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Literature and Technology

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Foreword

STEPHEN H. CUTCLIFFE
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This volume is the fifth in the *Research in Technology Studies* series published by Lehigh University Press. As with the previous volumes in the series, the intent of this volume is to present a representative range of original essays on a single theme set by the guest editors. Mark Greenberg and Lance Schachterle have invited a group of authors to write on the theme of literature and technology. Their topics range from Medieval literature to postmodern, from high culture classics to children's books, from philosophy to feminist literary criticism. Taken together, these essays reflect the diversity and the vitality of an emerging focal area within technology studies.

Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe. Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York and London: Methuen, 1982) counterpoints differences "between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in primary oral cultures . . . and in cultures deeply affected by the use of writing" (1).

19. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 87.

20. My source is the 2-vol. *Concordance to the Writings of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, *et al.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

21. Elizabeth Eisenstein, "Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought: A Preliminary Report," *Journal of Modern History* 40 (1968): 15.

22. Pages of the "Preface" are unnumbered; here I cite p. 1. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically in my text, for convenience carrying my numeration.

23. Kernan, *Johnson*, 197. See also Kernan's *The Imaginary Library: An Essay on Literature and Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982). On the literary culture of this period and its often antagonistic or self-consciously detached relationship with society, see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950*.

24. I refer to the first edition; in the 2d. ed., 1738, which appeared in folio, the table occupies one page.

25. For the fullest exploration of the dimensions of Blake's language, see Nelson Hilton, *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1983).

26. *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 53.

27. Kernan, *Johnson*, 55ff., explains how, to assure profitability, presses during the eighteenth century were driven to run with as few interruptions as possible. Type, always in short supply, had to be endlessly recycled, so that new jobs awaited the completion of books in press.

28. First published in 1936, the essay appears in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217–51.

29. See "Reading the Illuminations of Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," by Erdman with Tom Dargan and Marlene Deverell-Van Meter in *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, ed. Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 162–207.

30. On the problematics, see Robert N. Essick, "William Blake, William Hamilton, and the Materials of Graphic Meaning," *ELH* 52 (1985): 833–72.

31. *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1979), 94.

32. "A Temporary Report on Texts of Blake," in *Blake: Essays for Damon*, 411.

33. Philip Gaskell, in his *New Introduction to Bibliography* (cited in note 26), diagrams the "body parts" of type on p. 9 and discusses them in detail on pp. 9–39.

34. *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947), 201.

Jules Romains, *Unanimisme*, and the Poetics of Urban Systems

ROSALIND WILLIAMS

> Over the last century, a human life has become a machine for burning petroleum. . . . It makes no sense to talk about cars and power plants and so on as if they were something apart from our lives—they *are* our lives.
>
> —Bill McKibben
> "Reflections (The End of Nature)"
> *The New Yorker* (11 September 1989), p. 92

Since the Industrial Revolution, the contrast between organism and mechanism has been a fundamental theme in Western thought. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and William Morris, among many others, repeatedly propose "the organic" and "the mechanical" as opposite poles of knowledge and value.[1] It is also true that since the Industrial Revolution, Western literature has explored the territory between these two poles, discovering that they might not be so far apart after all. Writers like Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, and Émile Zola (to cite three obvious examples) show how human beings can become mechanized and how technological devices can assume organic qualities. We are now beginning to recognize how prophetic such writers are. The merging of organic and mechanical creations is no longer a topic of interest primarily to cultural and literary scholars; this process has earth-altering practical effects, as natural cycles have become progressively interwoven with technological ones.

Historians of technology—whose methods and vocabularies are quite different from those of imaginative writers—are still shaping a conceptual language to describe this process of interpenetration. These historians are more and more often using *systems* rather than *machines* as their basic unit of analysis. In theory, the concept of

technological system is certainly broad enough to include both mechanical and organic components. In practice, however, the concept is usually used to describe a mixture of technological and social elements; natural elements tend to be considered "external" factors outside the system.[2]

In *The Myth of the Machine* (1966, 1970) Lewis Mumford proposed a more specific term, the *megamachine,* to describe a system with both technological and organic components. According to Mumford, this system was first devised by the ancient Egyptians to assemble and organize the manpower required to build the great pyramids. This megamachine was, in Mumford's words, "a great labor machine . . . its components, though made of human bone, nerve, and muscle, were reduced to their bare mechanical elements and rigidly standardized for the performance of their limited tasks." The concept is provocative, but its scholarly influence has been limited just because of its strongly ideological overtones. For Mumford, "megamachine" is a term of abuse. The pyramid building megamachine, he asserted, is the earliest working model for all later complex machines including the American "pentagon of power," a nuclear-armed and potentially catastrophic version of the Egyptian system.[3]

This essay will describe and analyze another concept of a system wherein organic and mechanical life have merged. This concept is far more positive than that proposed by Mumford; it was formulated fully a half century earlier than the megamachine (even though its originator was born only ten years before Mumford); and finally, it was first advanced as a literary cause rather than as a mode of historical analysis. The concept is the *unanime,* and the literary movement based on the apprehension of these partly mechanical, partly organic groups is called *unanimisme*. The movement was announced in a 1905 manifesto in the French literary journal *Le Penseur*. The manifesto was written by twenty-year-old Louis Farigoule, who later became famous, at least in France, under the *nom de plume* Jules Romains.

In unfurling the banner of *unanimisme,* Romains proclaimed that writers of his generation should take as their theme the new social groups created by the interaction between human beings and their technologies in contemporary urban life. In his *unanimiste* manifesto he explained

> The current tendency for people to gather in cities; the uninterrupted development of social relationships; the very strong, close ties established among men by duties, occupations, and common pleasures; and always greater encroachment of the public on the private, of the collective on the individual: these are facts that some may deplore, but that no one denies.
>
> It is impossible that such a way of living would not bring about a corresponding way of feeling.[4]

As we shall see, many writers of Romains's day assumed that their major challenge was to find new literary forms to express new technological forms. Romains defined the challenge somewhat differently. For him, the central literary problem was to express new *social* forms, and for this reason, Romains did not join the aesthetic debate, which engaged so many of his contemporaries, over the compatibility of beauty and utility. Is an automobile beautiful? Romains did not care. His poetry describes not the appearances but the rhythms of modern life; not objects, but environment; not the automobile, but traffic. He is the poet of urban systems. While the technologies of production are nearly absent from Romains's work, he is fascinated by the new ways of living and feeling he saw developing along with new systems of communication and transportation. The dominant technological presence in *unanimiste* poetry is the subtle pattern of city vehicles weaving an ever-changing yet predictable network. In the life of the *unanime* the rhythms of human beings mesh with those of technology; indeed, their common rhythm *is* the *unanime*. Romains expresses these rhythms in the language of fluid dynamics: images of circling and ebbing, of crisscrossing and intersecting, of whirling and dispersing. In the flowing universe of *unanimisme,* the physical and mental cycles of human beings have become intertwined with the cycles of the technologies they have created.

This essay will begin with a brief biographical sketch of Romains, who is not well known on this side of the Atlantic and whose fame has faded even in France since his death in 1972. Next, we shall take a longer look at the technological environment in which he grew up and that was so significant in inspiring *unanimisme*. Since his early poetry—his freshest, sweetest, and most *unanimiste* writing—has not been translated into English, I will then present my own unpretentious rendition of some key passages.[5] Finally, I will analyze *unanimisme* for its assumptions about the interpenetration of organism and mechanism in the landscapes of modern life.

The main purpose of this essay is not so much to describe a writer, or even his poetry (though both are well worth the attention), but rather to explore the theoretical framework, long associated

with Marxist cultural analysis, of technological base and literary superstructure.[6] The validity of the base-superstructure formula must be an issue, implicitly or explicitly, in any study of the relationship between technology and literature. This is not so true of studies that attempt to relate literature and science; in that relationship, both elements are often assumed, however uncritically, to be "superstructural." As noted in the introduction to this volume, both literature and science are habitually perceived as text-based, as part of "higher culture" rather than "everyday life," and as aloof from immediate, practical goals. When we are dealing with technology and literature, on the other hand, the differences are far more evident than the similarities. Technology is material, "everyday," practical; literature is verbal, "special," noninstrumental. While these dichotomies are very much open to question, the obvious differences between technological and literary creations challenge us to define the relationship between the very different ways they are produced.

The Marxist formula proposes that we begin with material production and analyze literary production as a dependent variable: a real and given world, an imaginative and contingent response. As we shall see in the earlier biographical sections of this essay, the origins of *unanimisme* are indeed intimately related to technological changes that were transforming Paris so rapidly and markedly. These changes can certainly be understood as the technological basis of Romains's *unanimiste* superstructure. This is not a sufficient reading of *unanimisme,* however. As we shall see later on in the essay, the relationship between mechanical and organic life expressed so eloquently in *unanimisme* is more than a response to technological events. In a far more active way, *unanimisme* affirms and even promotes the same assumptions that inspired the policymakers largely responsible for those events. In other words, the technological environment is not just a material given, which in turn inspires a literary perception. The technological world itself is shaped by imagination and metaphor—in this case, by the visions of a living city and a dead nature. We are dealing here with a single social world, at once conceptual and technological.

* * *

Jules Romains (1885–1972) was the only child of *déracinés,* provincials from the region of Velay who moved to the city when Jules's father became an *instituteur* at a lycée on Montmartre. Jules grew up in the family's apartment on the south slope of the butte. He was a brilliant student, first at elementary school on Montmartre and later at the lycée Condorcet in downtown Paris. He was also an aspiring poet, choosing his pen name when he was only a teenager and publishing his first poem under that name when he was seventeen.[7]

When Romains published his 1905 manifesto, it drew no particular attention; dozens of such declarations were appearing in those years.[8] But a few years later, when Romains published *La Vie unanime* (1908), his first volume of *unanimiste* poems, he won both attention and praise. In the first issue of *La Nouvelle Revue Française,* André Gide wrote, "I consider this newcomer's book one of the most remarkable and significant that has been given us by the rising generation." Gustave Kahn, Émile Verhaeren, and Guillaume Apollinaire also praised the volume extravagantly.[9]

Romains's career and that of *unanimisme* were launched together. In later life he marveled how, in the three or four years following the publication of *La Vie unanime,* he managed to do so much: completing two *licenses* (one in literature and one in biology) from the École normale supérieure; achieving his *agrégation* in philosophy from the Sorbonne in 1909 and then embarking upon a teaching career; carrying on an active social life of salons, dinners, and readings in Parisian literary circles, as well as participating in an artistic commune, the Abbaye de Créteil; and all the while continuing to write *unanimiste* poetry [*Premier livre de prières* (1909), *Deux poèmes* and *Un être en marche* (1910), and *Puissances de Paris* (1911)] as well as *unanimiste* theater [*L'Armée dans la ville* (1911)] and prose [*Manuel de déification* (1910) and *Mort de quelqu'un* (1911)].

This happy and productive life collapsed when war broke out in August 1914. Romains, then twenty-nine years old, was called to active duty, but he suffered a nervous collapse and was hospitalized in 1915 from mid-July to September. After being discharged from the army at the end of 1915, Romains convalesced and eventually returned to teaching in Paris in mid-1916. There he wrote the long poem *Europe,* which proclaimed that the Continent was now the supreme *unanime* and which appealed to all Europeans not to let it die. To publish this poem at the height of wartime patriotic fervor, when pacifism was equated with treason, took considerable courage.[10]

In 1919 Romains ended his university career to devote himself exclusively to writing. In 1923 his play *Knock* made its Paris debut; in subsequent years this supremely witty, fast-paced farce was staged countless times around the globe. By the later 1920s Romains had an international reputation and regularly attended writ-

ers' conferences in Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. He began to participate in PEN, the international writers' association, and later served as its president for many years. In 1928 Romains purchased an elegant estate in Touraine, where he began work on the first volume of *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* [*Men of Good Will*], which appeared in 1932. Twenty-six more volumes followed, adding up to a jumbo (three million words) series of novels giving a panoramic view of European society in the early twentieth century.

Since World War I Romains had continued to reiterate the theme of an underlying, common European culture. Whatever the virtues of this theme in shaping *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, it led him into some unfortunate dabbling in diplomacy in the 1930s that more resembled appeasement than pacifism.[11] Only with the fall of France did Romains give up hope in European-wide *unanimisme*. He left the country in June 1940 (with his second wife, who was Jewish), settling first in New York City and later in Mexico City. His actions during the war went far to salvage his reputation. He consistently supported the Free French and General de Gaulle, and as president of PEN, he worked tirelessly to rally writers to the Allied cause.

Returning home after the war, Romains was elected to the Académie française in 1946. The same year saw the publication of the last volume of *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*. From then on, Romains traveled widely and wrote primarily reminiscences and essays on general social themes. Since his death in August 1972, at the age of eighty-six, Romains's memory has been carefully tended by admiring friends and family. In general, however, his reputation has declined. Neither revered nor reviled, Jules Romains now dwells in the purgatory of the ignored.

* * *

Romains is to some extent a victim of his own later fame, which has overshadowed his earlier achievements. If he had died in 1911 or 1912, Romains once remarked, his poetry and poetic theories "would have merited more attention."[12] In order to give *unanimisme* the attention it is due, we must leave behind the grand old man of French letters and return to a vanished Paris, Paris of the Belle Époque, to recover the young man in the young century. Romains himself recalled that epoch in his speech accepting his seat in the Académie française:

> The great city breathed around us and through us. Its streets were the paths of our promenade. . . . The rumors of its thick quarters, of its distant railroad stations, the distant vibration of its fanlike suburbs, accompanied us with a perpetual music. In the streets of the city, in its swirling intersections, we learned confidence in the multitude—as the fisherman's son learns the sea, and understands it so profoundly that he no longer thinks to fear it.[13]

In the midst of his intensive academic education, Romains received quite another type of schooling—*une leçon des choses,* "a lesson of things," to use an expression popular in that day. To borrow his own metaphor, he grew up swimming in an urban ocean, and he always prided himself on his easy, confident familiarity with its waters. During his lycée years, Romains established close friendships with other students such as Georges Chennevière[14] and André Cuisenier, who shared his passion for Paris. They delighted in improvising new routes between Montmartre and downtown Paris, and they skipped classes or even entire days of school to take extended excursions to distant suburbs, sometimes using a tramway or bâteau-mouche, but more often walking.

Jules's familiarity with the city was encouraged by his father, who also took pride and pleasure in exploring his adopted home (he would challenge Jules to name a street he could not locate). Romains's rapport with the city seems to have even deeper sources, however. As the only child of emotionally distant parents,[15] he appears to have projected onto the urban landscape his yearnings for intimacy and emotional rapport. Consider, for example, the highly charged language of Romains's 1925 preface to *La Vie unanime,* when he asks why "searchers after influences" could not recognize that

> *La Vie unanime* was above all the book of a Parisian child, who was drenched in Paris, inebriated by Paris, for innumerable hours and days, who knew all the quarters, all the suburbs, who had walked in all the streets, who could distinguish, with his eyes closed, the noise of one intersection from the noise of another, who received from the soil, from the walls, from the sky of the great city a thousand secret communications that he held in his heart, that were day and night his treasure and his delight, and who was made to tremble unto tears and put into a state of medium-like lucidity by this lost cry that he alone heard, by this rustling, by this whisper?[16]

A thorough discussion of the origins of *unanimisme* would have to include a wide variety of textual sources, both literary and scientific.[17] As Romains points out, however, the city itself was the

ultimate source of *unanimisme*—in the same sense that Wordsworth's childhood experiences of the natural landscape can be regarded as the ultimate source of his mature poetry.[18] Romains's childhood coincided with a sweeping transformation of everyday material life, the transformation usually referred to as the second industrial revolution. Individuals do not see an "industrial revolution," however. They see a world transformed, and Romains's boyhood world was Montmartre.

In the late 1800s Montmartre had, in Romains's own words, "a quite singular character—very contradictory, very temporary."[19] When he was born in 1885, the butte was a ramshackle jumble of mills, fields, goats, vineyards, scrubbrush, alleys, gardens, and cabins—a semirural village still quite isolated from Paris. Each year his father would ask his students how many of them had seen the Seine, and regularly well under half of them would raise their hands.[20] The urbanization of Montmartre began when the butte was chosen to be the site of the Cathedral of Sacré-Coeur, built to expiate the collective sins that had supposedly led to France's humiliating defeat by Prussia in 1871. At the time of Romains's birth, the cathedral had been under construction for ten years. Among Romains's earliest memories was the sight of a dozen or so yoke of oxen hauling a prodigious bell up the slope; he also recalled hearing the bell rung for the first time.[21] When Sacré-Coeur was completed in 1891, the Montmartre real estate boom began. Speculators erected town houses all along the rue Caulaincourt, which they had laid out to connect Paris with the south slope of Montmartre. When Romains walked to the lycée Condorcet, half the time he arrived with plastery mud caked on his shoes. By the time he was a young man, the advancing edge of the city had engulfed the village of his boyhood.[22]

In another way, too, the Paris of Romains's youth had a "very contradictory, very temporary" character: the streets of the city presented a swarming, bewildering spectacle of vehicular evolution. While the human population of Paris continued to grow steadily (the city had two million inhabitants at the outset of the Third Republic, and just under three million by 1914), this growth was far outstripped by that of the population of motor vehicles, which increased ten-fold from 1891 to 1910. During this period, modes of transportation dating back to the *ancien régime* rubbed fenders with new and sometime bizarre vehicles. Around 1890 the primary means of transport were horse-drawn carriages (either privately owned, or cabs called *fiacres),* horse-drawn omnibuses, and horse-drawn trams on rails. By 1900 a variety of new and strange vehicles

had begun to appear: a few automobiles (only 1672 in all of France in 1899, the first year they were taxed); safety bicycles; a cable car line, the Belleville funicular; subway cars (the first Métro line opened in 1900); and a variety of trams running on compressed air or on electricity from batteries, from overhead lines, or from live studs transmitting current to a stake mounted under the cars. (Because overhead trolley lines were considered hopelessly ugly—they were nicknamed "trop laid" ["too ugly," pronounced *trolay*]—they were usually restricted to areas outside the city's fortifications.)

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the internal combustion engine became increasingly dominant. The number of automobiles doubled from two thousand in 1903 to just over four thousand by 1906. The first automobile taxis appeared in 1905, notably at stands near the Opéra; they cost four times as much as a *fiacre* and consequently were hired only by the very rich and by English tourists. In 1905 the first "autobuses" appeared, clumsy vehicles that chewed up the roadways and emitted so much noise and smoke that people living along their routes kept their apartment windows permanently closed. Sometimes the frame of a horse-drawn omnibus would be outfitted with an internal combustion engine to create a hybrid vehicle, though these proved unstable because the body was too heavy for the chassis.[23]

As Raymond Williams has reminded us, *traffic* is not only a pattern of moving vehicles, but also a dominant pattern of social interaction in modern urban environments: "a form of consciousness and a form of social relations."[24] Thus it is appropriate that Romains's poetic epiphany—the moment he first apprehended a *unanime*—came in the midst of evening rush hour. Late one October afternoon in 1903, Romains and Chennevière emerged from the lycée Condorcet to begin walking home to the Farigoule family apartment. They stepped from the entrance to the lycée, located on a quiet side street, into the busy place du Havre near the Gare St. Lazare, the major railway station connecting Paris with the north. They began walking up the rue d'Amsterdam toward the place Clichy, where the rue Caulaincourt would lead them to Montmartre. As the two schoolboys ambled along the rue d'Amsterdam, they were surrounded by other pedestrians on the sidewalk, by carriages and omnibuses in the roadway, and by shop windows displaying Oriental rugs, perfumes, and jewelry. Suddenly Romains had a vision: to him the street, the shops, the vehicles, and the crowds seemed the unified body of a larger, elemental being of which he himself was the mind. He thought

> In the rue d'Amsterdam I am like a cell in the body of a man or in the leaves of a tree. At the moment I am the only one conscious of this. It is for me to suck forth from the street all the life it contains in its dense mass of vehicles and people. It is for me to lead it to the light of consciousness, above and beyond the explosions of its motors, above and beyond the movements and thoughts of each person.[25]

For Romains, the city street would always be the prototypical *unanime*. In *Puissances de Paris,* his collection of prose poems published in 1911, the majority of the twenty-six *unanimes* described in it are streets, passageways, or squares (the rest are assorted gatherings such as a literary salon, cinema and theater audiences, and groups of passengers on an omnibus or bâteau-mouche). The rue Montmartre, for example, is "a unified being" despite its length, because its daily rhythms are as predictable as the tides: "it is the center of reliable whirlpools, and the regular passageway for reliable floods."[26] The first volume of *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*—which Romains considered "a vast *unanimiste* synthesis of our time"[27]—begins with a chapter titled "Paris goes to work on a fine morning" that describes morning rush hour on 6 October 1908. (Romains chose this date because in retrospect it seemed to him the foot of the historical wave that would crest in August 1914.) In the last volume of the series, Romains again uses rush hour to portray his collective hero, Paris, this time going to work in the much more ominous atmosphere of 7 October 1933.[28]

The street-*unanime* is the paradigmatic *unanime* because its "body" so evidently unites human and technological components ("its dense mass of vehicles and people"). Other sorts of *unanimes* also come to life through the interaction of human beings with their immediate material surroundings—pavement, benches, walls, tables, merchandise. In this treatment of the technological objects of everyday life, then, Romains insists that literature should deal with them not simply as material objects, but as parts of a more encompassing social environment. He focuses on the common ground from which both literature and technology arise: the social landscape.

In this respect, Romains differs from most other writers of that postsymbolist age, who were still hotly debating whether utilitarian objects could be considered beautiful.[29] Beginning in the early 1890s, the symbolists and their decadent cousins had proclaimed that beauty was incompatible with utility, and that in modern life *la vie factice*—by which they meant primarily the artifice of art, not that of technology—had triumphed over *la vie naturelle*. (These

principles were largely derived from Théophile Gautier's highly influential 1868 preface to Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal.*) According to the symbolists, then, the goal of art was to create aesthetic objects that would create a counterworld to the ugly, banal world of modern utilitarian society.[30]

A new literary front had begun to blow through in 1897, when St. George de Bouhélier published a *naturiste* manifesto in *Le Figaro* declaring that literature should return to "nature" and "life." Because the *naturistes* tended to identify natural life with rural life—peasants, regional literature, the quiet lanes and fresh air of the countryside, daily labor in the fields, simple pleasures around the hearth—in practice they did little more to incorporate modern technologies into poetry than had the symbolists. To be sure, one wing of *naturisme,* led by Eugène Montfort, did resist this bucolic tendency. Montfort declared that his subject was "the beauty of modern life," and he explicitly included industrial artifacts:

> Art is not in the thing contemplated by the artist, but in the artist who contemplates: it is a movement of his soul. Thus there is nothing ugly. . . . We can build ugly houses, we can fill the streets with factories and machines, but these destroy neither art nor artist; on the contrary, the latter will soon find something new to adore in these spectacles . . . [the artist] will find relationships and marvelous analogies in them that had escaped everyone else.[31]

Montfort, then, celebrated not so much "the beauty of modern life" as the power of the artist to transform even the ugliest materials by discovering aesthetic "relationships and marvelous analogies." Like the symbolists, he emphasized the power of art—in this case not to create a counterworld to ugly utilitarian modernity, but to redeem and transform that world through aesthetic perception.[32] The *naturistes* therefore stayed within the aesthetic polarities established by the symbolists: beauty vs. utility, *la vie factice* vs. *la vie naturelle*.

Romains broke away from those dichotomies. Like the *naturistes,* he wanted to end what he considered poetry's secession from the modern world.[33] Instead of advocating a return to nature, however, Romains was convinced that "in modern man social feeling predominates over feeling for nature."[34] *Unanimisme* proclaims neither *la vie factice* nor *la vie naturelle,* but *la vie sociale*—the social life of the *unanime* that emerges from the ever-increasing interpenetration of mechanical and organic life. Let us see how Romains expressed this interpenetration in *La Vie unanime,* his most complex and ambitious *unanimiste* poetry.

* * *

Romains once commented, "I unreservedly admire critics who discern that the description of an autobus [in *La Vie unanime*] comes from a hand that has been leafing through the Iliad." Like Baudelaire before him, Romains assumed the mantle of antiquity to invest modern life with heroic grandeur. He intended *La Vie unanime* as an epic of modern life.[35] "From the beginning," Romains explained,

> I had conceived the general movement of the work and the large divisions it has retained. . . . Once a poem was completed, I looked for a place for it in my edifice. . . . In its divisions it marked the stages I had come to recognize in the impassioned relationship between the soul and the *unanime* that completely preoccupied me.[36]

The two major divisions of *La Vie unanime* are titled "Les Unanimes" and "L'Individu"; each is subdivided into three parts. The two major divisions, furthermore, are framed between a prefacing and a concluding poem that serve as slender bookends for the volume as a whole. Most poems begin with an epigraph from preceding ones, so that the volume is knit together through self-allusion. *La Vie unanime* is indeed an "edifice" rather than a collection.

The first division, "Les Unanimes," opens with a vivid portrayal of urban anomie in a city where *unanimes* have not yet been born. The noise of rusty, inefficient machinery echoes the cry of lost and disconnected people:

> The axle of the cart grates and the horse stumbles.
> At the corner of the wall a child cries. He is lost.
> He believes that it is over forever; that his father
> Is dying, trapped in the thick swarming
> Of the crowd. . . .
>
> I am searching.
> The child cries.
> The cart grates.[37]

But before long "Something begins to exist. . . . Another soul advances."[38] Grating fades, harmony emerges, and soul of the street begins to assume a regular pattern:

> What is it that thus transfigures the boulevard?

> The passers-by almost appear not to be physical;
> They are no longer movements, they are rhythms.[39]

The narrator gradually loses his sense of isolation. As he lives alone in his room, the supposedly impermeable walls still let in a "lukewarm drizzle" of city noises: the voice of an anxious doctor treating a sick child, the tinkle of a piano. When the narrator later rises and walks through the foggy streets, he notices that the gaslights illuminate the moist air, making the space between people tangible and giving them a sense of interconnection. *Unanimes* are coming to life: "Great beasts are stirring."[40]

The second subsection describes the stirring of these various "beasts"—barracks, theaters, churches, cafés. As the jerking, grinding existence of disconnected individuals begins to yield to harmonious rhythms, the patterns of the *unanimes* are occasionally cross-cut by other rhythms that are reminders of the countryside—the diurnal cycle of sunrise and sunset, for example, or the circling of a flock of sheep, their hooves lightly vibrating as they are driven to the slaughterhouse.[41] As the flock moves out of sight, though, the city as a whole assumes the flowing candence of *unanimisme* triumphant:

> It seems to me that in the depths of my streets
> The passers-by flow in the same direction,
> And, unravelling the neutral intersections,
> Straighten out the twisted boulevards;
> So that, less and less divergent,
> Despite the walls, despite the timbers,
> Innumerable forces flow together
> So that brusquely the entire surge
> Sets all the houses moving.[42]

In "Dynamism," the third and last subsection of "Les Unanimes," the narrator celebrates the new groups that have been born in the city. He emphasizes the technologies that helped bring them to birth. Electricity, for example, recreates a sunlit village in the urban darkness:

> Above the boulevard the manmade twilight
> Crystallizes into an electric arc . . .
>
> . . deep within bodies, cells
> Feel the marvelous waves undulate
> Toward them . . .

The unity of the flesh begins to crumble; . . .
The mind surrenders its force to the electrical influx.
Suddenly the street resolves to enjoy itself.
At the corners of its intersections it clots into
couples;
Seeds stir. Some men come to sit down at the table,
Small circular groups in the taverns.
The crowd dreams of being a village in the sun.

Automobiles too break down isolation. The passengers feel an intoxicating excitement as the city becomes pure movement for them, and onlookers become more aware of their surroundings as they look up to see an automobile roar by:

The motor lives through obedient explosions;
The atoms of gas scuffle while they sing;
The groups die and are born. The metal trembles.
Each tooth of the gears is a springboard
From which the force leaps, its legs together . . .
The people who are in the car, elbow to elbow,
Bathed by speed, lose their heaviness,
They exist more ardently than just before . . .
Along the cold sidewalk, passers-by are shut up
In a burrow of habits to which they have closed the
openings.
But they have seen the fierce vehicle running;
They all straighten up, like a trampled lawn
That is watered.[43]

The second half of *La Vie unanime,* titled "L'Individu," begins with a celebration of the state of blissful unself-consciousness that comes from immersion in a city of *unanimes.* The narrator no longer feels any distinction between the movements of his body, those of nature, and those of the urban environment:

Being myself no longer, I no longer feel what touches
me.
My skin is the sidewalk of the street, and the sky. . . .

The wheel of the omnibus that makes sparks,
And the wheel of the sun stuck in the clouds
Give a rhythm to my impersonal thought;
I am a majestic wheeling of images. . . .[44]

The city is a continuum where vehicles, buildings, and people all

flow together, everything connected to everything else, like the stanzas of the poetry:

Where the eyes do not see separate forms,
Where one thinks of nothing that does not seem a
totality.
Each thing prolongs the other. The metal
Of rails and the dazzling cobblestones; the entryways

Of houses; the pedestrians, the horses, the vehicles
Are joined to each other and join my body;
We are indistinct, each of us is dead,
And *la vie unanime* is our sepulchre.[45]

In the second subsection, titled "Moi en révolte," the plot and the tempo begin to thicken. The narrator becomes restive and begins to rebel against this immersion in collection life. He yearns to reassert his individuality, and he calls upon nature as his accomplice. If modern traffic patterns largely define *unanimes,* the linear railroad track makes possible a quick escape from them: the narrator boards a train and soon finds himself in the countryside. At first he is relieved to be away from the city. Slowly the urban rhythms fade, replaced by the timeless fragrance of fires, leaves, freshness. Initial pleasure, however, is followed by an overwhelming lethargy. The tempo of the poetry slows almost to a halt, as the narrator's refrain becomes, "To sleep under the leaves . . ." He gazes at a sunset, a "yellow ocean" of color, and suddenly panics; he becomes afraid of losing consciousness altogether, of being drowned in the "unfeeling ocean of nature"—in short, of dying. Unlike the trees and fields also enveloped in the yellow light, he suffers in nature's arms. Cold and afraid, he concludes that the dream of merging with nature is, for modern man, an atavistic weakness. Nature is empty; it is "the void between people."[46]

As the narrator begins to look again at the countryside, however, he recognizes that it is not "pure nature" but "fermented nature," not empty but overflowing with evidence of humanity's presence. The soil has been divided by human labor into fields and pastures, and enclosed by hedgerows representing human laws. Man-made roads roll toward the horizon, each mile representing a victory of human communication. The telegraph wires too remind the narrator that "I swim among human vibrations," even in the country. The networks of human society so evident in the city extend even here. The narrator consequently decides that instead of drowning in unfeeling nature, "I prefer to drown myself by throwing myself into

men." Wiser and chastened, he returns to the city and once again immerses himself in *la vie unanime*.[47]

The final subsection, "Nous," sings of the reconciliation between the wiser *moi* and the *unanimiste* city. The poet now understands his mission. He will participate in the efficiency and power of the networked city so that he becomes part of the infrastructure, at once technological and social, of modern life:

> . . . I will be
> The man who knows how to steal power from other men,
> A joyous crossroads of *unanimiste* rhythms,
> A condenser of universal energy. . . .
>
> I want to be at least
> In the obscure tangle of cables and wires
> The slender thread of consciousness, through which the fluid
> Travels with incandescent emotion
>
> And others, here and there, will begin to shine.[48]

La Vie unanime, which began with the image of grinding wheels, concludes with "Un jour," a poem that envisions human beings as efficient and unself-conscious as machines:

> One day we will be wheels
> That only think of doing good;
> We shall exist in copper and iron,
> But not in "soul."
> We will transmit exactly
> The force that is entrusted to us.
>
> What we take from the flywheels
> We will pass on to the transmission belts. . . .
>
> We shall dream of minimizing
> Our grindings, and of softening them
> Into a well-oiled and gliding hum.
> Our bodies will exude
> A silence that is full and saturated with energy. . . .
>
> We shall exist in action and in iron.[49]

* * *

Ezra Pound wrote in 1913, "[Romains] has achieved a form which fully conveys the sense of modern life. He is able to mention any

familiar thing, any element of modern life, without its seeming incongruous, and the result is undeniably poetic."[50] In order to understand the sources of this achievement, *La Vie unanime* deserves a much closer reading than it has received here. The purpose of this essay, however, is not to analyze the place of *unanimisme* in the history of French literature, but to show how it illuminates the relationship between literature and technology. This emphasis is justified because Romains—like Mumford—insisted that the organic/mechanical being he had discovered was not just a striking metaphor, but an objective social reality. Romains, indeed, went further than Mumford, insisting that in modern times the *unanime* was the *only* social reality:

> The period of abstractions is going to end. Society, categories, classes, "le monde," "le demi-monde," "le peuple," abstractions; collective words that designate no collective being. Nothing of all that has concrete existence, and therefore nothing of it will last. Social consciousness, class consciousness—abominable metaphors. What exists, what is beginning to exist with a complete, bodily, conscious life, are groups; streets, city squares, meeting halls, theaters. These are the beings that have a future.[51]

Critics then and now have noted striking similarities between Romains's concept of *unanimes* and concepts proposed by contemporary social thinkers such as Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Trade, and Émile Durkheim. Romains, however, denied any such influence; his respect for the biological sciences was matched by his contempt for the social sciences.[52] Instead, Romains preferred to compare his discovery of the social landscape of *unanimisme* to the romantics' discovery of the natural landscape. "Both causes involved a discovery of a sensibility and a reality which, to be sure, existed already, but of which the human soul was becoming much more attentively and warmly conscious than before."[53] Like mountains, he said, *unanimes* had always existed, but they had not been noticed. "*Unanimisme* means an effort to teach people to perceive the *unanime* as they have learned to perceive landscapes."[54]

Let us pursue this suggestive analogy between romantic and *unanimiste* literature. Both are based on a radical sense of estrangement that leads to a yearning for the reestablishment of connection between oneself and the larger whole. Instead of communing with nature, however, Romains seeks to commune with society.[55] At the moment of his epiphany in the rue d'Amsterdam, he felt he had lost the burden of individuality and had become part of a larger organic life, in this case the life of a social organism: a mountaintop experi-

ence in the midst of the city. The paradox of both romanticism and *unanimisme* is that the loss of individuality depends upon a supreme effort of the individual will. The poet must be "strong" (Wordsworth's term) in the sense of having "the power of conferring the visionary quality upon an ordinary sight."[56] While a megamachine is created by a political authority (whether pharaohs or Pentagon chiefs), Romains's collective being is created by poetic authority. While the organisms' body is made up of vehicles and pedestrians, its mind is that of the poet: "I am the only one conscious of this. . . . It is for me to lead [the *unanime*] to the light of consciousness."

The *unanime* is a chance gathering of people who cohere because their daily routines happen to intersect. Romains claimed that *unanimes* were not mere crowds, though, at least not in the sense that his contemporary Gustave Le Bon was using the term. The *unanime* goes beyond the simple physical unity of the crowd to attain complex self-consciousness, a "soul." Similarly, the *unanimiste* poet is not just a passive *flâneur*—someone who mingles with the crowd but stands aloof from it, a keen but detached observer.[57] The *unanimiste* poet actively *creates* the crowd. He is the one who endows mental unity upon what would otherwise be a merely physical agglomeration. The *unanime* exists only when the self-conscious individual—usually a poet, and sometimes, especially in Romains's plays, a prankster—imposes upon the urban landscape (and here I am deliberately using romantic language) the vital, transforming power of his imagination.[58]

But this is a strangely incomplete community. In the first place, it is *optional:* Romains can leave at any time, either physically (by withdrawing from the city on a train) or psychologically (by withdrawing his imaginative powers). The *unanime* is created by the temporary elevation of individual consciousness, not by enduring social and economic relationships. It provides a resolution of Romains's conflicting desires for individuality and solidarity, but this is only a tenuous and transient compromise. From this community, furthermore, some crucial social and economic relationships are absent, or nearly so. If Romains succeeded in bringing modern technologies into his poetry, they are largely the technologies of transportation and communication; those of production are rarely seen. He returns again and again to the rhythm of commuters, but he rarely describes the rhythm of their labor once they have arrived at work. One poem of *La Vie unanime* does describe the vitality of factories, in order to contrast their vibrancy with a moribund atmosphere of a church:

> . . . now they have arisen, the factories,
> The youthful factories! They live very robustly.
> They send smoke higher than the bells can ring.
> They are not afraid of hiding the sun
> Because they make some sun with their machines.[59]

But while the narrator enters the church and portrays its congregation in careful detail, he never enters the gates of the factories to see the workers. Other poems in *La Vie unanime* describe isolated workers—the shepherd driving the sheep to the slaughterhouse, a sewing machine operator working alone in her apartment—but the only laboring *unanime* portrayed is a group of soldiers in a barracks. Most of the groups in *La Vie unanime* are composed of people taking it easy: lounging at the café, picnicking at a park on a Sunday afternoon, dining, riding the train. The absence of working groups is even more evident in *Puissances de Paris,* where among the twenty-six *unanimes* in the collection only one is a working group—a gang of laborers digging a tunnel for the Métro.[60]

When "technology" is perceived primarily as modes of communication, transportation, and entertainment, class divisions are muted. In a typical *unanime*—whether a movie audience, a queue, or a flood of commuters—people are equalized because they move in a common rhythm. Everyone is slowed down by the traffic jam; everyone is caught up in the cinemagraphic drama. When people go to work or return home or lounge around, when they are seen as part of a crowded street, questions of ownership and power are not so sharply evident as they are in, say, a factory setting—at least in a day when "the democratization of luxury" (a popular contemporary term) was greatly reducing formerly sharp differences in consumption patterns. The technologies associated with street life seem to have no owner. They are the cityscape, a leveling backdrop—the environment of modern life.

At this point we need to recall Raymond Williams's dictum that "environment" is a "bourgeois notion." "By contrast," Williams adds, "the Marxist definition of realism starts talking about society or history."[61] Romains, of course, scorned just these traditional categories of society and history ("Nothing of all that has concrete existence, and therefore nothing of it will last"). It is this attitude that led him into compromising positions during the interwar period, when his vision of a Europe beyond class and nation encouraged him to disregard existing political realities. Romains proclaimed the *unanime* as the fundamental reality of modern collec-

tive life, and he wanted to believe (to quote from *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*) that "Collective life, breathing life, is quite another thing than history, and does quite well without it."[62]

The lesson of the twentieth century is that history does not leave collective life alone. Here we begin to glimpse some of the complexities of the relationship between Romains's poetry and historical events, or between the literary superstructure and the technological base, if you will. It is true that the technological restructuring of Paris during Romains's youth is a primary source of repeated, striking, novel sensory experiences—sights, sounds, and rhythms—that he expressed so well in his writing. In their "very contradictory, very temporary" character, furthermore, these sensory experiences impressed Romains as metaphors for more general social changes taking place in French society. But the connection between technology and imagination is reciprocal rather than unidirectional. Romains is not just a passive subject responding to technological change. He is not just someone "influenced by." Instead, in his work he actively affirms and praises an imaginative vision—the vision of the city as an organism including both human beings and the built environment—that motivated those technological developments in the first place.

It is well known that Paris was rebuilt between 1853 and 1869 under the orders of Napoleon III and the management of Baron von Haussmann. This, however, was just one phase in a continuing process of urban renewal, which continued at a brisk pace right up until the first world war. The city continued to extend outward, its traffic increased dramatically, and other major building projects were undertaken (for example, for various international expositions and for the Métro system). From Haussmann on, this "rationalization" of Paris depended, paradoxically enough, upon the assumption that the city should be regarded as a gigantic organism. The most "modern" aspect of Haussmann's accomplishment is that "no one, before him, had considered the city as a single organism, a unit which could be conceptualized, planned as a unified system, and realized through technical, scientific and mechanical means."[63] Haussmann and his successors speak over and over of the city's biological "functions"—digestion, respiration, and above all circulation. (Maxime Du Camp's monumental study of the restructured city, published in six volumes in 1893, is titled *Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie dans la second moitié du XIX siècle*.) Haussmann's plan emphasized wide boulevards and straight streets that were to be the "major arteries" of the urban circulatory system.[64] Opening them up eliminated urban "congestion," just as opening up tree-lined, light-filled vistas provided

"breathing space" for urban life. In other words, technological values associated with organic movement came to dominate over older technological values associated with stable structures. The values of communication triumphed over those of architecture. Whatever was part of a circulatory system was healthy and vital; anything detached from it was old, diseased, dangerous.[65]

When cities are conceived as superorganisms, the needs of this fictitious being may come to supersede the needs of human beings who live on a far smaller scale. When Napoleon III and Haussmann designed the boulevard system, they paid far more attention to the aesthetic effect of the façade than to the comfort of the people who would live there. As a result, some fine exteriors concealed slum-like interiors. Furthermore, when the streets were laid out on such a grand scale (some of them were three miles long), the vista became lost on the ordinary walker: it could only be imagined from a map, or from a panoramic overview.[66] Finally, of course, the act of constructing the new circulatory system meant the destruction of existing urban settlements. Buildings were demolished and their inhabitants dispersed. Romains's poetic glorification of the temporary, optional community of the *unanime* may be interpreted as an attempt to find a modern dynamic replacement for the more traditional, settled urban communities that were destroyed as Paris became a regional city, as boulevards were laid down through old quarters and open fields, and as villages like Montmartre became integrated into the larger metropolis. If we recall that Paris was rebuilt with highly organized gangs of men wielding the simplest of tools—picks and shovels—we can say that the *unanime* protests the megamachine.

Unanimisme is not just a passive response to often destructive technological changes. The *unanimiste* poet who resists history (in the name of "collective life") simultaneously confirms the worldview of those who are making history. When Romains glorifies superorganic urban beings and urges their supremacy over individuals, he is actively celebrating and promoting the very priorities and values that inspired the rebuilding of Paris. Both Haussmann and Romains seek to impose organic categories upon urban life. While the model of technological base and literary superstructure assumes that imagination is a product of technological change, imagination also played a role in producing that change. To encompass this reciprocal influence—to deal with technology as one element in a wider field of social relationships—the Lukàcsian language of social totality is more helpful than that of base and superstructure.[67]

In another way, too, Romains echoes a reversal of organic and

technological categories characteristic of contemporary policymakers: the more the urban landscape is invested with organic vitality, the more the natural landscape is perceived as lifeless, inert matter. This reversal of categories is most apparent in the long section of *La Vie unanime* where the poet describes an episode of getting back to nature—or rather of trying to do so. Although the episode, and the book as a whole, ends on a note of triumphant reconciliation, this narrative of a failed return to nature—this final farewell to an old lover, to use Romains's image—is described with powerful undertones of grief and loss. The price of Romains's rapport with the social landscape, it seems, is the loss of any sense of connection with the natural landscape. When he gazes upon it, he sees only blankness and death. What compensates (at least in part) for this loss of rapport is his newfound perception that the human presence extends into the natural landscape in the form of telegraph wires, hedgerows, cultivated fields, and the like. Certainly this perception is an important and valuable corrective to the sentimental view that would glorify an "unspoiled" natural landscape as a Holy Other. We should remember, however, that in the urban landscape Romains succumbed to a very similar sentimentalism; in the countryside he perceived the technological evidence of human labor that he had scarcely noticed in the city.

I want to invoke Raymond Williams one last time to remind us that this response to the natural landscape—unreal nature, dead nature—is common among writers in the late nineteenth century:

> This social character of the city—its transitoriness, its unexpectedness, its essential and exciting isolation and procession of men and events—was seen as the reality of all human life. . . . City experience was now becoming so widespread, and writers, disproportionately, were so deeply involved in it, that there seemed little reality in any other mode of life; all sources of perception seemed to begin and end in the city, and if there was anything beyond it, it was also beyond life.[68]

Once again, we are dealing with more than a literary response to technological change. Once again, in their assumptions about nature, writers like Romains actively (if unwittingly) affirm the ideological assumptions driving technological change. In this case, I am referring particularly to economic assumptions generally shared by capitalists and socialists of the late nineteenth century for whom nature is first a storehouse and second a dump. Both *unanimisme* and the dominant economic systems deny independent significance to nonhuman nature; the human world is all that counts, and nature is unreal except as it bears the imprint of human

intervention. In that case, no element of earthly life transcends or even lies outside human values and purposes. Everything—organism and mechanism alike—becomes part of a human-organized system. *Unanimisme* is part of a social world, a world at once ideological and technological, that celebrates what Francis Bacon called "the human empire."

NOTES

1. Leo Marx, "Lewis Mumford: Prophet of Organicism," in *Lewis Mumford: Public Intellectual*, ed. Thomas P. Hughes and Agatha C. Hughes (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 168.

2. To be sure, the work of Thomas Parke Hughes and others discourages a "rigid demarcation between the system and the environment in which the system develops," but the "environment" is often defined in social rather than in natural terms. (Donald MacKenzie, "Missile Accuracy: A Case Study in the Social Processes of Technological Change," in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor J. Pinch [Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1987], p. 197.) Another favored term in contemporary history of technology is the "seamless web," used to describe an ideal of contextual history. Although this is a metaphor based on an analogy between historical studies and organic life, in practice "the seamless web" more often refers to social networks than to natural ones.

3. Marx, "Prophet of Organicism," p. 177. See also Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), pp. 189–211 passim.

4. Bonner Mitchell, *Les Manifestes littéraires de le Belle Époque* (Paris: Seghers, 1966), p. 81. The manifesto appeared in *Le Penseur*, 5th year, no. 4 (April 1905), pp. 121–24.

5. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are mine.

6. For a summary and discussion of the base-superstructure relationship in Marxism, see Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 31–49.

7. For information on Romains's early poetry and choice of pen name, see Annie Angrémy et al., *Catalogue de l'Exposition Jules Romains* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1978), pp. XI–XVI, 3; Michel Décaudin, preface to Romains's *La Vie unanime, poème 1904–1907* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 7; André Guyon, "Jules Romains avant l'unanimisme," *Cahiers Jules Romains 3, Actes du Colloque Jules Romains*, Bibliothèque Nationale, 17–18 February 1978 (Paris: Flammarion, 1979); and Guyon, "J'entends les portes du lointain . . . ," *Cahiers 4* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981).

For a fairly complete review of Romains studies, see M. Raimond, "État présent des études sur Romains," *L'Information littéraire*, no. 5 (1980), pp. 190–93.

An excellent introduction in English to Romains's life and letters is Denis Boak, *Jules Romains*, gen. ed. Sylvia E. Bowman, ed. Maxwell A. Smith (New York: Twayne, 1974).

8. Many of them are found in Mitchell, *Manifestes*.

9. Romains himself later remarked on the book's reception, "One would have needed a truly insatiable vanity not to be satisfied with the welcome it received. I came to know all the types and degrees of praise that can be bestowed, with a freshness that is tasted only once" Angrémy et al., *Catalogue,* pp. 25–27. See also Romains, "Préface de 1925," in *Vie unanime,* p. 27, and Claude Martin, "Le Dossier de presse de *La Vie unanime,*" *Bulletin des Amis de Jules Romains,* 6th year (December 1980), and 7th year (December 1981).

10. Boak, pp. 64–65. See also Georges Bonneville, "Jules Romains et l'Europe," *Cahiers 3,* pp. 253–65. Romains had first been drafted in 1905 and had also suffered a nervous breakdown as a consequence.

11. See Georges Bonneville, "Jules Romains et l'Europe," *Cahiers 3,* pp. 253–65; also Romains's own self-justifying description of his negotiations in *Sept mystères du destin de l'Europe,* written at the request of the *Saturday Evening Post* and published in New York in 1940. (The book was never published in France, for its opinions were deemed too controversial.) See Angrémy et al., *Catalogue,* pp. 70–75, for a brief summary of Romains's interwar diplomatic efforts. Also see Boak, pp. 99–101, for a description of another now-embarrassing publication from the interwar period—Romains's epic of the white race, *L'homme blanc* (1937).

12. Jules Romains, *Ai-je fait ce que j'ai voulu?* in *Les Auteurs jugés de leurs oeuvres,* ed. Philippe Carlier (Paris: Wesmael-Charlier, n.d.), p. 44.

13. Quoted by André Bourin, *Connaissance de Jules Romains, discutée par Jules Romains de l'Académie française. Essai de géographie littéraire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1961), p. 212.

14. Léon Debille, also an aspiring writer, is best known as well by the pseudonym he adopted as a teenager—Georges Chennevière. Louis/Jules and Léon/Georges remained artistic and personal comrades until the latter's untimely death in 1927.

15. Only after his father's death did Romains learn, to his astonishment, that he had been married earlier, briefly, to a woman who died shortly after the wedding. (Boak, *Romains,* p. 19.) There are a number of intriguing biographical parallels between Romains and Mumford. They were both raised in families that did not provide much emotional closeness; in their childhood they both developed a powerful rapport with their native cities; and as adults they both shared a sense of being outside conventional social categories, especially those of social class.

16. Romains, "Préface de 1925," *Vie unanime,* p. 31.

17. Some literary influences will be mentioned later on in this essay, but the influence of Romains's scientific studies is at least as important. At the time he was writing his early poetry, he was also studying for his *diplôme d'études supérieurs* in biology. The interplay between these two pursuits is most evident in the fundamental metaphor of *unanimisme:* the *unanime* is a great beast, a new kind of organism. Such biological analogies were common in the intellectual discourse of the time, but Romains went further, seeking *unanimiste* principles in biology itself. The title of his biology thesis—"L'État 'individu' dans la matière vivante"—echoes one of the prime assertions in *La Vie unanime,* the illusory nature of the "individual state." The purpose of the thesis (that Romains admits was overly ambitious, and that his advisor severely criticized) was to show how simple plant and bacterial colonies exhibit rhythms that can be express in scientific laws. (Bourin, *Connaissance,* pp. 124, 127.)

Even more generally, Romains sought to demonstrate that scientific knowledge could be attained through intuitive apprehension rather than through analysis. In a series of "méditations unanimes," written between 1904 and 1907, he tried to apply *unanimiste* principles to knowledge in general. He proposed that knowledge be sought not in the analytic enumeration of essences, reasons, first causes, and

the like, but in the apprehension of "rhythms, *ways of grouping* phenomena" (Décaudin, preface to *Vie unanime,* pp. 16–17). Throughout his life Romains kept returning to the quasi-mystical conviction that fundamental scientific discoveries could be made through intuition and imagination—most notably in his experiments between 1918 and 1923 to demonstrate the possibility of "extraretinal vision," a type of sight through hypothetical minute organs in the skin that can distinguish shapes and colors independently of the eyes. In 1920 Romains produced a monograph on the theory—the only work he published under his given name Louis Farigoule. Other scientists remained unconvinced. (See Boak, *Romains,* pp. 65–68.)

18. See the discussion by Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth-Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961 [1940]), pp. 270–93.

19. Bourin, *Connaissance,* p. 85.

20. *Ibid.,* pp. 112–13.

21. Angrémy et al., *Catalogue,* p. 5.

22. *Ibid.* One should recall that Braque and Picasso were both living in Montmartre at the time Romains was composing *La Vie unanime* (Braque settled there in 1902, Picasso in 1904), and this was the milieu where—beginning in 1908, the year *La Vie unanime* appeared—they collaborated to invent cubism. Cubism too shatters the autonomy of the individual object to integrate it with its environment; it too celebrates instability, indeterminacy, and change.

23. On population growth, see Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Époque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 169. From 1901 to 1906 alone, the population of Paris increased by about six hundred thousand inhabitants to around 2.5 million. On changing modes of transportation, see Charles S. Dunbar, *Buses, Trolleys & Trams* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1967); Paul Delay, "La Transformation des moyens de transport à Paris," *Le Correspondent,* vol. 229 (10 October 1907), pp. 69–97; Auguste de Morsier, "Chronique scientifique.—Les tramways éléctriques," *La Semaine littéraire,* no. 149 (7 November 1896), pp. 537–39; Eugène Henard, *Études sur les transformations de Paris* (Paris: Librairier-Imprimerier Réunis, 1903 et seq.); and Louis Mocquant, "Les grands travaux de Paris," *Le Nouvelle Revue,* 3d series, vol. 8, no. 31 (10 October 1907), pp. 323–31.

24. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 296.

25. Romains himself never wrote a description of this awakening, except for an oblique reference in a poem composed a decade later ("En revenant du lycée," in *Le voyage des amants* [1921]). The description given here was paraphrased from Romains's verbal accounts by his good friend André Cuisenier in *Jules Romains et l'unanimisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1935), p. 17. Romains and Cuisenier had just met at the time of the rue d'Amsterdam experience, but Romains did not mention it to Cuisenier until three years later—and Cuisenier did not record this description until he published this first volume of his two-volume biography (the second volume, published by Flammarion in 1948, is entitled *L'art de Jules Romains*). Evidently Romains said nothing to his companion Chennevière during or immediately after the event. Taken together, these circumstances suggest a good deal of conscious mythologizing by Romains and his *amis.* See André Guyon, "Le Souvenir de la rue d'Amsterdam," *Bulletin des amis de Jules Romains,* 3d year, nos. 8–9 (April–June 1977), pp. 13–29.

26. Jules Romains, *Puissances de Paris,* 7th ed. (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française, 1919), pp. 24–28.

27. Romains, *Ai-je,* p. 104.

28. Jules Romains, *Men of Good Will,* vol. 1, *The Sixth of October,* trans. Warre B. Wells (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933), esp. pp. 4–7. This chapter should be compared with chapter 18 of the same volume, "Introducing Paris at Five O'Clock in the Evening," and with the opening chapter of *The Seventh of October,* trans. Gerard Hopkins (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946). See the discussion of these works by Josef W. Konvitz in *The Urban Millennium: The City-Building Process from the Early Middle Ages to the Present* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), pp. 140–42. For the choice of October 6 as the foot of the historical wave, see Romains, *Ai-je,* p. 112.

29. Romains also differs in this respect from the futurists. In his view, they never overcame a somewhat infantile fascination with machinery. Moreover, he was much more cerebral in his approach while the futurists praised irrational instincts. While writing *La Vie unanime* Romains became quite friendly with Guillaume Apollinaire, and Apollinaire was one of those who praised the book highly. Romains hoped to forge a literary alliance between Apollinaire and Max Jacob on the one hand and his Abbaye friends on the other. In 1909 Romains proclaimed a united new generation of writers in a much discussed article published that year in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. There were always strains in the relationship, however, and a rupture came in 1911 when Apollinaire wrote a highly critical review of Romains's play *L'Armée dans la ville*. [Apollinaire's review appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue Française,* no. 28 (1 April 1911), pp. 610–13.] While a reconciliation was effected, Romains's relations with Apollinaire never regained real warmth. See Angrémy et al., *Catalogue,* pp. 31–33; Apollinaire's "La vie anecdotique" in *Mercure de France,* quoted in *Cahiers I* (1978), p. 44; Guy Taillade, "Unanimisme, Futurisme, Abbaye de Créteil," *Bulletin des Amis de Jules Romains,* 7th year (March 1981); Bourin, *Connaissance,* pp. 149–51; Christian Sénéchal, *L'Abbaye de Créteil* (Paris: André Delpeuch, 1930); and Marc Baroli, *Le Train dans la littérature française* (Paris, 1963), p. 332.

30. See the analysis by Wylie Sypher, *Literature and Technology: The Alien Vision* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 62. For an overview of the postsymbolist interlude, see Michel Décaudin, *La Crise des valeurs symbolistes: vingt ans de poésie française* (Toulouse: Privat, 1960).

31. Eugène Montfort, "La Beauté Moderne," *La Plume,* 14th year, no. 305 (1 January 1902), pp. 49–50. This is the last of five articles Montfort published in *La Plume* under this collective title; it is dedicated to Jean Jaurès.

32. Some of Bouhélier's fellow *naturistes* were Henri Ghéon, Eugène Montfort, Paul Fort, and Francis Jammes. See Eugène Montfort, *La Beauté moderne, Conférences du Collège d'Esthétique* (Paris: Éditions de la Plume, 1902). See also Baroli, *Train,* p. 331n.

At the beginning of 1901 Montfort established a Collège d'Esthétique moderne on the rue Rochefoucault, where he organized art exhibits, brought in speakers (including Saint George de Bouhélier), and lectured on topics such as "the beauty of the street." The Collège survived only six months. The *naturiste* group as a whole broke up in 1902, as members drifted off in various directions. Montfort went on to become an important literary critic and along with André Gide established the *La Nouvelle Reveue Française* in 1908. After the first issue appeared in February (the issue that contained Gide's laudatory review of *La Vie unanime*), the partnership broke up, and Gide assumed full control of the journal. Décaudin, *Crise,* pp. 115–17.

33. Romains criticized the symbolists for relying upon "accessories borrowed from lost civilizations, things no longer part of human experience." Romains, *Ai-je,* p. 52. In recalling his youth, Romains remarked that "the symbolist storm hardly dampened him at all." *Ibid.,* p. 30.

34. *Ibid.,* p. 48.

35. Romains, "Préface de 1925," *Vie unanime,* p. 31. Romains always downplayed—and one suspects underplayed—his debt to modern writers. He admitted to savoring some verses by Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, and of course he had read Verhaeren and Baudelaire. Romains later recalled telling someone around 1903 or 1904 that Baudelaire was the most important influence on his own poetry, but he later confessed that this was "a little lie dictated by fear of not appearing sufficiently advanced." In fact, he said, he found Baudelaire too perverse for his taste (Romains, *Ai-je,* p. 31). Later, in his book *Saints de Notre Calendrier,* Romains referred to Baudelaire as "the first poet of the modern great city, of its murmurings, of its occult powers, of what he calls its 'innumerable relationships.'" (Quoted by P. J. Norrish, *The Drama of the Group* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958], p. 101.)

36. Romains, "Préface de 1925," *Vie unanime,* pp. 25–26.

37. Romains, *Vie unanime,* p. 15. I am providing a fairly literal translation of Romains's poetry, which deserves far better.

38. *Ibid.,* p. 46.

39. *Ibid.,* p. 47.

40. *Ibid.,* pp. 23–24, 56.

41. *Ibid.,* pp. 71–72.

42. *Ibid.,* p. 82.

43. *Ibid.,* p. 94.

44. *Ibid.,* p. 133.

45. *Ibid.,* p. 138.

46. *Ibid.,* pp. 167–79.

47. *Ibid.,* 179–82. See the discussion in chap. I, "La Nature," in Cuisenier, *Jules Romains et l'Unanimisme,* pp. 79–82.

48. *Ibid.,* p. 209.

49. *Ibid.,* p. 215.

50. Ezra Pound, "The Approach to Paris," *The New Age,* N.S. vol. 13, no. 21 (18 September 1913), p. 608. This article is the third is a series of seven reports on contemporary French poets. Pound ends with these words: "Whatever we may think of his theories, in whatever paths we may find it useless to follow him, we have here at least the poet, and our best critique is quotation." (The article includes a long quotation from *Puissances de Paris* translated into English by Pound. Other quotations are given in the original French.) In the last article of the series, Pound remarks, "[In England I cannot] see about me any young man whose work is as refreshing as Romains's" (N.S. vol. 13, no. 25 [16 October 1913], p. 727).

51. Quoted by Bancquart, "Langage," *Cahiers,* p. 47.

52. Durkheim was teaching at the École normale while Romains was a student there, but Romains claimed he never heard Durkheim lecture or read his works at that time (he did eventually profess great admiration for Durkheim as "the Descartes of *unanimisme*"). Romains spoke of Le Bon even less charitably, saying that the very title of Le Bon's well-known study *La Psychologie des foules* made his skin crawl. Romains explained that he disliked Le Bon's work so intensely because "I suspected it [of] putting its clumsy paws on realities that I wanted to touch only through pure intuition of mystical ecstasy and love." Romains, "Préface de 1925," *Vie unanime,* pp. 28–29. See also P. J. Norrish, "*Unanimiste* elements in the works of Durkheim and Verhaeren," *French Studies,* vol. 11, no. 1 (January 1957), pp. 38–49.

53. Romains, preface to *Death of a Nobody,* trans. Desmond MacCarthy and Sydney Waterlow (New York: Howard Fertig, 1976), pp. iv–v.

54. Romains's response to Lucien Maury's *enquête* in *Revue bleue* (4 September 1909), as quoted in Blancquart, *Cahiers 3*, p. 53.

55. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* can be read as a mirror image of *La Vie unanime*. In Wordsworth's epic, the interlude in London serves the same purpose as Romains's visit to the countryside does in *La Vie unanime*—a journey of temptation and education that ultimately convinces the narrator of the superior virtues of the alternative environment.

56. Willey, *Eighteenth Century Background*, p. 279.

57. The term has been made famous by Walter Benjamin in his analysis of Baudelaire. The *flâneur* (as described by Benjamin) is marginal both to the city and to the bourgeoisie: "Neither of them had yet overwhelmed him. In neither of them was he at home." The fact that he can stroll rather than work shows he is a gentleman of leisure, and yet he is not part of the powerful, decision-making class. He is lucid, but helpless. "As *flâneurs*, the intelligentsia came into the marketplace." (Benjamin, "Paris—the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn [London: NLB, 1973], p. 170. See also pp. 36, 69, 129, 162.) Even more ambivalent than Baudelaire, Romains is no longer so content to stand aloof from the crowd: one part of him still wants to, but another part of him longs to be drowned in the "ocean of humanity." At times he assumes the role of the self-conscious *flâneur*, but at other times the isolation of that role becomes too burdensome. He seems to yearn for (though he never completely gives himself over to) a social role more like that of the unself-conscious *badaud*—the onlooker who loses his individuality as he becomes absorbed by the outside world, forgetting himself under the influence of the intoxicating urban spectacle. See Rearick, *Pleasures*, chap. 7, "The Spectacle of Modern Life," pp. 167–95, on the traditions of the *flâneur* and *badaud* and on Parisian street life in general around the turn of the century.

58. More ominously, Romains sometimes describes the poet as someone who imposes a soul upon an unconscious assembly, who remains outside the group rather than participating in it. For example, in June 1909 Romains's long poem *À la foule qui est ici* was delivered by the actor de Max at the Odéon Theater as part of a poetry competition. With his powerful voice and gestures, de Max recited the words intended to transform the *foule* into a godlike, self-conscious *unanime*. His performance caused a tumult and Romains won second prize. (André Cuisenier, *Souvenirs unanimistes* [Le Celle-Saint-Cloud: J. Cuisenier, 1975], p. 30; also Norrish, *Drama*, pp. 15–16.)

Sometimes the individual who arouses the *unanime* may act less like a poet than like an *agent provocateur*. In Romains's play *Le Bourg régeneré* (1906) and in his novel *Les Copains* (1913), high-spirited young men created *unanimes* in dull provincial towns by staging pranks—writing annoying graffiti in public urinals, or arranging elaborate hoaxes. While at the École normale, Romains himself acquired considerable local fame as a prankster, especially when he orchestrated an elaborate and convincing campaign for a nonexistent candidate—an incident that suggests his contempt for ordinary political processes and activities (Bourin, *Connaissance*, pp. 128–29).

In the *Manuel de déification* Romains is even more outspoken in recommending that individuals create *unanimes* by arousing already existing groups. "Do them violence," he declares at one point, and at another, more benignly, he recommends giving groups "still naive, spontaneous, and childlike, clear consciousness, the concept of their living unity, the revelation of their self." (Quoted by Décaudin in his preface to *Vie unanime*, p. 18; also Norrish, *Drama*, p. 13.) Such groups, in short, are passive audiences prone to manipulation by the superior poet-prankster.

There is a fundamental ambivalence here, as *unanimisme* expresses both complicity with and contempt for the urban crowd.

59. Romains, *Vie unanime*, p. 140.

60. The absence of work and workers in Romains's poetry is by no means unusual among writers of his time. "The literature of the Belle Époque is not at all a literature of labor" (Baroli, *Train*, p. 361).

61. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: Verso, 1981 [1979]), p. 205.

62. The remark is made by Jallez, a contemplative, studious, mild Parisian who represents cultural Europe, the continent of daily life, comfort, and happiness that exists in an eternal present—the *unanimiste* ideal. A second character, Jerphanion, is an ambitious, practical man of action from Velay. He represents political Europe, the continent with a past, a future, a history. Romains uses this literary device of "doubling" to express the contradictory sides of his personality. See Bonneville, "Jules Romains et l'Europe," *Cahiers 3*, pp. 257–58.

63. Shelley Rice, "Parisian Views" (*Views Supplement*, September 1986, pp. 7–13), p. 10 of manuscript version. In this discussion I am indebted to this and another fine essay by Rice, "Still Points in a Turning World" (*Afterimage*, May 1987, pp. 10–13).

64. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 150.

65. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986 [1977]), p. 195. See also pp. 178–97 passim. In the words of J. B. Jackson, the nineteenth-century rebuilding of Paris is a prime example of the "triumph of the street" by which we "perceive the city less in terms of architecture than in terms of communication." J. B. Jackson, "The Discovery of the Street," in *The Necessity for Ruins, and Other Topics* (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts, 1980), p. 55.

66. Rice, "Parisian Views," pp. 11–14.

67. See the discussion of Lukács in Williams, "Base and Superstructure," pp. 35–37. Note particularly Williams's discussion of the limitations of Lukács's approach on pp. 36–37.

68. Williams, *Country and City*, pp. 234–35.