At first it looks strange to the Trojans, the wooden horse, off color, outsized, barbaric. Like a mountain, it reaches up to the sky. Then little by little, they discover the familiar forms which coincide with those of a horse. Already for them, the Trojans, there have been many forms, various ones, sometimes contradictory, that were put together and worked into creating a horse, for they have an old culture. The horse built by the Greeks is doubtlessly also one for the Trojans, while they still consider it with uneasiness. It is barbaric for its size but also for its form, too raw for them, the effeminate ones, as Virgil calls them. But later on they become fond of the apparent simplicity, within which they see sophistication. They see, by now, all the elaboration that was hidden at first under a brutal coarseness. They come to see as strong, powerful, the work they had considered formless. They want to make it theirs, to adopt it as a monument and shelter it within their walls, a gratuitous object whose only purpose is to be found in itself. But what if it were a war machine?

Any important literary work is like the Trojan Horse at the time it is produced. Any work with a new form operates as a war machine, because its design and its goal is to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions. It is always produced in hostile territory. And the stranger it appears, nonconforming, unassimilable, the longer it will take for the Trojan Horse to be accepted. Eventually it is adopted, and even if slowly, it will eventually work like a mine. It will sap and blast out the ground where it was planted. The old literary forms, which everybody was used to, will eventually appear to be outdated, inefficient, incapable of transformation.

When I say that it is quite possible for a work of literature to operate as a war machine upon the context of its epoch, it is not about committed literature
that I am talking. Committed literature and écriture féminine have in common that they are mythic formations and function like myths, in the sense Barthes gave to this word. As such they throw dust in the eyes of people by amalgamating in the same process two occurrences that do not have the same kind of relationship to the real and to language. I am not speaking thus in the name of ethical reasons. For example, literature should not be subservient to commitment, for what would happen to the writer if the group which one represents or speaks for stops being oppressed? Would then the writer have nothing more to say? Or what would happen if the writer’s work is banned by the group? For the question is not an ethical one but a practical one. As one talks about literature, it is necessary to consider all the elements at play. Literary work cannot be influenced directly by history, politics, and ideology because these two fields belong to parallel systems of signs which function differently in the social corpus and use language in a different way. What I see, as soon as language is concerned, is a series of phenomena whose main characteristic is to be totally heterogeneous. The first irreducible heterogeneity concerns language and its relation to reality. My topic here is the heterogeneity of the social phenomena involving language, such as history, art, ideology, politics. We often try to force them to fit together until they more or less adjust to our conception of what they should be. If I address them separately, I can see that in the expression committed literature phenomena whose very nature is different are thrown together. Standing thus, they tend to annul each other. In history, in politics, one is dependent on social history, while in one’s work a writer is dependent on literary history, that is, on the history of forms. What is at the center of history and politics is the social body, constituted by the people. What is at the center of literature is forms, constituted by works. Of course people and forms are not at all interchangeable. History is related to people, literature is related to forms.

The first element at hand then for a writer is the huge body of works, past and present—and there are many, very many of them, one keeps forgetting. Modern critics and linguists have by now covered a lot of ground and clarified the subject of literary forms. I think of people like the Russian Formalists, the writers of the Nouveau Roman, Barthes, Genette, texts by the Tel Quel group. I have a poor knowledge of the state of things in American criticism, but Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James, and Gertrude Stein wrote on the subject. But the fact is that in one’s work, one has only two choices—either reproducing existing forms or creating new ones. There is no other. No writers have been more explicit on this subject than Sarraute for France and Stein for the United States.
The second element at hand for a writer is the raw material, that is, language, in itself a phenomenon heterogeneous both to reality and to its own productions. If one imagines the Trojan Horse as a statue, a form with dimensions, it would be both a material object and a form. But it is exactly what the Trojan Horse is in writing, only in a way a little more intricate, because the material used is language, already a form, but also matter. With writing, words are everything. A good many writers have said it and repeated it, a lot of them are saying it at this very moment, and I say it—words are everything in writing. When one cannot write, it is not, as we often say, that one cannot express one's ideas. It is that one cannot find one's words, a banal situation for writers. Words lie there to be used as raw material by a writer, just as clay is at the disposal of any sculptor. Words are, each one of them, like the Trojan Horse. They are things, material things, and at the same time they mean something. And it is because they mean something that they are abstract. They are a condensate of abstraction and concreteness, and in this they are totally different from all other mediums used to create art. Colors, stone, clay have no meaning, sound has no meaning in music, and very often, most often, no one cares about the meaning they will have when created into a form. One does not expect the meaning to be interesting. One does not expect it to have any meaning at all. While as soon as something is written down, it must have a meaning. Even in poems a meaning is expected. All the same a writer needs raw material with which to start one's work, like a painter, a sculptor, or a musician.

This question of language as raw material is not a futile one, since it may help to clarify how in history and in politics the handling of language is different. In history and politics words are taken in their conventional meaning. They are taken only for their meaning, that is in their more abstract form. In literature words are given to be read in their materiality. But one must understand that to attain this result a writer must first reduce language to be as meaningless as possible in order to turn it into a neutral material—that is, a raw material. Only then is one able to work the words into a form. (This does not signify that the finished work has no meaning, but that the meaning comes from the form, the worked words.) A writer must take every word and despoil it of its everyday meaning in order to be able to work with words, on words. Chklovsky, a Russian Formalist, used to say that people stop seeing the different objects that surround them, the trees, the clouds, the houses. They just recognize them without really seeing them. And he said that the task of a writer is to re-create the first powerful vision of things—as opposed to their daily recognition. But he was wrong in that what a writer re-creates is indeed a vision, but the first powerful vision of words,
not of things. As a writer, I would be totally satisfied if every one of my words had on the reader the same effect, the same shock as if they were being read for the first time. It is what I call dealing a blow with words. As a reader, I find that some writers give me this shock, and it is how I keep on understanding what is happening with words.

What I am saying is that the shock of words in literature does not come out of the ideas they are supposed to promote, since what a writer deals with first is a solid body that must be manipulated in one way or another. And to come back to our horse, if one wants to build a perfect war machine, one must spare oneself the delusion that facts, actions, ideas can dictate directly to words their form. There is a detour, and the shock of words is produced by their association, their disposition, their arrangement, and also by each one of them as used separately. The detour is work, working words as anyone works a material to turn it into something else, a product. There is no way to save this detour in literature, and the detour is what literature is all about.

I said history is related to people while literature is related to forms. As a discipline, however, history like all disciplines uses language in communicating, writing, reading, understanding, and learning. History, ideology, and politics do not question the medium they use. Their domain is the domain of ideas, which is currently considered to be apart from language, issuing directly from the mind. These disciplines still rest on the classical division of body and soul. Even in the Marxist and post-Marxist traditions, there are, on the one hand, the economic order, the material one, and, on the other hand, ideology and politics, considered as the “superstructure.” They do not examine language as a direct exercise of power. In this conception, language, along with art, is part of what they call the superstructure. Both are included in ideology, and as such express nothing but the “ideas” of the ruling class. Without a reexamination of the way language operates both in the domain of ideology and in art, we still remain in what the Marxists precisely call “idealism.” Form and content correspond to the body/soul division, and it is applied to the words of language and also to ensembles, that is, to literary works. Linguists speak of signifier and signified, which comes to the same distinction.

Through literature, though, words come back to us whole again. Through literature then we can learn something that should be useful in any other
field: in words form and content cannot be dissociated, because they partake of the same form, the form of a word, a material form.

One of the best examples of a war machine with a delayed effect is Proust's work. At first everybody thought it was only a roman à clef and a minute description of Parisian high society. The sophisticates feverishly tried to put a name to the characters. Then in a second stage they had to change around the women's and men's names, since most of the women in the book were in reality men. They therefore had to take in the fact that a good many of the characters were homosexuals. Since the names were codes for real people, they had to glance back to their apparently normal world, wondering which of them was one, how many of them were, or if they all were. By the end of La recherche du temps perdu, it's done. Proust has succeeded in turning the "real" world into a homosexual-only world. It begins with the cohort of the young men populating the embassies, swarming around their leaders like the maids around Queen Esther in Racine. Then come the dukes, the princes, the married men, the servants, the chauffeurs, and all the tradesmen. Everybody ends up being homosexual. There are even a few lesbians, and Colette reproached Proust with having magnified Gomorrah. Saint-Loup, the elegant epitome of a ladies' man, also turns out to be gay. In the last book, Proust, describing the design of the whole work, demonstrates that for him the making of writing is also the making of a particular subject, the constitution of the subject. So that characters and descriptions of given moments are prepared, like so many layers, in order to build, little by little, the subject as being homosexual for the first time in literary history. The song of triumph of La recherche redeems Charlus as well.

For in literature, history, I believe, intervenes at the individual and subjective level and manifests itself in the particular point of view of the writer. It is then one of the most vital and strategic parts of the writer's task to universalize this point of view. But to carry out a literary work one must be modest and know that being gay or anything else is not enough. For reality cannot be directly transferred from the consciousness to the book. The universalization of each point of view demands a particular attention to the formal elements that can be open to history, such as themes, subjects of narratives, as well as the global form of the work. It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine.