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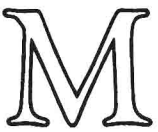

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Sometimes I think; and sometimes I **am.** (Valéry). One can be sitting beside the ligustrum bushes with their snow-white blossoms in early summer, the butterflies folding and unfolding their wings as they cling to the perfumed essence and the bees moaning in the delirium of the sweetness from the blossoms which seems to be overwhelming them as they attach themselves now to one and now to another powdery dot in the cluster of white blossoms surrounded by new glossy leaves; and one can be content with the purity of sensation, leaving the mind to flit unchecked from one thought to another while the body absorbs the idle passions of the fragrant afternoon. One can be subsumed by the light which filters through the green leaves in that contentment with life when memories dissolve and the body is felt to possess that substantiality in which vague, but rich, odours become a solid presence. There is a whirling of colours as if the currents of the perfumed air were each a strip of the blue sky or a red pomegranate flower torn from the branch by a sudden, maddening gust. One sips, like Emily Dickinson, the nectar never brewed, one becomes a debauchee of dew. It is the exhilaration of a subtle and negative sort of awareness: of non-being, or the death of the self, when life is experienced only as a breath of perfumed air. One does not need to sniff cocaine to have hallucinations of rainbows and to see the swift flight of the hummingbird as

a stillness of luminous green wings. In the dissolution of memories, in the novel belief that the self is momentarily freed from the afflictions of knowledge, becoming, during the brief experiencing of that ecstasy, the Other, one is filled then by an enchanting sense of a different being, and, in that giddy moment of beautiful confusions when one is dispossessed of the self, one asserts **I am.** No thought of contradiction attends such a bold affirmation. *And I begin again to ask myself what it could have been, this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof of its existence, but only the sense that it was a happy, that it was a real state in whose presence other states of consciousness melted and vanished.* (Proust). But logical coherence forces attention to itself; the earlier consciousness, with its perception of things immediately at hand, returns. The mind will not be succoured by images of the forest or be thrilled by evocations of the ocean breaking on a tropical beach without being satisfied about the meaning of things. *Man's world is the world of meaning. It tolerates ambiguity, contradiction, madness, or confusion, but not lack of meaning. The very silence is populated by signs.* (Octavio Paz). The mind has a quarrel with reality, having for generations rejected definitions of it while seeking, with the craving of an addict, one more new interpretation. It will take up this thing or that, even the body of which it is both the sitting tenant and the rent collector, and be filled with despair at the incomprehensibility of existence. *I think; here I lie under a haystack. . . . The tiny space I occupy is so infinitely small in comparison with the rest of space, in which I am not, and which has nothing to do with me; and the period of time in which it is my lot to live is so petty beside the eternity in which I have not been, and shall not be. . . . And in this atom, this mathematical point, the blood circulates, the brain works and wants something. . . . Isn't it hideous? Isn't it petty?* (Turgenev). These whirling clusters of words, these images which enter the mind and become fragmented—the butterflies folding and unfolding their wings—all from fictions, and the black beady eye of the

bee, for a fraction of a second the only visible phenomenon in my universe, receding at great velocity like a planet in space—but it has only moved to a farther branch. Groups of words, related to no immediate sensation, enlightening no personal experience, come and go like fireflies which create an extraordinary brightness for a moment and then leave the night darker. Amazing, the language that constructs itself, then disintegrates, and again assembles in a slightly altered formation, as if the words were recalcitrant soldiers brought to group themselves in a column and could not be restrained from filling the air with a bawdy song. Do the peasants, working the fields within sight of Uxmal or Palenque, understand any less, or more, of the Mayans than the archaeologists from Europe or North America whose convictions carry a scientific aura? The arbitrariness of meaning, the foolishness of ideas! *The blind cells of hearing, in their obscure consciousness, must of necessity be unaware of the existence of the visible world, and if you were to speak to them of it, they would doubtless consider it an arbitrary creation of the deaf cells of sight, while the latter in their turn would consider the audible world created by the hearing cells a complete illusion.* (Unamuno). When no group of words releases that meaning which would bring the solace of understanding, one then concludes that there is Nothing, for one will not be content with intermediate states, with provisional truths, just as a child who has been denied the orange it has demanded then refuses to eat any other fruit. Each thought that presents itself to the mind, coming with a brilliant promise, seems surrounded by a ring of bright moons of conviction, but when its course is exhausted the darkness of Nothing becomes even more intense. *The mysteries of a universe made of drops of fire and clods of mud do not concern us in the least. The fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy.* (Conrad). Such nihilism, too, is unbearable, and one finds it the most objectionable

when it appears to be the most convincing. The idea of existence can appear so appalling that it can be accepted only by those with a strong religious faith, who must find a Conrad or a Beckett an 'inhuman thinker'. *If consciousness is no more—as some inhuman thinker said—than a flash of lightning between two eternities of darkness, then there is nothing more execrable than existence.* (Unamuno). And, in a milder language, Tolstoy: *And if you really think that death is after all the end of everything, then there's nothing worse than life either.* But for Conrad, *Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die;*. Of the many uses of words the most obsessive one concerns the invention of reality which must daily be shaped somehow not only in our normal dealings with our families and colleagues at work to whom we must make the effort not to appear to be lunatics but also in the abstract world of our own inner silence which has to be filled with those words which soothe, clarify, bring meaning. But we've been made fools by the language we've invented by imposing upon it the burden of meaning and by charging it that it contain a capacity for truth. But it is only *as though one were anxious about the cut of one's clothes in a community of blind men. . . . Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit.* (Conrad). The compulsion to invent a believable reality remains strong, however; hence, the enormous universal consumption of fiction. One would think that an age so conscious of the pressures of time would have no time for novels; far from it: more novels (to say nothing of the fictions available on television) are consumed now than ever before, and what is more, some of the popular novels that become world-wide best-sellers are longer than *War and Peace*! Look about you the next time you are in a packed jumbo jet; even when a movie is on there will be several people reading a fat paperback. It is not simply the inane desire to escape from oneself but a craving, perhaps, to see the world created anew: we lend

credence to one more fiction to see if it will not create that impression of reality which will convince us of its truth. *And so it goes on, from story to story, from fiction to fiction in an unceasing endeavour to express something of the essence of life.* (Conrad). Even when it comes to abhor the notion of existence, the meaninglessness of which so appals it, for it has seen Nothing, the mind will not cease from inventing another, and then another, language to see whether a significant vision has not eluded it; it will continue to create fictions although it has concluded that all former combinations of signs and symbols have explained nothing. As in Beckett—*my life a voice without quaqua on all sides words scraps then nothing then again more words more scraps the same ill-spoken ill-heard then nothing vast stretch of time then in me in the vault bone-white if there were a light bits and scraps ten seconds fifteen seconds ill-heard ill-murmured ill-heard ill-recorded my whole life a gibberish garbled six-fold*—the mutterings of an existence which will never lose a knowledge of its own being while never gaining knowledge of anything else. In Beckett's fictions, the human body is first grotesque, then crippled and finally only an idea in the mind of the speaker as we follow the existence of Murphy and Watt, Molloy, Malone and the Unnamable. But the mind remains a ceaseless babbler, recalling images of a dead past which it does not always believe in and giving a farcical and an obscene utterance to philosophical thought. In Dostoevsky's St Petersburg and Patrick White's Australia, the hero finds himself in a desert where he must confront the failure of the body which he has himself unconsciously tried to annihilate. But Raskolnikov's quest for salvation drowns in the sentimentality of a contrived ending after much rain has indeed fallen over St Petersburg, and Voss, whose realistically described journey across the desert is a solemn and rather portentous version of Molloy's comical progress through the bog and the heather, must die without seeing his vision: the city streets will again be parched and dusty, the desert will remain a vast, mean-

ingless tract of sand. The possessed mind, like Voss's, is perhaps only suffering from an organic disorder: a brain fever. In Conrad's Far East or in his Africa, the mind searches for a bearable reality or an explanation of it. There is none. Virginia Woolf's characters have intimations of words which just fail to come to their lips. There is the anguish of time passing; and however brilliant the sunset, it is merely the end of another day that brought no knowledge; some whisper a formula of prayers, hoping for the body's continued health and expressing pious attachments to family, country and God, while others, whose despair with existence has long abandoned such convictions, mutter with Beckett's character: *and all this business of above yes light yes skies yes a little blue yes a little white yes the earth turning yes bright and less bright yes little scenes yes all balls yes the women yes the dog yes the prayers yes the homes yes all balls yes*—for the world of the family, the dog and the communal faith is not the point: it might be solid enough, and real too, but what is this other world in which I exist? The universe, which has its modern fictions in the writings of Einstein and Heisenberg, could well be a dream in the mind of a frail, blind old writer, Borges. And space as described by the novelist could belong to a physicist's perception—as in Beckett: *Molloy, your region is vast, you have never left it and never shall. And wheresoever you wander, within its distant limits, things will always be the same, precisely. . . . But now I do not wander any more, anywhere any more, and indeed I scarcely stir at all, and yet nothing is changed.* Or Conrad's *vast and uncertain expanse, as of a crepuscular horizon on a plain at dawn—or was it, perchance at the coming of the night?* One can go back to Balzac and find in him the Beckettian perception: *Man is a clown walking the tight-rope over the void.* One can be confined in a nutshell, like Hamlet, and be king of infinite space, but one's condition is scarcely different from Molloy's lying helplessly in bed. Nothing is changed, except this changing body—*this cataclysm of being* (Paz)—with its loquacious mind endlessly pursuing ab-

stractions to allay the anguish of existence. Reality remains a presumption, a story of the world that is now convincing and now filled with the confusions of a dream imagery, and every attempt to be clear to oneself about the nature of reality ends in the elaboration of another fiction. The earth is flat and is the centre of the universe. The earth is a sphere in some undetermined spot in a universe. The earth is a speck of mucus escaped from the nose of a god who has sneezed. We inhabit one world, or another. Or another. *Life is full of alternatives but no choice*, says Patrick White. The alternatives are fascinating because they are all fictions, each one carrying the potential of that surprise which will be the meaning we need. They are stories in which we want to know what's going to happen next and in which we long for a surprise ending while remaining in terror of the nature of the surprise; or the fictions are an absence of stories made up of a deliberately ungrammatical utterance, an anti-language, to see what revelation might be had by distortion; or they are the dreams of a mind which has never asserted—because no one has ever asked it—that it has ever been awake. Borges suggests it in his *Ficciones*: all systems of knowledge are a fiction; or that each fiction is a system of knowledge. Philosophy is a fantastic form of literature and literature a fantastic form of philosophy. We live out myths and myths are created by our lives; we remember stories and we are the characters in the stories that others tell. Even one's own life with its accumulation of memories—those unscrupulous advocates of the self—becomes a fiction: Borges is obliged to live with 'Borges' and when writing a piece entitled 'Borges and Myself' must necessarily end with the words, *Which of us is writing this page I don't know.* And Unamuno, who found the concept of existence unthinkable without a faith which offered a life everlasting, could not help concluding: *The most liberating effect of art is that it makes one doubt of one's own existence.* The words come and go; the butterflies fold and unfold their wings. Entire fictions

spring up their images, and the mind staring emptily at the white flowers on the ligustrum bushes and conscious that the sky has suddenly darkened in the west and that there will soon be a burst of rain, finds itself staring now at a farm in Russia where Levin is mowing the grass and now at Crusoe on his island in the mouth of the Orinoco. Words come. *And words vanish, and nothing remains, do you understand? Absolutely nothing, oh foolish man! Nothing. A moment, a wink of the eye and nothing remains—only a drop of mud, cold mud, dead mud launched in black space, turning around an extinguished sun. Nothing. Neither thought nor sound nor soul. Nothing.* Conrad's words, written in a letter in 1898, remind one of Beckett's in *How It Is*, first published in 1961, where too there is mud and black space and Nothing and where, as here, *alone in the mud yes the dark yes sure yes panting yes someone hears me no one hears me* . . . with the rain nearer now . . . the self sinking in the darkness. *And when my own face reappears, there is nobody there. I too have left myself.* (Paz). And entered . . . *the long course of my waking dream.* (Proust).

Early in the history of the English novel, as one sees it with Daniel Defoe, the novelist creates a fiction about himself pretending that he is not inventing a reality but merely editing the recorded facts of a true reality. 'The editor believes the thing to be a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it,' says Defoe in his Preface to *Robinson Crusoe*. It is an attempt to eliminate the idea of appearances and thereby to create a greater conviction with which to anticipate the reader's possible disbelief in the events to come: in announcing that he is rejecting 'fiction' for 'a just history of fact' while *knowing* full well that he is doing no such thing, the novelist is informing the reader that fact itself cannot be trusted to contain truth, especially as the novelist knows that the reader has seen him wink and has not at all been taken in

by his declaration of being a mere historian. Fiction is not being identified as fact; fact is being proclaimed a fiction. The twentieth-century novelist—following Flaubert's dictum 'No lyricism, no comments, the author's personality absent'—denies himself the role even of an editor, preferring to give his fiction the same objective reality which any other fact of the universe might be deemed to possess. The novelist has become a medium through whom a text comes into existence and he will be the last person to assert that the *text* is anything but groups of sentences generating a meaning which is engendered only by the premises contained within the text, and it will be of no consequence to him if someone were to label the work *a novel*. While in Defoe the assumption is that the images being recorded—Crusoe's impressions of Africa (where tigers are to be seen!), for example—are a true and accurate record of what his hero has witnessed of the world, the twentieth-century writer who actually travels and sees the world creates fictions which have no relationship to what he has witnessed, for his fictions are constructs entirely of his imagination—as with Raymond Roussell who travelled around the world and although he wrote a novel entitled *Impressions of Africa*, declared in an autobiographical statement that 'from all these travels I never took anything for my books.' (Of course, there are modern novelists, like Hemingway and Graham Greene, who travel in search of subject matter or for an exotic setting but they are the makers of consumer products and are of no enduring value to the history of the human imagination).

But even in Defoe the objective reality presumed to be true is only an invention: Crusoe's island exists only in Defoe's mind and not in the mouth of the Orinoco. A writer needs to fulfil the pattern suggested by his imagination and not to complete a record of his character's existence. To all intents and purposes, *Robinson Crusoe* ends when Crusoe leaves the island; the happy ending in

sight, the passage back to England does not need to be described, and Defoe does not do so; the words 'after a long voyage, I arrived in England' are enough. But the novel does not end there. Defoe obliges Crusoe to go to Lisbon on business and then invents a new situation for him to suffer; he takes Crusoe on a *land* journey from Lisbon for no other reason than an artistic one. Taking Crusoe and his party to the Pyrenees in winter, he puts them in a landscape of snow which is a representation, on solid ground, of the idea of the ocean, and there he surrounds them with hundreds of ravenous wolves whose 'growling kind of noise' and howling and yelling are not too subtle a representation of a howling gale upon the ocean. Indeed, when Crusoe, seeing 'some large timber trees, which had been cut down the summer before', draws his 'little troop in among those trees', the image is that of men crouching in a boat. Waves of wolves attack them and as water breaks over the bulwarks, so some of the wolves dash up over the barrier. The wolves 'came on like devils, those behind pushing on those before.'

The story does not need this additional example of the ordeals human beings have to suffer, but the writer's imagination is compelled to elaborate a metaphor in which the imagery is carefully ordered to hint that the previously described hazards on the ocean have also been a metaphor, thus transforming the history into a fiction. Truth is to be perceived not by looking at the world but by looking at the way in which images have been structured to complete the internal, imaginative order of the work.

Sometimes the images vividly present in our mind are not the representations of a world being perceived but are only a recurring event in the mind, being provoked by some association, which must play out a complete body of imagery which has accumulated from past perceptions and from past fantasies; an entire narrative plays itself out in a moment, the successive images not always being related causally. A man closing a door sees human figures

in the grain of the wood and in the moment it takes him to complete the action of closing the door his imagination constructs the lives of the human figures, placing them in a city, giving them actions to perform and observing that those actions contain gestures and deeds which are an unconscious manifestation of deep-rooted racial memories. Thus a novel called *Project for a Revolution in New York* by Alain Robbe-Grillet gets written. 'I am closing the door behind me, a heavy wooden door . . .' he writes on the first page, '. . . in which I have discerned human figures for a long time'. And 181 pages later, in the last paragraph of the novel, he writes, '. . . and now I am closing the door behind me'.

The images which take several hours to read, and which to some readers are bewilderingly confusing, happen in the mind of the narrator in a passing moment. Reality is suggested by the habit of the mind to transform what one sees to that which it is not; we do not perceive a world of objects so clearly as the fictions generated in our minds by the same objects.

Cf. Valéry: 'We have the means of grasping what does not exist and of not seeing what hits us in the eye.' Valéry also wrote: 'All that our eyes really see is a question of chance.'

The 'revolution' in Robbe-Grillet's novel does not concern itself with political ideology. At first glance, the title *Project for a Revolution in New York* strikes one as a hoax, as if it had been calculated to catch the attention of a larger American audience than the author had previously enjoyed. Though apparently misleading, the title, however, is precise: the novel is a *project* and if the audience (and the publishers in New York!) were to understand it there would indeed be a revolution in New York, that city which has become the dictator of what cultural products the world may consume. For Robbe-Grillet, as well as every living novelist who cherishes his art, knows that the publishing industry in western Europe (and also in South

America, the new big market for consumer goods) has become a sycophantic slave of the New York publishers and that what New York most prizes is an abomination to a writer who takes the life of letters seriously; if only the *project* were to succeed, the New York publishers would at last be enlightened and would know what novels to promote: Robbe-Grillet's and anyone else's who produced a *new* novel! And the project could succeed if only the subtle design of *Project for a Revolution in New York* could be understood!

The first paragraph of the novel:

> The first scene goes very fast. Evidently it has already been rehearsed several times: everyone knows his part by heart. Words and gestures follow each other in a relaxed, continuous manner, the links as imperceptible as the necessary elements of some properly lubricated machinery.

Scene, actors, words, gestures, imperceptible links. As in so much of Robbe-Grillet's work, one is again being reminded of a cinematic technique; but the paragraph itself is the first scene of a novel and is a statement of how first scenes of novels do get written. The author is not telling a story; he is creating a novel and in the process is obliged to show how the novel creates itself in the mind of the novelist. Suddenly something is there; not very clear in its outline at first: people, words, gestures, all yet to be defined; an intimation of images in the novelist's mind. This is followed by a pause when the novelist is groping to see what must come next. Thus, Robbe-Grillet's second paragraph:

> Then there is a gap, a blank space, a pause of indeterminate length during which nothing happens, not even the anticipation of what will come next.

And that is precisely the novelist's situation: an image has come from nowhere, compelling the novelist to record it, and then left him wondering what should come next. It is not reality that he has to create, but those other images, those groups of sentences, which would most appropriately follow the first, given image. He is being driven less by what he knows of the real world and his own experience in it and more by what he knows of other fictions, including the ones he himself might already have created: their formal procedures, their style. It is after the pause suggested by the second paragraph that the writer withdraws, replacing himself with a narrator, an *I*:

> And suddenly the action resumes, without warning, and the same scene occurs again . . . But which scene? I am closing the door behind me, a heavy wooden door with a tiny narrow oblong window near the top.

The opening of the novel, then, is a search for a point of departure which will take the novelist to a larger discovery—a discovery of those words with their clusters of images whose source is in memory, words which are needed to complete that form (*form*, not action) which, at the outset, is only a vague shape, and which, too, needs to be discovered by pausing again and again to see what should come next. Cf. Paz: 'Content stems from form, and not vice versa. Every form produces its own idea, its own vision of the world. Form has meaning; and, what is more, in the realm of art only form possesses meaning.'

And what comes next in *Project for a Revolution in New York* is a mosaic of images, a collage of visual impressions. Since written sentences can only work in a succession of horizontal lines while what is seen or experienced or contained by a consciousness at any given moment is a multiplicity of thoughts, images and sensations, therefore a narrative is obliged to produce a highly edited version of reality. The modern novelist has broken down that

limitation by creating an artful confusion on the page; images are repeated with slight variations, what begins by appearing to be a description of a person ends up by being a poster in the subway, a tribal ritual turns out to be a documentary film on television. It might appear a frivolous enterprise unless the reader comprehends that the fragments of the mosaic, being elements of a perception and the data of sense impressions, reveal the experience of a particular consciousness, and that the general form of the confusion in the narrative is a truer expression of that experience than could be suggested by a clearly written traditional story. We are no longer looking at Julien Sorel or Emma Bovary or even Leopold Bloom; we are looking at *a novel*. The reader is not examining the states of mind of characters but is obliged to enter the consciousness of the writer himself, and that not in order to engage in some such portentous activity as understanding the human condition or the plight of the coal miners in Poland or West Virginia but to engage in an abstract perception of reality. Twentieth century painting has progressed towards the elimination of subject matter, and novelists have attempted a similar rejection of solid themes. And just as I, the reader, enter the consciousness of Robbe-Grillet, the novelist, similarly the critic, another *I* whose consciousness contains many previously assimilated texts, fragmentary images from several of which simultaneously come to mind in a moment together with some irrepressible bit of memory or personal association and the distractions present in the immediate field of perception, the critic, too, expresses his ideas in the form of a revelation of the imagery in *his* consciousness.

There is a description in *Project for a Revolution in New York* of an underground area devoted to amusements:

> slot machines whose enigmatic apertures, which respectively devour and spit forth change, are embellished so as to make more obvious their resemblance to