A commitment to the thinkable specificity of a particular century, with literature as the apparent object, can provide intimations of the currency-lives of words. Authorial names become a vector of differentiation, accumulating suggestive powers through their constant positioning and re-positioning in the retrospective construction of cultural change. Epochal generalities flow somewhat paradoxically from an arrangement of proper nouns:

If it is accepted for argument’s sake that the literature of the twentieth century clings to the formal possibility of difference in the face of the erosion of potentially meaningful nineteenth-century individuality and of belief in such, then I would propose to develop that argument here by suggesting the value of Marcel Schwob as an interestingly lucid transitional figure between those positions. This suggestion will be grounded hereafter by reference to a specific text. That the individual was in general a governing preoccupation for Schwob is no revelation. ‘Au temps de l’universel et des foules, de la statistique et de l’imitation, Schwob voulut assurer le fantôme de l’Individu comme épiphanie discrète de l’Unique’ wrote, for example, Daniel Oster, his capitalisations giving a distinctly period look to this construction of a

literary profile.² What the capitalisations perhaps obscure is the extent to which Schwob confronted these preoccupations as a sceptic – as one intellectually wary of what was temperamentally most appealing to him, one alive to the potential absurdity of the most honourable first principles. There is, for example, more than a hint of a Swift or a Voltaire in some of Schwob’s works of ‘imagination’:

Les Éléuthéromanes craignent par-dessus tout de ressembler à quelque autre homme, sachant bien que c’est une manière de contrainte qui leur serait imposée à leur insu. De la pleine mer nous les regardâmes encore plusieurs heures sur la côte, et tous faisaient des gestes divers.³

These lines conclude L’Anarchie (1892), in which a dialogue between Phédon and Cébès is followed by a prose fragment relating a visit to the island of the Éléuthéromanes, ‘possédés [...] d’une certaine manie libre qui les porte à vivre chacun à leur guise’ (SPI, p.211). Details are given of political arrangements among the Éléuthéromanes, and of the more extreme acts to which their anxiety of influence leads. In his notes to the 1960 edition, Maurice Saillet (SPI, p.233) suggests that this text anticipated the ‘idée-mère’ of Jarry’s Ubu Enchaîné, although in L’Anarchie the presentation is that of the standard utopian voyage, recounted by an eye-witness. That Schwob should juxtapose this with a separate dialogue might well be read as a conscious deconstruction of the utopian genre’s most celebrated texts, many of which are developed around the dialogue form – the utopia figuring essentially as a reality recounted (and thus placed at an ironic distance) therein.

Schwob’s later Dialogues d’utopie (1905[?]) does not obviously conform to this pattern, indeed one of its more enigmatic aspects is the presence of utopia in the title. Publishing it for the first time only three years ago, Bernard Gauthier describes this text as ‘[le] dernier conte de Schwob’.⁴ As such it completes an important body of short works

⁴ In his prefatory remarks to Marcel Schwob, Dialogues d’utopie (Toulouse: Ombres, 2001), p.10 (hereafter DU).
of imaginative prose, but through the foregrounding of the dialogue form in the title and its adoption as the framework of the text it recalls in particular a number of dialogues by Schwob dating from the early 1890s, namely *L’Amour*, *L’Art* and the aforementioned *L’Anarchie* – the trio with which he was subsequently to conclude his volume of selected prose, *Spicilège* (1896). In these dialogues, which take the Socratic as their model to the point, in *L’Anarchie*, of incorporating reference to that precursor, Schwob sets out and interweaves a number of lines of thought which could validly be described as durable preoccupations in his work.

Thus, *L’Art* brings together a conclave of canonical figures from the Italian Renaissance under the patronage of Dante, in what functions as an exposé of contending lines of thought on the subject prevalent within that era. The dialogue can be read as an enactment of the library, or as a projection of Schwob the omnivorous reader. ‘Il nous est permis de nous réunir en des temps fixés, et de nous considérer tel que nous fûmes, et d’entendre nos voix telles qu’elles résonnèrent, et de nous entretenir des choses que nous avons aimées’, Dante declares, before setting out the basis of the discussion which is to take place:

J’ai dit et je prétends que les peintres, les sculpteurs et les poètes sont soumis aux femmes qui leur révèlent l’amour, et que tout leur art ne consiste qu’à se laisser guider par la forme qui leur persuada de l’imiter dans les chansons, ballades et assemblages de vers, ou sur les muraillies sacrées, ou dans le cœur du marbre étincelant. Et lorsque je parle ainsi, mes compagnons Guido et Cino se taisent, mais le méchant rallieur Cecco éclate de rire; Cimabue demeure grave; Donato réfléchit; Sandro a un sourire douteux; Orgagna et l’Oiseau rient en secouant la tête, et je ne suis approuvé que par Fra Filippo; mais je crains que nous n’entendions point la même chose (*SPI*, pp.189–90).

The dialogue houses its own justification, then, as a collective exercise in semantic refinement, a rendering explicit of discrepancies in the application of words which ground differing individual practices. A witness who happens upon the eternal conclave is appointed by Dante as judge of the question at issue, the potential representative of both author and reader, a surveyor and survivor of the dispute. Of this witness, himself a historical figure, we are given a potted biography:
Jan van Scorel [...] était un jeune homme de vingt-six ans; il revenait de Palestine où il avait accompagné une confrérie de pèlerins hollandais. Jan van Scorel fit le portrait du Pape Adrien et considéra diligentment tous les tableaux de Raphaël et de Michel-Ange, qui le transportaient (SPI, p.187).

This Van Scorel resurfaces in Dialogues d’utopie, at the far end of Schwob’s œuvre, under the variant name of Schoorl. On this occasion it is however only as a name amongst others – as Schoorl, van Scorel is reduced to the role of a simple reference in the artistic culture of Schwob’s new protagonist, one Cyprien d’Anarque. This singular inconstancy in names can be taken as an invitation to disquiet, as d’Anarque, who might more properly be called the opening statement of Dialogues d’utopie, is at once a worshipper and a victim of signs. He is characterised thus:

Grand lecteur de théories et impatiente de toute contradiction, [Cyprien d’Anarque] avait la religion spéciale de ceux qui croient en ce qu’ils disent dans le moment où ils parlent, cette religion qui n’a qu’un fidèle, et qui lui suffit. La foi de Cyprien était devenue maniaque. Il avait pour son moi une adoration si pure qu’il eût eu la nausée de se souiller au contact d’un autre moi; je dis d’un sentiment, d’une volonté, d’une idée, d’une parole qui n’eût pas été très exclusivement cyprianique. Loin de chercher à ressembler aux grands hommes par certains détails familiers (amour assez répandu), il écartait toute ressemblance avec horreur. Il s’était brouillé avec ses parents d’Anarque pour éviter l’air de famille. Il ne pouvait souffrir qu’on lui trouvât d’analogie avec aucun être humain (DU, p.125).

Cyprien’s is what we might call a ‘pure position’, were it not for a fatal technical restriction on the desire for total singularity. For the ‘adoration’ of a putatively autonomous individual self is an activity which is constrained and maintained by reference to the outside world. The ‘moi’ which is the be-all-and-end-all of Cyprien’s reasoning is a personal stamp put on the generic material to hand. He exits the system of resemblance by putting that personalised production (‘un sentiment, une volonté, une idée, une parole... très exclusivement cyprianique’) beyond himself, into imaginary circulation. But the extent to which our hero is thereby the author of anything at all – even of his own difference – is at best unstable. Aspiring to being the artist of his life he is in the first instance a consumer: more than a discerning consumer, a consumer of discernment. A postulate of internal unique-
ness thus attempts (unsuccessfully) to ground itself in a strategy of external rarity. This attempt underlines, in passing, a paradox of an elitist cultural capital as 'currency': it is currency \textit{a contrario}, one which loses the very status of currency through circulation. Cyprien's conduct and dispositions are nothing short of exemplary:

D'abord il s'était intéressé à l'art, mais seulement à l'art qui semblait ne relever d'aucune école. Ainsi il avait commencé par admirer une demi-douzaine de peintres, les uns inconnus; d'autres dont on ne connaissait qu'un tableau; d'autres encore comme le maître des Demi-Figures, dont nous ne possédons même pas le nom. Il savait qu'en faisant jouer un ressort derrière l'un des tableaux de la grande salle du musée de Haarlem, sous le panneau de la Confrérie Saint-Jean de Jérusalem, une petite porte s'ouvre, comme enchantée, et que dans une chambre secrète on aperçoit une merveilleuse Sainte Cécile. Il connaissait à Paris une Descente de Croix de Wohlgemuth, deux portraits de Cranach, un de Fra Filippo Lippi, mais n'en partageait la vue qu'avec leurs possesseurs. Dans certaines chapelles d'Allemagne il était seul à avoir découvert la main de Schoorl ou de Schaffélin sur des retables que personne n'a regardés depuis quatre cents ans.

Malheureusement, un à un, on violait ses secrets; de curieux voyageurs, des savants sur une piste, des catalogueurs de musée révélaient au public ce que Cyprien s'était cru seul à adorer (DU, pp.125–6).

So much for the inherent value of connoisseurship. Unfortunately, the logic of rarity as somehow constitutive of singularity turns out to be the same for the would-be creator as for the confirmed consumer cohabiting in Cyprien's becoming soul. There is no essential difference between the descent from grace just recounted and that experienced when he subsequently turns to writing. 'Poetry', inscribed on vellum with a golden pen and locked away from any possible readership, offers him the greatest apparent promise of incom-parability in this domain. Removing it from physical circulation is at base an embellishment of the idea that the poetic 'genre', with its 'inimitables entrelacs de rythmes et de mots' presents language, independently of propositional content, as an object of wholly individual rather than at least partially collective determination:

Son œuvre se composait donc de volumes immenses où tout l'ordre accoutumé des phrases était bouleversé et où les phrases mêmes étaient composées, autant
This somewhat forced singularity offers little resistance, however, to the accumulated ocean of previous recorded engagements with language:

[A] mesure qu'il avait lu davantage, il avait retrouvé, éparses, inscrites bien avant lui, certaines de ses pensées, de ses phrases et souvent ses excentricités les plus outrées. Tant qu'à la fin il avait jugé qu'en écrivant, nous imitons toujours, même à notre insu (DU, p.127).

Though the speed with which Cyprien’s enthusiasms are dispatched goes to make of him more a figure of ridicule than of tragedy, it is worth noting the extent to which this process of disillusionment addresses positions with which Schwob may be validly identified. His reputation as a collector of arcane or marginal knowledge and as a scholar of real erudition was from very early on part of that which he enjoyed as a writer. 5 His avowed conception of the work of art indicated an aspiration (at least) to the possibility and presence of the unique (which art would make its domain). Typically of this understanding, in ‘L’art de la biographie’, the preface to his Vies imaginaires (1896), he writes:

L’art est à l’opposé des idées générales, ne décrit que l’individuel, ne désire que l’unique. Il ne classe pas, il déclasse. Pour autant que cela nous occupe, nos idées générales peuvent être semblables à celles qui ont cours sur la planète Mars et trois lignes qui se coupent forment un triangle sur tous les points de l’univers. Mais regardez une feuille d’arbre, avec ses nervures capricieuses, ses teintes variées par l’ombre et le soleil, le gonflement qu’y a soulevé la chute d’une goutte de pluie, la pique qu’y a laissé un insecte, la trace argentée d’un petit escargot, la première dorure mortelle qu’y marque l’automne; cherchez une feuille semblable dans toutes les grandes forêts de la terre: je vous mets au défi (SPI, pp.161–2).

What Schwob names ‘les idées générales’ are thereby placed in polar opposition to ‘art’ – the process of deriving general ideas from a postulated infinite diversity of the things themselves being the

business of ‘science’. To each its own object, or its own values in the face of the object. Thus we read: ‘Il n’y a pas de science du tégument d’une foliole, des filaments d’une cellule, de la courbure d’une veine, de la manie d’une habitude, des crochets d’un caractère’ (SPI, p.162). This division and its rhetorical stability come under strain, however, when the utterly particular attempts to realise itself in the incurably general. Models of individuality and agency which appear sustainable or at least imaginable in respect of things themselves break down once the relative dimension of reality, the fact of reality encompassing relation, is confronted. Thus Cyprien’s goals in literary work dissolve not so much from any despairing of his own singularity but due to what feels like the impossibility of establishing such within the relevant parameters of relation (in this instance: written, natural language). The subject moves from a natural assurance of a world of which it is the centre to one in which the position of an individual, centred, subject position is itself very difficult to imagine. In such a system of generality, the ubiquitous lurking convention subsumes the original (self-) assurance of agency. Logically, with a growing sense of diminishing returns, we are presented with the bare issue of Cyprien’s eleutheromaniacal explorations:

Mais enfin, s’était dit un jour Cyprien, s’il faut que je ressemble à quelqu’un, s’il faut que je subisse la même admiration que quelqu’un, suis-je forcé d’agir comme quelqu’un? Ne suis-je pas libre? Et mes parents, mes semblables, les circonstances même s’unissant, ne puis-je pas résister à ce qui déterminerait un autre, être véritablement moi-même? (DU, p.127)

While Schwob describes these reformulations in terms of what he calls Cyprien’s ‘mania’, that is – in his own terms – what is most wholly inimitable in the individual subject, the manias in Dialogues d’utopie are themselves exemplary for the radical generality of their articulation and of the object via which they become manifest. Witness in this regard Cyprien’s antithesis, Ambroise Babeuf (the cypher-like names give a sense of transparent artificiality which is in itself an ‘effet d’utopie’). Babeuf, we are told, is an erstwhile historian who, having lost his faith in the possibility of actual knowledge of historical persons, transposes this doubt onto his own status as a knowing subject:
L'espoir qu'une connaissance exacte de l'esprit de Babeuf par lui-même pourrait lui permettre d'interpréter un jour scientifiquement les faits avait mené Ambroise vers la psychologie, et de là, très vite, par la recherche d'une base solide, à l'anatomie et à la physiologie, particulièrement du cerveau. Quel était l'élément de la pensée? Était-ce la cellule cérébrale? Par quels procédés des cellules qui semblaient bien peu différenciées recevaient-elles les impressions, emmagasinaient-elles de la mémoire, fabriquaient-elles de l'imagination, de la volonté, de la raison? De sorte que Babeuf passait la journée dans son laboratoire à faire des coupes de cerveau, à les sectionner, à les examiner au microscope. […] Mais la cellule, pour la connaissance de la vérité, n'aidait pas plus qu'un acte signé ou une quittance de compte. C'était un fait qui ne révélait point de personnalité. Pouvait-on décomposer, aller plus loin? Peut-être; mais Babeuf s'était convaincu que la science du corps humain, comme celle des faits humains, avait des limites. Et il répétait:


Although Schwob here caricatures an empiricist extreme of the recourse to science in the search for foundations, it is related to the same experience as Cyprien’s – the apparent impossibility of a representation in general, transferable terms of what is apprehended as unique. Here the individual subject is effaced in deference to a method of ubuesque resonance (‘ Coupons des cerveaux!’) and a despairing literal-minded focus on the materiality of its chosen object. It is strange, then, that both Cyprien and Ambroise attain what distinction they enjoy as characters via their (failed) respective attempts to investigate and confirm the possibility of such distinction in purely general terms. Given the theme of the present volume, this paradox is at its most striking in the culmination of Cyprien’s attempts to salvage a sense of his individual agency in a kind of economic inversion, or evacuation, of the Mallarméan Coup de dés:

Cyprien d’Anarque était assis devant sa table nue où il avait rangé des pièces de cinq francs neuves et exactement semblables. Son attention se portait à en choisir une sans qu’il pût se rendre compte du motif qui en avait déterminé son choix. Ainsi la chose avait réussi quand la pièce n’était pas spécialement éclairée d’un rayon de soleil, ni, plus que telle autre, à portée de la main, ni placée dans une série fatidique comme un, trois ou sept. Mais il ne fallait pas non plus qu’une de ces considérations eût déterminé Cyprien à ne pas choisir cette pièce-là, mais sa voisine (DU, p.127).
If the Absolute is a recurrent theoretical preoccupation of the literary artist in the nineteenth century, that century is counterbalanced as a profane site by an equally vast preoccupation with the historical transformations of capitalism, industry and the condition of the individual in which money functions as universal mediator. The view of Balzac with which we began is compatible with this duality. But there is an admirable perversity in pursuing the cause of election and distinction, of autonomy and agency, through the play of the utterly undifferentiated – as Cyprien does here. Indeed, he has chosen to represent his absolute singularity with the institutional embodiment of value as the outcome rather than the precondition of the exchange (and of the exchangeability) of objects (this was how the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel, most notably in his Philosophie des Geldes of 1900, was theorising money as Cyprien was coming into being).

Is a reading of Simmel with Schwob anything more than a gratuitous act? In attempting through the playing of the coin game to experience his actions as beyond determination Cyprien brings into play the artistic criterion of the singular, as set out in Schwob’s earlier-cited remarks, via (per Simmel) the most radical and the most all-pervading of ‘idées générales’. For as well as being the embodiment of value as the outcome of exchange – and hence in opposition to the very idea of the value of the singular per se – money in the modern period, and specifically through the nineteenth century, as Simmel also maintained, had become the lingua franca, the common expression of all individual ‘sequences of purpose’ and perspectives on reality. Not only then was money the meta-language in which all things and all beings found themselves open to re-description, it had become the properly mystical language in which opposites coincided – a realisation to which the sociologist does justice via the conceptual vocabulary of theology:

In reality money in its psychological form, as the absolute means and thus as the unifying point of innumerable sequences of purposes, possesses a significant relationship to the notion of God – a relationship which only psychology, which has the privilege of being able to commit blasphemy, may disclose. The essence of the notion of God is that all diversities and contradictions in the world achieve a unity in him, that he is – according to a
beautiful formulation of Nicolas de Cusa – the coincidentia oppositorum. Out of this idea, that in him all estrangements and all irreconcilables of existence find their unity and equalization, there arises the peace, the security, the all-embracing wealth of feeling that reverberate with the notion of God which we hold.

In Simmel’s analysis there has been a breathtaking transformation of function and position as the absolute Mittel, becoming the convergence point of all various subjective lines towards self-realisation (or self-recognition) in the accomplishment of ultimate purpose, thereby usurps the position of the Absolute per se (its antithesis: the imaginary locus of sovereignty, agency, incomparability, unrelatedness). The five franc piece, if we return to the process of the dialogue in Schwob generally, is like a word for which there is at the same time both an absolutely agreed, conventional meaning and an infinity of private meanings – it opens up the appalling vista, in other words, of the poet having his fantasies of intentional omnipotence realised only to find that he has become a lawyer, or migrated to the theoretical fictions of the lawyer, in the process.

We are, in further resonance with Cyprien’s gesture, in a position to observe an existential paradox of give and take in Simmel’s account of money. In that account, just as it enables and institutionalises the modern dominance of exchange value, money separates possibility out from the world of objects to which it had formerly inhere as a diffuse

principle. ‘Legal tender’ operates a *sui generis* objectification of possibility itself, the object it constitutes being at once both within and beyond the real. It thus simultaneously reinforces the subject’s assurance of individual personal agency (the sense of self-as-actor / self as author of one’s acts) and suggests to the observer, through the absolute equivalence of its infinitely repeated forms, as the embodiment of exchangeability, all that is ultimately de-individuating and de-centring in its specific contribution to the development of humanity.

Might it be this cumulative latent horror of the pure that Schwob had in mind with his titular reference to utopia? Those who espouse a negative stance towards the term and its connotations will be alive to the *reductio ad absurdum* of both d’Anarque and Babeuf’s attempts to ground their actions theoretically as subjects of knowledge and of action – as truly free agents – and to the way in which such attempts can be thought to incapacitate their authors. It might on the other hand be more constructive to move from an idea of ‘utopia’ as the name of the attempt to think against the grain of the dominant social, economic, intellectual arrangements of the time – dominance being characterised by the aura of self-evidence.\(^7\) If, to quote Daniel Oster again, ‘la fin de siècle [est] ce moment de l’histoire de la France où, par toutes sortes de détours et de mises en spectacle, on est venu buter sur la question de l’Individu’;\(^8\) then it is surely at least in part because the individual and individuality were simultaneously becoming ever more ideologically ubiquitous and theoretically precarious in the evolving conditions.

That Cyprien should be so wrong-headed as to attempt to recognise ‘himself’ in the perfectly random selection of indistinguishable tokens rather (even) than in the objects which they allow one to procure has, for all its perversity, the virtue of resonating both with Simmel’s denunciation of the impossibility of a successful outcome to that second strategy, and with the figure of the *man without qualities* that we saw Pierre Jourde place at the centre of

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7 See, for example, Paul Ricoeur’s reading of Karl Mannheim in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

twentieth-century literary preoccupations. The lure of each successive object thrown in the path of the individual subject by the productive complexes which money had made possible for the first time was, in Simmel’s view, a factor of ever-increasing ‘alienation’. In equating a modernity made possible by money with both this alienation and with greater insight than in past eras into the properly human dimension of lived reality, Simmel was suggesting – as Gianfranco Poggi has pointed out in a compelling analysis – that such insight was not an unmitigated blessing. In his treatment of his intellectuals Schwob would appear to agree. Happily, he is very far from restricting appearance in his work to intellectuals. The tension between action and the theoretical grounding of one’s action, its appropriation as one’s own, is thus counterpointed if not definitively dispelled in Dialogues d’utopie by Cyprien’s ‘significant’ other:

Who is Lili Jonquille, we might surmise, other than the embodiment of the freedom from theory, irony made sublime through being unconscious (‘sa crédulité égalait son scepticisme’); or again, to be less facetious, the artist’s ideal of the person as the inimitable sum of his or her peculiar traits – all the more singular, or all the more human, for being contradictory among themselves. When, without blinking, Lili Jonquille perfectly randomly selects a coin from the exhausted Cyprien’s pile, his reaction is to admire her ‘liberté par ignorance’ and to

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Lili Jonquille, ou plutôt Musaraigne, avait vingt ans, et pas d’histoire. [...] Elle lisait les feuilletons, pleurait à tous les drames, ne croyait pas à la médecine ou à la politique, admirait à la fois les révolutionnaires et les hommes d’autorité, adorait les auteurs comiques, savait par cœur toutes les chansons des cabarets de Montmartre et même avait remplacé son amie Cigale au Casino des Trottins. Sa crédulité égalait son scepticisme; elle était à la fois très susceptible et très endurante, très pitoyable et très cruelle. [...] Enfin elle avait horreur de l’hôpital, de la police, des araignées et des magistrats; mais elle n’eût point manqué d’aller voir passer le Président de la République (DU, p.12–29).

reject it for himself: ‘[P]our moi, ce n’est guère satisfaisant’ (DU, p.128).

While the characters in Dialogues d’utopie adjourn for lunch without having noticeably progressed from their opening positions, the reader is left to ponder on alone. It appears that while each individual, each ‘mania’ aims at something under a general name (something such as freedom, or certainty, or happiness), the general within the dialogue acts as a shorthand for the less general, the particular definition. The text of the dialogue form, as the space or device in which this becomes apparent, serves in its turn as an achieved coincidentia oppositorum – as the construction of an external perspective, an imagined totalising point of view, thought not in terms of oppositions but of a totality beyond these, and which is characterised by their co-presence. Difference, voiced, opens, in theory, onto continuity. But it may also do so, as it would appear to do here, in literary practice. The writer, in Schwob’s explicit understanding, by attaining this perspective transcended and thereby also ensured a personal singularity in language:

Pour un observateur venu d’un autre monde, mes embauemes et mes pirates, mon sauvage et mon roi n’auraient aucune variété. Si par une certaine convention on supposait à ce visiteur supérieur la vue bornée d’un artiste en même temps que la généralisation d’un savant, voici probablement ce qu’il dirait après avoir pris une connaissance exacte de nos sociétés d’êtres animés: « […] Saisissez donc les différences charmantes par votre imagination, mais apprenez à les confondre en la continuité des ressemblances, qui font les lois explicatives, par l’exercice de votre raison. Ne donnez pas plus de foi à ceux qui vous montrent la discontinuité ou les différences individuelles, ou la liberté dans l’univers, qu’à ceux qui vous exposent sa continuité ou ses lois nécessaires. Souvenez-vous que vos mathématiques, fondées sur la continuité dans le temps, l’espace et le nombre, suffisent à calculer des mouvements d’atomes, qui sont des tourbillons discontinus. Imaginez que la ressemblance est le langage intellectuel des différences, que les différences sont le langage sensible de la ressemblance. Sachez que tout en ce monde n’est que signes, et signes de signes. » (SPI, pp.149–50).