

The French "Nouveau Roman", A Revolution in Literature?

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In the early fifties, the French novel of the twentieth century went through an unexpected and radical change, the importance of which has been perceived by many writers, readers or critics. Its influence is still affecting many fields of literature. As a matter of fact, the first half of this century simply continued the nineteenth century genre of novel, characterized by its analysis of habits, descriptions of characters or social commentaries. The two major themes of the earlier genre were love and money. The twenties saw the addition of a metaphysical preoccupation with the interpretation of life and the profound tragedy of the human fate as in André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus' works. This gave

birth to the novel on the condition of man and the absurdity of life. But, from 1950 onward, this radical change is clearly perceived by the disavowal of the logical interpretation of these important themes, always treated and always in the same way. The novel is now describing society in a free, bearish and haphazard way, renouncing any demonstration of social or socialist thesis, as was found, for example, in the works of Emile Zola; it no longer describes "characters" or "stereotypes" as Huysman's "Le Disciple", but a unique, flesh and blood human being, living his haphazard and confused life; it no longer depicts the poetical and dream-like charm which marks Alain Fournier's "Le Grand Meaulnes"; it has

become psychologically irrational and chaotic in response to the stimulation of real life and real world. The different orientations of these various kinds of modern novels could, in spite of their apparent dissonance, have this in common: whatever the social, psychological, poetical aims of the writer may be, the novel is no more a harmony structured by an idea, a thesis or even a problem, nor it is the account of a case, the discussion of a problem, the refutation of an idea or the demonstration of an ideology. Rather it is a material, a mass, rich in content, but inorganic and indistinct. While the novel of the nineteenth century was the study of an idea intentionally and arbitrarily made static in the middle of the living whirlwind of human experience, the French "Nouveau Roman" surrenders this static study, and even the study itself, in order simply to express this whirlwind, not to crystallize a thesis or a logic.

Aims of the French "Nouveau Roman".

Beginning in 1954, the awareness of these different problems of the novel resulted in the appearance of what can only be called a new style in literature, later named by the critics "Nouveau Roman" (Although this style is rather an anti-style, because it aims to break with the literary tradition which makes the novel an harmonious combination of theme and style). This "Nouveau Roman" would have no theme and would express itself without affectation or refinement. Its purpose is to renounce the common conventional understanding, but no to replace it by the use of other "techniques", either those of philosophy or those of scientific fantasy. We may find predecessors of this "Nouveau Roman" in Anglo-Saxon literature: Joyce, Virginia Woolf, John dos Passos. These authors assume in their works that reality is not unique, but involves different levels of prehension and under-

standing. As a matter of fact, different persons have different perceptions of the world. There are as many worlds, as many realities, as there are persons, each of them looking at the world with an unique, an original understanding. Each person will reorganize and synthesize his perception according to his personality. Thus the world is nothing but an heteroclite gathering of possible worlds, in which each finds, and must find, his own. Alain Robbe-Grillet and his fellow-writers, early novators of this new literary form, suggest to us that the purpose of writing is to offer the reader a series, the larger the better, of "possibilities" in which that reader, every reader, any reader, can recognize his own world. The novelist is not claiming for himself the right to impose his personal world to the reader. The novel has to be as "depersonalized", as objective as possible, in order to give the reader the opportunity to "rewrite" it, according to his own perception.

There are as many worlds as there are individuals. Therefore it is necessary to have as many elucidations of the novel (i.e. as many novels) as there are readers.

This is why these "Nouveaux Romans" give no explanation or interpretation of the facts, ideas or thoughts which they present. The reader finds himself confronting an enigma which he alone can solve, and only for himself. At first glance, the composing of "Nouveau Roman" may resemble earlier conventional techniques. But the "Nouveau Roman" compels us into the every-day life of the real world of man. We are not permitted to escape into the fantasies of our imaginings.

Techniques of the French "Nouveau Roman".

The authors' attempt to expose the banality of existence will reveal life to us as unreal and enigmatical. The way they present life baffles the reader, even while involving him. The objective authors force him to find, in the midst

of this mass lacking any internal logic, his own world, which he usually interpolates automatically in reality, but which comes now to him by—and through a written medium, the "Nouveau Roman". That ambiguity of personal perception in the midst of thousands "possible" perceptions is expressed in the novel by Michel Butor, "Degrés". Three characters are untiringly describing the same banal experience, life in a classroom. But these descriptions of the same classroom are changing—not only from character to character—but also from time to time and from mood to mood. The novel gives us an example of the aim, the ambition of the "Nouveau Roman". First of all, these different accounts of the same events are intended to show us that there is no single, comprehensive, objective "world view", which is to say that the world as it is, in itself, cannot be comprehended by the human mind, and the novelist's objectivity compels him not to impose

—by force—his own explanation of the world. So the reader is confused and irritated as he faces the author's refusal to provide him with a prefabricated "world view" which he cannot seize or make his own, or even integrate into his own "world view". The vanity of the traditional novelist thus violates the readers' integrity of conscience and further contributes to the incommunicability between human beings.

Out of respect to the reader's integrity, the "Nouveau Roman" gives the world a paralogical ambiguity which allows it the opportunity of presenting the different possibilities of reality. Returning to an old technique of scientific fantasy—the temporal journey, which allows the author to describe ten times or more the same period of time—Alain Robbe-Grillet has told, in "Dans le Labyrinthe", a banal story, the adventures of a soldier who has to carry an important message to a town which is about to be occupied by the enemy.

The day after a French army defeat, we find ourselves in a little provincial town, and it is snowing. At a crossroads, under a street light, a soldier is waiting, his feet in the snow, a box under his left arm. A young boy passes by, the soldier asks him the way.

The boy does not answer. In the next house, an empty bedroom is meticulously described. A picture is hanging on the wall representing a pub with people drinking. In the foreground, a young boy is standing with a box under his arm. In the back ground, three anonymous-faced soldiers. These two images, the real one, in the street, and the pictured one, in the room, are beginning to move. Now we look on a second version of the first sequence: the young boy takes the soldier to another crossroads, where he waits once more. A young boy (but is he the same? Is it the same sequence?) passes by. In the last version, the young boy takes the soldier to a pub where the image

described in the first version is recomposed. There, hanging on the wall of the pub, a picture representing a crossroads, with a soldier, a box under his left arm, waiting under a street light.... and everything begins once more. The end of the story has no importance. Are all these things real? Or are they only a dying soldier's dream? The reader has to assemblate the pieces his own way. These flash-backs in time, these investigations about the different possibilities, these traps for attention, all these means are drawn from the techniques of scientific fantasy.

But make no mistake, these games about time are not what Alain Robbe-Grillet's story is about. They are only to make the reader conscious of the plasticity of reality, which can be understood and even molded to different points of view. Then, in order to destroy the academic and lineal description of society and/or psychology in traditional novels, the authors use all the means

at their disposal; such as simultaneity which is used by Michel Butor in "Passage de Milan", in which he borrows techniques from John dos Passos and Joyce. Butor describes life in a Parisian building, all day long, mixing actions and thoughts, but never linking them together. In "Le dîner en ville", Claude Mauriac describes a dinner which brings eight characters together as a mass made out of eight components of secret or unconscious preoccupations; thoughts and words are crossed and mixed, entangled to a point where the reader cannot follow any of these eight personal thought, but is forced to feel and even to submit himself to this kind of a collective conscience which emerges from this confused magma of words and thoughts. Thus we describe the author's skill as the ability to present reality according to a point of view which will baffle the reader and force him to forget his literary habits. We have to "put the character in presence

of the objective world and show how the universe is disjointing itself under his eyes—and ours—and will reorganize itself, in another way, but as legitimate as the former one" (Claude Mauriac, forewords for "Le dîner en ville"). Another of these techniques frequently used by the authors of the "Nouveau Roman" is to place the reader in direct contact with the content of the novel instead of being nothing but a passive spectator. "You put your foot on the copper slide, and you try, without any result, to push the sliding-door with your right elbow". That is the beginning of Michel Butor's "La Modification" in which the use of the second person personal pronoun identifies the reader with the principal character. This man who lives through 236 pages in the Paris-Rome express, looking back over his entire life, "that's you, reader", says the author. This "you" modifies the reader's point of view and what was only an exterior story becomes a pro-

found shaking of the reader's mind. This method had already been used by an American author of scientific fantasy, and not by accident. For a writer of fiction, an extraordinary experience cannot be told as if it were the banality of life. For Michel Butor, this way of presenting the human experience as a mystery and not as a tale, provides the occasion for showing its alarming value, as it mesmerizes the reader and fixes his fear.

Metaphysics of the French "Nouveau Roman"

It is easy to understand, after this quick survey of the techniques of the "Nouveau Roman", that the writer does not write to tell a story (the banality of plots is always distracting) or to enjoy the doubtful pleasures of playing with words and language—not yet. "Plot", "style" and "techniques" are nothing but means serving an ideal. The authors of the "Nouveau Roman" group, following the lessons of ultra-

impressionism (they owe a lot to Virginia Woolf), destroy the conventional and temporal arrangement of the narrative, just as cubists and pre-impressionists destroyed the conventional and visual arrangement of the picture. Their unique aim is to make us feel the fundamental difference between what we see (perception) and what is seen (reality). This "Nouveau Roman" wants, after all, to discover the poetical reality and give the reader its inorganic aspect, before it is disformed and sterilized by social conventions, hypocritical and spiritless. The "Nouveau Roman" gives the reader the possibility to reach "poetical reality" which, of course, his own vision will modify, but it will be purer and more personal because it will not have to go through the social filter of conventional perception. The conventional novelist's world, which is regulated, ordered and rebuilt is rejected for the benefit of a new and wild world where nothing is explained. "Instead of this universe of

significations (psychological, logical, social, functional) we should try to build a world more solid, more *immediate*, things and actions should thrust themselves by their *presence*, and this presence should prevail *over any explicative theory* (...) In this future universe of novel, things will be *there* before being *something*. And they'll still be there after, strong, invariable, for ever, and reckless as to their meaning." (Alain Robbe-Grillet : "Une voie pour le roman futur") Reading such a profession of faith, the meaning of the literary quest appears : the "Nouveau Roman" is not the result of an evolution of literature. It is a total revolution. Robbe-Grillet accuses the novelists of an earlier genre of an unforgivable sin : to explain everything before understanding anything.

In order to free itself from that sin, the novel must present the reality of man and the world in all of its elements and complications at every

level, at this special moment where it is neither explained nor explicable. And, from this, all the technical "tricks" of the "Nouveau Roman" are illuminated : they are means, and only means. Either in "Degrés" by Michel Butor or in "Dans le Labyrinthe" by Alain Robbe-Grillet, where the same events are interminably repeated according to different points of view, or in "La route des Flandres" by Claude Simon, where many events are mixed up without any care of chronology, the main aim is always to find, behind the convention, the deep and primitive reality of things and people. This deep reality is always neglected in a "well-built" story, which is always simplification, falsification and violation.

As early as 1951, Ladislas Dornandi had, in "La vie des autres", reproduced *all* the actions of the inhabitants of a village. At the beginning, Alain Robbe-Grillet had followed him. Thus, in 1957, in "La Jalouse", his

opposition against sterile discussion and psychological analysis is not shown by complexity and enigma, but by a total renunciation of any analysis; he gives his attention to an insistant and full description of things, of any things:

“Now, the shade of the pillar—the pillar which support the south-west angle of the roof, divides the corresponding angle of the balcony in two equal parts; this balcony is a covered gallery which surrounds the house on three of its sides. As its width is the same in the median part and in the lateral sections, the trace of shade projected by the pillar arrives exactly to the corner of the house; but it stops there, because only the floor of the gallery is reached by the sun, which is still too high in the sky.” This irritating (and intentionnaly irritating) description is made by a man who, “bored by the erroneous meanings that talkative men give to things, beings and movements” (R.M. Albérès, “*Histoire du Roman Moderne*”), decides to

describe them in their harsh reality, before human culture will turn them away.

From the French “Nouveau Roman” to a new language in literature.

Between 1956 and 1960, the “Nouveau Roman” was proclaimed a new group in literature. Although Robbe-Grillet and Butor’s works had to face sarcasms and condemnations from some critics and readers, they still found enough readers to be published in pocket-collections. An audience of youth and students was attracted by this revolutionary concept of literary composition. After 1960, a new wave of authors, including Philippe Sollers, Jean-Pierre Faye, Roland Barthes was to go further and more radically into the experiments of their predecessors. If, until that time, the problem of composing the novel had been the most important thing, these newcomers emphasized the problem of language of the

novel itself. The difference between these two waves is almost imperceptible, because both of them insist on the importance of giving a perception of the world "*in density*", corresponding to our different levels of perception, as opposed to the lineal conception of the traditional novel.

The literary text has now to be understood as the contrary of the traditional story. The novel is not any more a description, a narration, or a confidence, it is an *object*. This is the idea which is developed by Claude Genette in "Figures II" when he defines the book "as a kind of a total object". This "total object" is, above all, a presence, as for poets and painters, a material and sensorial presence. "Van Gogh, for instance, shows it very clearly in his letters to his brother. When he describes, in one of these letters, the landscape he is admiring, he does not write : this is a cornfield; he says : In front of me, I see a field of cadmium

yellow from such and such sellor. This is immediately transported in the technical language of the way of expression he chose." ("Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers") And this artist's initiative gives appearance to another reality more complex, which is the painting, the poem and the novel. Instead of using the suggestive value of colour, the novelist uses the suggestive value of words. He replaces the painter's eyesight by the novelist's eyesight. Poetry was freed from anecdote by Reverdy, and the novelist, like the poet, refuses a conception of the world which, in order to adapt reality to a doctrine, mutilates and disfigures it. Using language, the work has to be able to give all that is given by the world in its integrity and purity. The immediate life is thus signified.

According to this point of view, the act of writing is autonomous : the act has to free itself from the banality of confession and story. Jacques Henrie

remarks that "a materialistic writing has to escape radically from the category of expression, which wants a text to be a putting in shape of a preliminary meaning." ("Pour une avant-garde révolutionnaire," entretiens de Jacques Henrie avec Philippe Sollers, *Revue Tel Quel*, No 40-1970). The novel is neither a document nor an explanation; it is a natural and instinctive action, anterior to any engagement in life or world. Writing is not anymore a way of reflecting reality by transforming it, it is a soliatri game played by the writer with words, in order to find the true world. One word gives birth to another, and gradually the text builds itself up, without being submitted to the mutilating rules of the literary genre. "What is in the writer's mind is not important; at the beginning of any work, there is nothing but a word written on a plain page.... this word is neither innocent nor useless. It will not leave the writing man's mind in the same

condition as if it had not been written. Each word is a keystone, a basis.... Each word is essential.... Each word is architecture. Each work engages the whole work." (Pierre Daix : "Nouvelle critique et art moderne") There is no longer, as in the traditional novel, a *seen* world and a *seeing* writer, but a mass where both are mixed and confused. The world is the reflection of man, man is the reflection of the world; two superimposed reflections, mixed in only one image, but not creating an objective reality. The drama of the novel is now the drama of writing. This is what is shown by Philippe Sollers' novel, "Drama" (1965), which describes a novelist fighting with the work he wants to compose, which is in his mind; the plot is unimportant; there is none. The real drama is not this work, but the hesitating and confused attempt of this man to adjust his vision of the world. *The novel is then nothing more than a question about perception and language.*

Sources.

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