others.

In Poetic Justice (1997), Nussbaum’s claims for the novel are more directly oriented toward the place of the genre in contemporary public life, as well as
toward an analysis of the affinities between literary and legal judgment. Nussbaum’s argument for the value of literature (or, more specifically, fiction) finds its basis in the Aristotelian claim that literary art is “more philosophical” than history; the latter deals with the actual, whereas “literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves”\(^6\). Yet Nussbaum is interested more specifically in forms of fiction that combine the exploration of the possible with a commitment to the ordinary. Therefore, although she does discuss the “democratizing vision” of Walt Whitman’s poetry (PJ 119), her main concern is “the realist Anglo-American novel”, and in particular “a group of novels with social and political themes” (PJ 10): Dickens’s *Hard Times*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*. Within this realist framework, literature explores the possible through the actual, offering a space of imaginary identification in a world that is both distant (because fictional) and familiar—since the “others” with whom we empathize can also be identified with our existing fellow-citizens. *Hard Times* is the paradigmatic case for Nussbaum’s argument, since its critique of utilitarian political economy directly thematizes the relationship between social justice and the fictional imagination, providing clear evidence for Nussbaum’s argument that there is “a deep connection between ‘fancy’ and democratic equality” (PJ 4).

§4 Nussbaum’s approach extends beyond thematic analysis to argue that the novel, “on account of some general features of its structure, generally constructs empathy and compassion in ways highly relevant to citizenship” (PJ 10). However, it seems that the bolder the claims for the public role of literature in a democratic society, the more limited the field of politically valuable literature. The shift of emphasis in Nussbaum’s work from the ethical to the political coincides with a narrowing of her focus to the novel and then to certain types of novel. Thus the claims for literature’s social utility in *Poetic Justice* entail leaving aside the modernist interiority of Proust and James (the subject of intricate analysis in *Love’s Knowledge*) in favor of those realist narratives that emphasize the drama of the individual within a concrete situation. The focus on questions of pedagogical practice in *Cultivating Humanity* (1997)\(^7\) and *Not for Profit* (2010) brings a further narrowing of the literary field in the name of humanistic education. Nussbaum presents a twofold role for the arts and humanities in schools and colleges: “They cultivate capacities for play and empathy in a general way, and they address particular cultural blind spots”\(^8\). Both tasks, however, “in order to be stably linked to democratic values”, require a normative view of human dignity and thus a “careful selectivity”, excluding works of literature that stigmatize groups of people\(^9\). Nussbaum’s concern about such “defective” forms of literature—defective because they because they inhibit, rather than promote, “imaginative access to the stigmatized position”\(^10\)—extends even to fairy tales such as *Hansel and Gretel* with its cheerful incineration of the witch\(^11\). In its politically useful forms, then, the fictional realm is at once identified with the free play of imaginative possibility, and strictly circumscribed within a normative framework already defined by democratic consensus.

§5 *Not for Profit*, even as it resists the creeping marginalization of literature in contemporary democratic societies, thus reveals the difficulty of linking literature in any stable way with democratic values. An instructive point of comparison is Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), which also argues that literature can help create solidarity by “increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people”\(^12\). However, Rorty’s acknowledgment that all literature does not function this way leads him to elaborate a public/private division that is partially distributed along genre lines.
While narrative, by promoting “imaginative identification”, is largely on the side of the public virtues, Rorty associates the figure of the “strong poet” with the “private” task of self-creation (CIS 93, 97). Thus the expansion of sympathy and liberal solidarity finds its privileged form in narrative, if not necessarily fictional narrative, via “genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel” (CIS xvi).

§6 Despite their differences, Nussbaum and Rorty share a commitment to a liberal model of democratic citizenship, in which some forms of literature connect the individual with the community. Nussbaum highlights the congruence of the novel with a certain political vision: “The vision of community embodied in the novel is [...] a liberal vision, in which individuals are seen as valuable in their own right, and as having distinctive stories of their own to tell” (PJ 7). While individual autonomy and the demands of solidarity are not reconciled so easily for Rorty, he nevertheless envisages their coexistence as alternative “vocabularies” that can be used for different purposes (CIS 11). The more troublesome aspects of literature, like those philosophical values that are not useful for liberal society, can be “privatized” (CIS 65). These optimistic claims for the literary imagination, however, seem increasingly at odds with the actual position of literature. In particular, we might wonder about Nussbaum’s claim that “the novel is a living form and in fact still the central morally serious yet popularly engaging fictional form of our culture” (PJ 6)—indeed, the phrase “in fact still” registers the shadow of a doubt. In this respect, Rorty’s reference to the political potential of a plurality of narrative forms (from the journalistic report to the novel) is prescient. The first years of the 21st century have seen the rise of calls for forms of representation that are more immediate than fiction, more urgently connected to present reality.

Nonfiction and Narrative Art

§7 Contemporary writers increasingly express a suspicion that falls not only on supposedly obsolete narrative techniques (as it did for the novelists associated with the nouveau roman) but also on fictionality as such. The perennial debate on the “death of the novel” thus takes a turn toward bold claims for the significance of literary nonfiction. This tendency, perhaps too easily dismissed by critics as a “fashionable anti-novelistic movement”13, is worth taking seriously as a symptom of larger transformations of the literary field and its place in contemporary culture, both in France and the Anglophone world.

§8 Two examples, taken from the American and British press in 2010, will serve as a point of entry into the pervasive discourse on the end of fiction in the Anglophone context. The first is a column for the New York Observer, in which the cultural critic Lee Siegel charges that fiction has been professionalized, has lost its former “existential urgency”, and is now “culturally irrelevant.” Great storytelling, claims Siegel, now happens outside the novel: “the most interesting, perceptive and provocative writers of our moment write narrative nonfiction”14. As examples of innovative nonfiction, Siegel cites a number of journalistic and biographical works, including David Remnick’s biography of Obama, a report in The New Yorker by Janet Malcolm based on a murder trial (“Iphigenia in Forest Hills”), Michael Lewis’s tales of contemporary finance, and T.J. Stiles’ The First Tycoon (a biography of Cornelius Vanderbilt). Siegel’s brief essay provoked a number of responses defending the novel’s connection with “aspects of our experience that are less timely, more universal”15, or offering market-based arguments about the
“extraordinary proliferation of new fiction”, “of all sorts”, that crowds bookstores and emerges from writing programs.

§9 My second example is an essay on contemporary war reporting by the British author Geoff Dyer, published first in the Guardian newspaper in June 2010, then in modified form in the nonfiction collection Otherwise Known as the Human Condition (2011). Adopting a narrower focus than Siegel, Dyer nevertheless also comments on the inadequacy of fiction to deal with contemporary events: “Reportage, long-form reporting—call it what you will—has left the novel looking somewhat superfluous” (the qualifier “somewhat” is added in the second version of Dyer’s text). Dyer discusses a number of nonfiction books concerned with what he calls “the defining story of our times—the al-Qaeda attacks on New York and the Pentagon, and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan” (OKHC 215). In their detailed recording of the horrors of war and their unveiling of the complexities of historical circumstance, these accounts provide a literary remedy for political (and journalistic) failure; Dyer quotes George Packer’s observation that “[t]he press redeemed in Baghdad what it had botched in Washington” (OKHC 216).

§10 Novels offer no such immediate remedy, claims Dyer, because it takes too long to make “imaginative sense” of real events (OKHC 216). Nonfiction accounts share the novel’s ability to use character and narrative as “forms of cognition and understanding”, and “it is difficult to see what the novelist might bring to the table except stylistic panache [...] and the burden of unnecessary conventions” (OKHC 217). Dyer draws out contrasts between different narrative possibilities within reportage—from the “narrative self-effacement” of David Finkel’s The Good Soldiers to the digressive first-person voice of Dexter Filkins’s The Forever War, which Dyer sees as closer to the territory of fiction (OKHC 219). He comments on the linguistic advantages of the American journalists, who unlike the class-identified British writers share a common idiom with their subjects through the “flexibility and versatility of American English as deployed by the soldiers on whose lives they depend” (OKHC 222-223). Finally, citing Martin Amis’s critique of the nonfiction novels of Mailer and Capote as lacking “moral imagination” (OKHC 226), Dyer concludes by suggesting that we have reached a new moment in the history of narrative nonfiction: “We are moving beyond the nonfiction novel to different kinds of narrative art, different forms of cognition. Loaded with moral and political point, narrative has been recalibrated to record, honor, and protest the latest, historically specific instance of futility and mess” (OKHC 227).

§11 The charge of the novel’s “superfluity” adds to the charge of irrelevancy a suspicion of fiction as surplus, an inessential supplement of style or convention added to a reality that is already saturated with stories. Fiction seems unnecessary when stories are there for the taking—and yet, Dyer insists that narrative construction retains a cognitive function in its organization and presentation of events. The praise of the possibilities of nonfiction thus does not entail a rejection of narrative form, but rather involves the claim that nonfiction narrative can mobilize the traditional resources of the novel, such as plot and character. Dyer and others celebrate a narrative art that leaves behind convention, and eschews fictional distance, in order to explore the moral meaning of current events. Perhaps most compelling in Dyer’s account is his description of the gesture toward totality that results from the incomplete nature of referential narrative:
Just as characters interconnect with each other within a novel, so these nonfiction books and real-life characters interconnect with and segue into each other to form an epic, ongoing, multivolume work in progress. The name of this constantly revised, unfinishable book, I guess, will eventually be *History.* (OKHC 225)

The strengths and weaknesses of particular works thus fade into the background of a larger proto-book, as they shape a literary space that is continuous with reality itself. The autonomy and completeness of fictional narratives are rejected, in the name of an incomplete but infinitely extendible, interwoven, layered, and contradictory space of “narrative art”.

**Genre Trouble, Reality Hunger**

§12 Reportage, reporting, “call it what you will” (OKHC 216): Dyer’s hesitation indicates the difficulty of demarcating a stable generic territory for the art of nonfiction. Siegel’s “narrative nonfiction” is an even broader category that might encompass memoir, biography, historical narrative, and journalism (and the works of Geoff Dyer), although Siegel clearly has in mind a number of commercially successful books that elicit a broad public response to current events. The recent emphasis on creative nonfiction also shapes the practice and reception of the literary essay, or what the American author John D’Agata calls the “lyric essay”—a category that mingles genres, promising an engagement with facts while giving primacy to art.

David Shields defends an aesthetic of brevity and the fragment when describing his own preference for “prose poems/lyric essays/short-shorts” that “hold the universal via the ordinary”.

This terminological hesitation points to the emergence of a new discursive configuration, one that places the question of literature’s relationship to reality beyond definitions of genre, in a realm structured primarily by the fiction/nonfiction distinction.

§13 Nonfiction prose occupies a marginal place in theories of literature: Käte Hamburger’s *The Logic of Literature*, in an analysis based on literature’s relationship to reality statement, posits the fictional and lyrical genres as the major literary forms; Gérard Genette’s taxonomic approach relegates nonfictional prose to the realm of conditional literality, subject to the “rhematic” criterion of its perceived aesthetic value. Yet the position of factual writing in the literary field should be considered historically, as Jean-Louis Jeannelle argues. Contemporary arguments for creative nonfiction can be viewed as a symptom of the shrinking place of literature in culture and intellectual life, as suggested in Dyer’s humorous account of his own “Reader’s Block” (OKHC 378), or in Shields’s assertion that the writer must “come to grips with the marginalization of literature by more technologically sophisticated and thus more visceral forms” (HLS 129).

More optimistically, what is occurring may be a transformation of the literary system, as it lays claim to the public role of journalism or encroaches upon the disciplinary territory of the social sciences. In either case, this shift is symptomatic of a preoccupation with literature’s relationship to the common, with its ability to engage a wide readership and shape a collective response to current events.

§14 The generic multiplicity of literary nonfiction also involves a hybridization of genres, in line with Dyer’s account of the ideal writer’s life as “one made up of all sorts of different kinds of writing, including periods of fictioning” (OKHC 5). Dyer’s
own nonfiction works include essays on a range of topics (photography, literature, jazz, travel) and works that blend criticism and autobiography, such as Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence (2009)\textsuperscript{26}, and Zona: A Book About a Film About a Journey to a Room (2012)\textsuperscript{27}, in which personal digressions emerge from a frame-by-frame description of Tarkovsky’s Stalker. What emerges is a broad territory of investigation in which the author, identified with the narrator, is resolutely present. Dyer’s novels appear as an exception to this rule—a passing moment of “fictioning” within a larger nonfictional world—yet even they are often characterized by a heightened concern with questions of reference. “This is a work of fiction”, state both the copyright page and the “Notes and Acknowledgements” section at the end of the novel Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi (2009)\textsuperscript{28}. Inverting those disownments of fictionality that often framed 18\textsuperscript{th}-century novels, Dyer’s assertions of fictionality point to the possibility of a referential reading even as they deny that “real” elements function referentially in the text. The paratextual apparatus multiplies familiar disclaimers (“Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental”), while also enumerating in meticulous detail the similarities and differences between real and invented elements, and even including the dates of the author’s own visits to Venice and Varanasi (JVDV 294-95). Real persons and places take on the same role as textual sources in the acknowledgement of the novel’s borrowings, blurring the distinction between the fictional and the metafictional, the referential and the intertextual.

§15

Here we enter an ambiguous territory in contemporary literature, where the factual is the ground of the text’s ethical authority but is constantly subject to fictionalizing. This point of uncertainty is foregrounded in David Shields’s Reality Hunger (2010), an essay-manifesto composed of numbered fragments. Integrating borrowed material and covering topics from reality television to hip-hop, the book calls for a literature that offers the “lure and blur of the real” through “deliberate unartiness”, spontaneity, openness, collage, the incorporation of “raw” material, hybrid genres—and, above all, the blurring of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction\textsuperscript{29}. In advocating and implementing a collage-based aesthetics, Shields reorients modernist techniques toward an antifictional stance. Yet this argument hinges on somewhat contradictory claims: on the one hand, Shields asserts that the border between fiction and nonfiction has become irrelevant: “the facts of the situation don’t much matter” (RH 40). On the other hand, he argues that it is crucial to maintain “that tightrope walk along the margin between the newspaper report and the poetic vision” (RH 15). But how do we define the place of the margin, and what is at stake in this tightrope walk if the facts do not matter?

§16

As Shields is aware, the history of the modern novel is bound up with that of the anti-novel, and numerous authors have played on the ambiguity of the boundary that separates referential and fictional narrative—Shields mentions Defoe’s 1722 novel A Journal of the Plague Year. Scholarship on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novel has argued that the genre emerges precisely as an ambiguous form of “factual fiction”, determined by the “splitting of the undifferentiated matrix of news/novels into novels on the one hand, and journalism and history on the other”\textsuperscript{30}; some even argue that that the [English] novel discovered fiction” as a conceptual category\textsuperscript{31}. Whether we understand “fiction” as a specific historical category tied to the evolution of the novel, or more generally (following Jean-Marie Schaeffer) posit a universal “fictional competence” that is subject to varying cultural “uses”\textsuperscript{32}, it seems likely that a new configuration of the fact/fiction divide is appearing as a result of the pressures and discourses of the “information age”.
§17 The political consequences of this development are not yet clear. In yet another plea for new forms of “factual fiction” (or “faction”), the British novelist Ewan Morrison approvingly quotes Walter Benjamin’s assertion in “The Storyteller”: “there emerges a form of communication” which “confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and [...] it also brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication is information”\(^\text{33}\). However, when Morrison glorifies the fragmentation and rapidity of the digital age and praises “multi-format, open-access, internet wiki-learning” as a way for the novel to “let the world in” (and of course, remain “relevant”), he apparently does not share Benjamin’s sense of menace. For Benjamin, we should note, “information” is at odds with the force and amplitude of true storytelling: “Every morning brings us news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation, in other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information”\(^\text{34}\). Information comes pre-explained and pre-understood, whereas storytelling leaves room for the play of imagination and interpretation.

§18 The rise of literary nonfiction in the Anglophone world can therefore be seen either as a sign of renewed moral and political engagement with reality, or as a symptom of democratic conformity; here we encounter some familiar concerns about modern democratic regimes. What is clear is that the contemporary hunger for authentic stories is connected to anxiety about the truth-value of proliferating information. Inevitably, this quest for unmediated truth brings with it highly public scandals—one example is the furor in 2006 following the exposure of fictional elements in James Frey’s memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), which in 2005 had became a “nonfiction” bestseller after being selected for Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club. The media attention given to John D’Agata and Jim Fingal’s *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012), is also symptomatic, since the book openly addresses the relationship between journalistic ethics and creative license. A fictionalized version of an original exchange, the book dramatizes the encounter between the fastidious queries of a newspaper “fact-checker” (Fingal) and the writer D’Agata’s equally extreme stance on his right to manipulate the facts for aesthetic or argumentative effect\(^\text{35}\). Although the book investigates the relationship between truth and fact, and highlights the ethical problems of writing about reality (the subject of D’Agata’s “essay” is the actual suicide of a teenager), the dialogic form and combative tone firmly entrench the factual/aesthetic divide, with the unfortunate result of polarizing the debate between journalistic positivism and dubious claims for artistic irresponsibility. The latter seem very far from Dyer’s view of the moral art of reportage or even Shields’s arguments in *Reality Hunger*, in which the pull of reality presents a challenge to literary form. Instead, D’Agata presents us with a seeming impasse: artistic value depends on manipulating those very facts that supposedly ground the text’s ethical commitment to the real.

**Factual Fictions**

§19 Contemporary French literature has arguably seen a similar “factual turn”, albeit in the absence of any established discourse on the literary claims of “non-fiction”. Since the 1990s, the novel has been cast as both victim and culprit in a more general narrative of cultural decline. Thus Jean-Marie Domenach’s *Le crépuscule de la culture française* (1995) gives privileged place to the novel as a cultural
indicator while suggesting that the genre, since it is coextensive with the leveling effects of democracy, contains the seeds of its own banalization. More recently, in Contre Saint-Proust (2006), Dominique Maingueneau sees the end of Literature as in part the consequence of an immanent process of autonomization and self-abolition; but he also connects it to the transformation of communication in the Internet age, which produces “une sorte de laïcisation de la création, qui se dissémine dans une ‘créativité’ où il entre dans des proportions variables une part d’expression de soi et une part d’intégration dans un groupe”.

§20 Against these “tombeaux de la littérature”, those counter-discourses that affirm the vitality of recent French-language literature hail a return to earlier subjects and forms: a return to narrative, to the subject and to the real. Dominique Viart offers the most nuanced elaboration of this view, arguing that literature since the 1980s has absorbed the lessons of the nouveau roman while turning back from intransitivity to transitivity, from formal experiment and solipsism to the world. The return to the real, however, does not mean a return to the familiar forms of the realist tradition, or even to the genre of the novel. Rather, contemporary literature accommodates a plurality of narrative forms, often varieties of the récit rather than the roman. In an essay that examines texts by François Bon and Patrick Modiano, Alexandre Gefen observes that the contemporary form of literary engagement (engagement littéraire rather than Sartrean littérature engagée) tends toward testimonial or documentary modes. To characterize such works as “fictions” or “fictions critiques” is to acknowledge their literary value and the complexity of their narrative structure. Yet the designation of “fiction”, even broadly defined, also risks obscuring the resistance to fictionalization that characterizes much contemporary narrative literature.

§21 The place of the factual in contemporary French literature evidently varies in form and degree. Within the tendency often described as the “récit de filiation”, the reconstruction of a relation to the past necessitates fictional excursions into the realm of the possible, within an overall autobiographical pact. Pierre Michon’s Vies minuscules (1984) is a case in point. Annie Ernaux represents an extreme case in that she explicitly describes her work (since La Place in 1983) in terms of “écriture factuelle”, and develops a body of work that is deliberately anti-novelistic. Other writers incorporate novelistic aspects within an overarching referential framework; this is Emmanuel Carrère’s approach in D’autres vies que la mienn (2009) and Limonov (2011), with their respective paratextual assertions: “Tout y est vrai”; “Limonov n’est pas un personnage de fiction”. Another kind of narrative posture involves provocative claims of fictionality that both highlight and repudiate the recognizably factual origins of a story, as in Régis Jauffret’s Sévère: “Ne croyez pas que cette histoire est réelle, c’est moi qui l’ai inventée.”

§22 The historical novel presents a particularly complex case, but once again the relationship of fact and fiction is highly variable; we need only compare Jonathan Littell’s extensively researched and extravagantly mythologized novel Les Bienveillantes (2006), to the anxious verifications and rejection of invention that dominate the narrative inquiry of Laurent Binet’s HHhH (2010). In the latter case, the narrator-author’s diatribes against literature and fiction do not prevent him from attempting an imaginative projection into the past: “moi aussi, peut-être, je suis là”. The scandal surrounding Yannick Haenel’s Jan Karski (2009) is partly a consequence of the combination of factual and fictional elements. The work is divided into three distinct sections: a description of documentary material (drawn
in particular from an interview with the Polish resistance fighter Karski in Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 film Shoah; a summary of Karski’s 1944 book Story of a Secret State; and a first-person fictional reconstruction of the meeting between Karski and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Although the generic division between the sections is explicit, the coexistence of these parts creates an equivocal position that is reiterated by Haenel’s subsequent responses to his critics. Laying claim simultaneously to the freedom of fiction and to the authority of testimony, the author appropriates the figure of the witness in order to ventriloque an ideological interpretation of history, replete with anti-American caricature (the portrait of a yawning, indifferent Roosevelt). The documentary material of the first two sections serves to legitimize the unsubstantiated claims of the third section where, under the cover of fiction, Haenel claims to possess a truth that Karski himself was supposedly obliged to keep hidden.

True Stories

§23 It is possible to see the extension of the category “fiction” in France and the extravagant claims for “non-fiction” in the Anglophone context as two sides of the same coin. This is the view suggested by the novelist Luc Lang’s Délit de fiction (2011), an essay that links the contemporary inflation of the term “fiction” to the marginalization of literature. The contemporary tendency to insist on the factual in literature is, Lang argues, an attempt to compensate for “l’effet dévasteur du mot fiction”48. The erasure of the historical consciousness of literary genres, and the division of literary production according to a binary too easily mapped onto the true/false distinction, amount in Lang’s view to an exclusion of literature from its place in the community (DF 21). While locating the origin of this phenomenon in the “Anglo-Saxon” world, Lang nevertheless describes it as a symptom of a more general cultural phenomenon, a reaction to the proliferation of “histoires vraies” that saturate everyday life via newspapers, television, books, and blogs (DF 22-23). Characterized by the naïve belief in the continuity between the lived and the narrated, and by the unproblematic identity of the author-narrator-subject, these “true stories” preclude in advance any inquiry into narrative construction or point of view. This apparently democratic phenomenon, whereby each person is authorized to be the subject of his or her own story, is for Lang a politically insidious trend that instrumentalizes small narratives for the benefit of those who control the larger story:

Nous sommes parvenus, grâce à notre environnement technique qui nous baigne dans une vapeur […], un nuage narratif, à réaliser le rêve d’une démocratie directe – ainsi nous parle l’idéologie – où bruit l’infini brouhaha, inutile et vain, des voix narratives, celles des citoyens du monde que nous sommes tous, s’imaginant accéder enfin à l’énonciation singulière et publique de nos récits personnels, qui ne sont, se réjouit l’idéologie, que la polyphonie récitative d’un même texte. (DF 159)

The narrative regime of true stories thus appears as a version of Benjamin’s “information” (or Christian Salmon’s account of “storytelling”).

§24 It seems clear that the current fascination with the fiction/non-fiction divide is in large part a response to a disturbance—either democratic or ostensibly so—of the territory of literature. The claims for the democratizing force of literature also find themselves displaced, from the imaginary identification with fictional characters
praised by Nussbaum, to the “direct” democracy of universal storytelling; or, to put it in more Rancierian terms, the troublesome democratic objects of the realist novel become the unruly potential subjects of a proliferating factual writing. While it is worth heeding the voices that warn against the ideological manipulations behind this new regime, it is also impractical to wish to return to the genre system of an earlier moment of literary history. We might still need defenders of the novel, yet writers might also explore spaces of possibility such as the elaboration of what Yves Citton calls “contre-fictions”, as a way of imagining political alternatives to a world narrowly defined by the “given” (data, but also the discourses that mobilize these data, and the products that are “given” to us)50. Another possible direction is to accept that literature must now function in a new technological space in order to renew its relationship to the world. François Bon’s Après le livre (2011) examines some of the possibilities of this dislocation, arguing that technological change has brought narrative into more immediate and direct contact with the real, while the Internet re-inscribes literary practice within an open, unstable space beyond the closed object of the book51. Bon’s own literary practice is exemplary in this regard, as he has made his website tierslivre.net the center of a literary activity that encompasses multiple forms of writing, from fiction to essay to journal entries, and also extends to the digital publishing project of publie.net. The result is the reinscription of literary practice into a territory that is continuous but not undifferentiated, and the construction of a new public space of reception.

§25

Are we witnessing the final dissolution of literature into what Hegel calls the “prose of the world”, or simply one more configuration of the contradictions of literature (Rancière)? In any event, it seems unlikely that these transformations of the literary field mean the end of fiction, although it is necessary to rethink the democratic possibilities of literature beyond a certain historical form of the novel. Yet fictional invention may still be an ethical and political necessity, and an inevitable response to the limits of the real. After all, thinkers as different as Martha Nussbaum and Jacques Rancière share the conviction that fictional imagination is a requirement for democratic politics, whether through its mediation of our relation to others or because it enables us to posit a community that does not yet exist. Democratic politics requires, in Rancière’s terms, “cette pratique du comme si qui constitue les formes d’apparaître d’un sujet et qui ouvre une communauté esthétique, à la manière kantienne, une communauté qui exige le consentement de celui-là même qui ne la reconnaît pas”52. Both philosophical approaches highlight the ways in which fiction and democracy connect a political subject to a possible community, and they demonstrate that our relation to the real cannot only be a matter of fact.

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NOTES

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6 Martha C. Nussbaum, Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life, Boston, Beacon Press, 1997, p. 6; henceforth PJ.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. 109.
11 Ibid., p. 147n8.
13 The phrase is used by the critic James Wood in his review of Laurent Binet’s HHhH: “It’s possible to see HHhH as part of a fashionable anti-novelistic movement, made popular in the Anglophone world by works like David Shields’s recent manifesto ‘Reality Hunger,’ and by the essays of Geoff Dyer.” James Wood, “Broken Record”, The New Yorker, 21 May, 2012.
18 Among Dyer’s list of “the greatest books of our time” are David Finkel’s The Good Soldiers (2009), Sebastian Junger’s War (2010), Steve Coll’s Ghost Wars (2004), Lawrence Wright’s The Looming Tower (2006), George Packer’s The Assassins’ Gate (2005), Rajiv Chandrasekaran’s Imperial Life in the Emerald City (2006), and Dexter Filkins’s The Forever War (2008).
19 As Dorrit Cohn observes, referential narratives are verifiable and incomplete, whereas nonreferential narratives are unverifiable and complete. Dorrit Cohn, The Distinction of Fiction, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, p. 16.
20 Lee Siegel, “Where Have All the Mailers Gone?”, art. cit.
39 Dominique Viart, “Fictions critiques: la littérature contemporaine et la question du politique”, Formes de l’engagement littéraire (XV-XXI siècles), ed. Jean Kaempfer, Sonya Florey, and Jérôme Meizoz, Lausanne, Antipodes, 2006, p. 186. Viart designates as “fictions critiques” a range of contemporary texts, including those of Jean Rouaud, Richard Millet, Pierre Bergounioux, Annie Ernaux, and François Bon. These forms of writing are fictions, since they cannot be reduced to documentary status; they are critical in the kinds of social and historical questions they pose as well as in the critical gaze they direct toward their own literary fashioning.
41 Dominique Viart, “Fictions critiques”, art. cit.
48 Luc Lang, Délit de fiction : la littérature, pourquoi ?, Paris, Gallimard, 2011, p. 16; henceforth DF.