

Ann Jefferson

**The
nouveau
roman and
the
poetics of
fiction**

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for Anthony, Amy and Laurie

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*Fatalité de l'essai, face au roman: condamné à l'authenticité – à la
forclusion des guillemets.*

(Barthes, 1975, 93)

Contents

Acknowledgements	page ix
Introduction	i
1. Unnatural narratives	9
Last things first	9
The absent <i>telos</i> : <i>Les gommages</i>	18
The gamma point: <i>L'emploi du temps</i>	30
The real in question: <i>Vous les entendez?</i>	40
Narrative euphoria: <i>La maison de rendez-vous</i>	46
2. Character and the age of suspicion	58
Unforgettable figures: <i>Portrait d'un inconnu</i> and <i>Le voyeur</i>	58
From the eponymous to the anonymous: <i>Les fruits d'or</i>	73
Character and the world of platitudes: <i>Entre la vie et la mort</i>	82
The hidden life at its source: <i>Projet pour une révolution à New York</i>	88
Pronominal persons: <i>La modification</i> and <i>Les fruits d'or</i>	98
3. Narrative strategies and the discovery of language	108
To dramatise the seeing eye	108
The first person and its narrative dramas: <i>Portrait d'un inconnu</i>	119
The missing <i>I</i> : <i>La jalousie</i>	133
Free indirect speech as language on the loose: <i>Vous les entendez?</i>	143
First-, second- and third-degree narrative: <i>Degrés</i>	153

4. The novel and the poetics of quotation	164
Speech about speech	164
Talk as theme: ' <i>Disent les imbéciles</i> '	175
The novel and the world as library: <i>Degrés</i>	185
Mimesis, reflexivity and self-quotation: <i>Topologie d'une cité fantôme</i>	193
Conclusion	207
Bibliography	210
Index	217

Introduction

The novel is notorious for its lack of theoretical definition, and indeed its primary characteristic as a genre has often been regarded as its very freedom from fixed generic features. E. M. Forster called it 'distinctly one of the moister areas of literature' (1949, 9), and went on to describe it as a kind of swamp lying between the sharply defined peaks of philosophy on the one hand and poetry on the other. Nevertheless, the emergence of the *nouveau roman* in the 1950s and the debates and polemic that accompanied it do suggest that some more or less precise definition of fiction as a genre was at stake, even if it had never been very explicitly formulated. The *nouveau roman* was seen as posing a serious challenge to what it vaguely called the Balzacian novel, and in so far as the label *nouveau roman* had any meaning at all, it was clear that this new literature also had rights of entry to the house of fiction. Certainly, of all the terms coined for this new movement (*anti-roman*, *école du regard*, *chosisme*, *école de Minuit*), it was only the one which characterised it as fiction (*nouveau roman*) which stuck.¹ All the texts discussed in this study bear the rubric *roman*.

If we accept that the *nouveau roman* is fiction, what theory of the novel are we implicitly proposing? Is the existence of the *nouveau roman* a sign that the current of fictional development is now flowing along another of the hundred unconnected rills in the marshy no-man's land of the novel, leaving the frequently invoked Balzacian and Stendhalian channels to dry up? Or is there some deeper connection between the

¹ For a historical account of the development of the *nouveau roman* see Astier, 1969.

so-called traditional novel and the new fiction which would constitute a coherent and all-embracing definition of the genre? It is the contention of this book that the *nouveau roman* itself implicitly proposes a revised definition of fiction which is necessitated by the irrelevance and inadequacy of traditional models of interpretation, but which also encompasses the novels for which these models were once appropriate. It is not a case of a new literature requiring a new theory, designed to account just for its own particularities. The *nouveau roman* invites us to elaborate a new poetics of fiction which instead of subverting generic classifications, alters their parameters so that we see all the pre-existing fiction in a new light. But before going any further, the view that a reading of the *nouveau roman* will yield a kind of retroactive poetics should be set in perspective against different assumptions concerning the novelty and nature of the *nouveau roman*.

The first shock on reading the *nouveau roman* is caused by a drastic reduction in the scope of what is represented by the fiction. Balzac confidently set out to portray the whole of French society, and even Proust and Gide in his *Faux-monnayeurs*, who are often invoked as twentieth-century precursors of the *nouveau roman*, have a sizeable panorama in their novels. By contrast the *nouveau roman* seems positively emaciated, as the title of J.-B. Barrère's hostile *La cure d'amaigrissement du nouveau roman* confirms. Furthermore, representation in these novels often seems inaccurate or unrealistic, as the complaints made to Robbe-Grillet by some of his readers testify: "Things don't happen like that in real life", "There aren't any hotels like the one in your *Marienbad*", "A jealous husband doesn't behave like the one in your *Jalousie*", "The adventures that your Frenchman has in *L'immortelle* aren't realistic", "Your lost soldier in *Dans le labyrinthe* isn't wearing his badges in the right place" (Robbe-Grillet, 1963, 69). Apart from Robbe-Grillet's defence of his supposedly non-anthropomorphic descriptions in his essay 'Nature, humanisme, tragédie' (1963, 45-67), hardly any attempt was made to justify the *nouveau roman* in terms of what it directly portrayed. Seen in a hostile light, the insubstantiality of what one might call the content of the nou-

veau roman is an unwelcome novelty which automatically prevents it from being regarded as fiction at all, since it appears to lack a serious realist purpose.

A less hostile view of this novelty, however, sees it as a part of a developing tradition in twentieth-century fiction whereby the burden of realism is gradually shifted from content to form (and thus renders the form-content distinction redundant). The apparent novelty of the nouveau roman then constitutes no more than a sign that this shift is more or less complete. There are two different kinds of interpretation concerning the nature and relevance of this formal realism; one which holds that the formal organisation of the novel mirrors the organisation of the society in which it is produced; and another which assumes that it mirrors the structure and patterns of human consciousness.

The first view is exemplified by Lucien Goldmann who takes as his starting point the assumption that there is a '*rigorous homology* between the literary form of the novel [. . .] and the everyday relations that men have with goods in general, and by extension, with other men, in a society devoted to market production' (1964, 24). Thus, in the novels of Robbe-Grillet, the reduction of the role of character and the increased dimensions of the descriptions can be seen as formal equivalents of a society organised in terms of a market economy, whose chief concern is with the exchange-value of the objects it produces, and whose operation ignores the non-economic and private values that men place on objects and each other.²

To the extent that this view of fiction implies a more or less committed Marxist position and cannot account for the nouveau roman's particular novelty it does not have a very wide critical currency, and it is the phenomenological interpretation of the formal features of fiction which is most widely accepted. The supposed rejection of plot and character is necessitated by changes in the way that people structure their experiences. There has been a change in our notion of the experience of time, for example, so that the linearity of plot now seems a false

² For fuller examples of the possibilities of this kind of approach in relation to the nouveau roman see Leenhardt, 1973.

representation of time. Instead, we can read the confused chronological structure of many of the *nouveaux romans* as a more appropriate representation of the experience of time, a formal equivalent of what Sturrock calls the 'play of the mind', free to 'rearrange the images or memories of the past without reference to perceived reality' (1969, 22). This view is very closely related to that of Sartre for whom a 'novelistic technique always reflects the novelist's metaphysics' (1947, 71), and who saw Mauriac's use of an omniscient author in his novels as a betrayal of authentic human experience (1947, 36–57). This view continues a development which the new novelists are happy to trace back to Proust, Joyce, Kafka and Faulkner. Formal realism implies that what is new in fiction is determined by what is new in reality – 'Nouveau roman, homme nouveau' as Robbe-Grillet has it in the title of one of his essays (1963, 113–21). This theory, in both its sociological and its phenomenological form, is undeniably attractive, not least because of its ability to account for change in the novel in historical terms. But it has the serious disadvantage that it still implicitly defines the novel as a swamp, an amorphous hotchpotch of techniques determined not by the genre itself, but only by external factors, such as the economic structure of society or cultural agreements about the nature of human experience.

There is a third and more distinctly literary view of the *nouveau roman* which fully endorses its novelty and defines it in terms of its opposition to traditional fiction. Ricardou, for example, sees the *nouveau roman* as an attempt to subvert the conventions which imply that the novel is a copy of reality, in order to demonstrate that the *nouveau roman* is constituted instead primarily by writing itself, which produces rather than copies reality (1971, 9). The interest of a given *nouveau roman* for Ricardou will consist first in the way in which realist conventions are subverted or contested, and secondly, in the structural development of the strictly formal features of the writing. For example, Robbe-Grillet's novel *Le voyeur* is not (says Ricardou) to be read as a depiction of a man who is a voyeur in any psychological sense of the word. Instead the novel is created by

a kind of pun; it was originally entitled *Le voyageur* and it became *Le voyeur*, just as Mathias is transformed from a commercial traveller (*voyageur de commerce*) into a guilty *voyeur*, simply by the omission of the central syllable of the word *voy(ag)eur*, an omission which generates the plot itself, with its crucial silence in the middle concerning Mathias's whereabouts at the time of the murder (1967, 38-41). The *nouveau roman* is therefore defined as an example of the 'practice of writing' (Heath, 1972), an antithesis to the mainstream of realist fiction. It has forebears in aspects of the writing of Flaubert and Proust, more especially in the previously underestimated works of Edgar Allan Poe and Raymond Roussel, and in most exemplary form in Joyce, Artaud, Bataille and Borges. Originally a radical movement on the margins of realist fiction, it has now reached sufficient proportions to supplant it. Like formal realism, this view has the advantage of enabling one to make historically-based distinctions between different kinds of literature (although the distinction between literal and realist is the only criterion it has for doing so). But it categorically rules out any possibility of arriving at a generic definition of fiction, since the concept of writing does away with all distinctions between genres.

All of these theories, realist and anti-representational alike, stress the novelty of the *nouveau roman* at the expense of the novelistic. In this study I hope to give weight to both elements of the term, by recognising from the outset that the very need for a redefinition of the poetics of fiction springs from a crisis in the reading of fiction which can be quite precisely dated in historical terms, and by working towards a theory of fiction which will at the same time extend beyond the works of the particular writers in question. And indeed, these projects are very far from being antithetical, for the crisis in the concept of the novel that began in the 1950s led to an extremely intense and fertile exploration within fiction itself of the nature and limits of its own being as fiction. A high degree of reflexivity can be seen as a major consequence of the crisis in the theory of fiction.

This reflexivity has often been regarded as the special feature

of the *nouveau roman* that marks it off from pre-existing fiction, and, for some, makes it a sterile and limited kind of literature. But reflexivity is not necessarily a sign of imaginative impoverishment. On the contrary. The *nouveau roman*'s overt preoccupation with things novelistic may well constitute its novelty, but it also has an extremely enriching and enhancing effect on the genre as a whole. The elements of fiction that are re-evaluated by the *nouveau roman* affect our reading of those novels that the *nouveau roman* supposedly subverts. The entire genre is reassessed in a perspective that alters the way in which we see even the most familiar examples of it. Plot, character, representation now appear as complex operations that are interesting in their own right in any text. And, furthermore, having been alerted by the *nouveau roman* to the workings of self-representation, we discover reflexive operations in even the most representationally orientated texts. So, an analysis of the specific novelty of the *nouveau roman* will also contribute towards a fuller and richer definition of what we understand by the novelistic.

The question of the practical interpretation of the term *nouveau roman* is a somewhat different one. There must be many novels that can be read as a reflexive response to a critical moment in the history of the genre, but not all of them belong to the group which critics and literary historians have dubbed the *nouveau roman*. It is not my intention here to see how far the label extends and I have chosen as examples writers who have always been happy to accept it.³ Restricting myself to three writers was the result partly of wanting to keep the corpus to manageable proportions and partly of a wish to build up some sense of the specificity of each writer within the general theoretical context, which might have been lost if I had also included works by other equally interesting writers. The reason for choosing Butor, Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute was, to a certain degree, a matter of personal preference, but another important factor determining my choice was the existence of differences between them which would, I hoped, create a broad enough

³For a discussion of the practical definition of the *nouveau roman* see Ricardou, 1973, 5-25.

base to validate the theory. Although the term *nouveau roman* derives from the state of the art in the 1950s, I have concentrated as much on the later novels of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute as on the earlier ones, again in order to promote as wide-ranging an exploration of the issues as possible. As *Degrés* is the last of Butor's writings to be defined as a novel, I have not included any discussion of his work published after 1960.

In organising the book I have begun with the topics which were most vigorously and repeatedly contested on the emergence of the *nouveau roman*, namely character and plot. The first two chapters will demonstrate how the novels explore and redefine these concepts which were once regarded as the linchpins of fiction, and so justify a definition of the *nouveau roman* as new in its apparent rejection of these concepts and novelistic in its reflexive meditation on them. The third chapter will investigate the ways in which the apparently realistic use of certain narrative techniques encourages reflexivity and self-preoccupation in the novel. And the final chapter will attempt to determine the generic features of fiction which make possible both the subversion and the reflexivity which are so often presented as being the defining characteristics of the *nouveau roman*.

At every stage the theory will be read through the fiction, assuming that fiction articulates theory more interestingly and exhaustively than any explicitly theoretical writing; and the fact that Butor, Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute have all written essays on the novel therefore bears only incidentally on this enterprise. It is the novels which produce the theory and not the theory which produces the novels. For, as Robbe-Grillet himself has written, 'A novel which was only an example to illustrate a grammatical rule – even if it is accompanied by its exception – would of course be useless: it would be enough to state the rule' (1963, 12). This strategy should also have the advantage of showing the practical relevance of theory. Theories of literature have often been accused, particularly in recent years, of operating at too great a distance from actual literary works. I hope to make it clear that interaction between literary

theory and text is not only possible but crucial to our reading of literature, for literature both feeds on theory and propagates it. In my use of the texts in question, I have contrived to discuss as many of them as is compatible with the discussion of the relevant aspects of the theory. Because some texts seemed to lend themselves more readily than others to being read around a given theoretical issue, a few have not been dealt with at any length, and others have been discussed more than once, each time in a different context. But although some questions seem more pertinent to some texts than to others, I do not wish to imply that each one invokes only one aspect of theory, or, worse, that if a particular novel has not been discussed at all it has no theoretical significance. In the to-and-fro between text and theory we cannot expect anything to be more than provisional, for it is in this shifting mutual scrutiny that the greatest illumination lies.

1

Unnatural narratives

Last things first

In any discussion of the poetics of the novel it is almost inescapable that one should start with the topic of plot. We class the novel under the generic heading of *narrative* fiction, and it seems likely that what we understand by fiction here will depend on what is meant by narrative. One is perhaps best advised to broach this topic with the caution, if not reluctance, shown by E. M. Forster who describes himself as ‘drooping and regretful’ as he concedes, ‘Yes – oh dear yes – the novel tells a story’ (1949, 27). Forster was not sure that the story was the heart of any novel, and indeed story is not the sole defining feature of the genre. Fairy tales, myths, epics and plays tell stories, as do films, cartoon strips and newspaper reports; we frequently speak of ourselves, of others and of our society in narrative form. But this very pervasiveness of the narrative mode serves to show how powerful a structuring device it is. Stories are the means whereby we combat the contingent and give sense to time, a task which is assigned most particularly to the novel.

Narrative constructs have varying degrees of rigour and they reveal more or less single-mindedness in answering the questions which call narrative of any kind into being, namely, ‘and then?’ and ‘why?’. ‘The king died’ proposes Forster in his discussion of plot as the first term of a narrative sequence which is completed as narrative when it tells what happened next (‘the queen died’), and why (‘of grief’), to give the sequence: ‘The king died and the queen died of grief’ (Forster, 1949, 82–4). Or one may take a more complex version which Forster offers