# The French new novel

## Claude Simon, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Sturrock, John.

JOHN STURROCK

# THE FRENCH NEW NOVEL

Claude Simon, Michel Butor
Alain Robbe-Grillet

LONDON
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK TORONTO
1969

*Oxford University Press, Ely House, London W.1*

GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
CAPE TOWN SALISBURY IBADAN NAIROBI LUSAKA ADDIS ABABA
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI LAHORE DACCA
KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE HONG KONG TOKYO



*Printed in Great Britain*

*For*
*Jenny and Oliver*

# CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

*'However, many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things . . .'*

SWIFT. A Voyage to Laputa.

DOES the term *nouveau roman* actually define a homogeneous literary movement or not? A number of critics both inside and outside France have accepted that it does, that there is a sufficient coherency of principle among the writers so labelled to justify their being herded together into a new orthodoxy. More recently, however, there has been considerable dissent from this view, a dissent often most forcefully expressed by the writers of the New Novel themselves. They have protested that their so-called 'movement', like all such literary groupings, was an invention partly of harrassed critics, seeking to impose order in the chaos of contemporary writing or to dismiss the divergent trends of *avant-garde* writing conveniently as a single entity, and partly of their less scrupulous followers, the literary publicists: reviewers, journalists, and other commentators, who certainly enjoy more outlets in France for their ideological or hierarchical assessments of the current artistic scene than they do in any other country. The position of those who protest in the name of a critical nominalism that they should not be grouped together is to some extent justified by the fact that most of those who used the collective appellation, *nouveau roman*, were hostile to what they took to be the intentions of these writers. The protests have been an attempt to get a fair hearing. It is noticeable, however, that responsible critics who show a keen and sympathetic understanding of the practices of the New Novelists, have not abandoned the term.

It is naturally hard to be quite sure when this term was first used, or by whom. What really matters is when it first imposed itself and became a useful term of reference for a certain type of

writing. This was certainly some years after the first published novels of the writers now thought of as the high priests of the movement (if it proves to be one). Nathalie Sarraute, for instance, published her first novel shortly before the war, in 1939; Claude Simon wrote his, *Le Tricheur*, in 1941, even though it was not published until after the war; Robbe-Grillet published *Les Gommes* in 1953; and Michel Butor *Passage de Milan* in 1954. Yet the first recorded public appearance of the words *nouveau roman* seems to have been delayed until July 1958, when the *personnaliste* review, *Esprit*, produced a special number devoted to the 'nouveau roman'; these quotation marks were no doubt intended as the badge of an infant and contestable categorization, but the more cautious commentators are still prone to use them. *Esprit*'s special number was produced, as is explained in an editorial preface, in answer to a number of requests from participants to a congress of intellectuals held the previous year. The review seemed anxious to show that it, at least, was not creating a literary movement out of nothing, but attempting to contribute to a debate that was already under way.

To my mind it is not a very sensible argument to claim that, because the term *nouveau roman* post-dates the appearance of the first novels supposed to have inaugurated the new genre by four or five years, the idea of a movement is a sham. I see no reason at all why the birth and the christening should have been simultaneous. The New Novelists have never, unlike some previous groups of writers in France, issued joint proclamations of intent. Their collectivity must be defined by a convergence of interest and of aesthetic conviction.

In their time they have had to endure other group-names, as well as New Novelists. They were once held to constitute an *école du regard*, for example, because of what many people took to be an excessive preoccupation in their novels with brute objectivity. This was a much more flattering and accurate title than those who coined it can have appreciated, as I shall hope to prove in this book. Another even more desperate name found for them was *école de Minuit*, so attributed because the *avant-garde* publisher, Jérôme Lindon of the Éditions de Minuit, seemed to have become the impresario of all progressive novelists. Already the publisher



of Samuel Beckett, Nathalie Sarraute, and Robert Pinget, he added to his list Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Claude Simon, and, for the space of a single novel, Marguerite Duras. This title was eccentric enough for a special number of *Yale French Studies* devoted to the New Novel in France to appear under its English translation 'Midnight Novelists'.

But these were the heady days of a nascent revolution, since when it has become more fashionable to concentrate on what divides the novelists who had previously been grouped together. Some of the more acute and structurally-minded French critics, notably Roland Barthes (often accused of promoting over-portentously ideas too intricate and austere to have entered the head of the iconoclastic Robbe-Grillet whom he was supposedly elucidating) had been doing this almost from the start, by showing certain radical divergences in purpose and seriousness between two of the writers studied in this book, Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet. This no doubt makes it seem as if my own purpose is reactionary, since, somewhat against the current fashion, I insist on looking for fundamental similarities in the concerns of the *nouveau roman*. But any tendency to declare these writers free from all contagion from each other's practices is as inaccurate as the opposite tendency, and I am not siding blindly with those who have been using the term *nouveau roman* eagerly all along. Indeed, it is doubtful whether many of them troubled to uncover or to define the elements in the novels in question which did in fact indicate an identity of purpose or technique.

It is perfectly understandable that the New Novelists themselves should have been outraged by the glib way in which their differences had been obscured. Some critics and reviewers used, and still do use, the term *nouveau romancier* as a conclusive value-judgement on a writer's work, implying that it does not need further particularization. It is, for example, only necessary for a novelist to spend too long (as it is thought) on the description of an apparently trivial object to be dismissed as a sterile follower of Robbe-Grillet. Such hasty judgements are generally both unfair and superficial.

In what I have myself written about three New Novelists, Claude Simon, Michel Butor, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, I do not

feel that I have neglected or diminished the divergent tendencies or convictions which individuate their novels. On the other hand, I have tried to uncover in their methods of composition sufficient evidence that they share a certain conception of the novel, and that they can be studied together in a single book without incongruity.

These three novelists were chosen because, first, they exemplify with a greater or lesser degree of clarity a central proposition about the *nouveau roman*: that these novels must *never* be read as exercises in naïve realism or naturalism, but as studied dramatizations of the creative process itself. The second reason for choosing them was that, together with Nathalie Sarraute, they have emerged by common consent as the most prestigious figures of the New Novel. Some of the lesser writers who might have been included here, and whose novels are certainly very rigorous exercises in the creative discipline I shall hope to define—such as Claude Ollier or Jean Ricardou—have been left out because they are not well known outside France and have not been widely translated. The omission of Nathalie Sarraute is harder to justify, but her novels are, in their concern with the infra-structures of consciousness and with the pre-verbal gyrations of the psychic life, structurally less apt for the sort of textual demonstrations I shall rely on. Moreover, the inclusion of another study of an individual writer, of the same length as those already included, would add an unwelcome weight. The aim of these studies is to prove convergence as well as divergence; the more convergence that is proved the greater the danger of sterile iteration.

It would be absurd to claim that the New Novel was launched on the day on which Robbe-Grillet published *Les Gommes* in 1953. Literary revolutions do not explode with such drama, they are more in the nature of reorientations, exploiting certain aspects of the literary past that may not have attracted much attention hitherto, but which the new movement tries to show to have been the true indicators of the future. As I have said, the property common to all *nouveaux romans* is that they embody the creative activity of the novelist—they display the novelist at work. This in itself is nothing new; *A la recherche du temps perdu* draws attention to its own methods of composition, so does Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. The New Novel, indeed, belongs to that twentieth-century tradition to which so many of the more significant novelists can be closely or loosely related—the tradition which insists that the novelist explain or reveal his principle of organization in the text itself.



The brashest and least compromising polemicist of the New Novel has been Robbe-Grillet, though his literary proclamations seem to have ended with his entry into the cinema as the director of his own screen-plays. But Robbe-Grillet has always claimed that he was not overturning the past, but extending it in the only possible direction. His tradition of the novel extends back through Samuel Beckett, Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce, Proust, Roussel, and Flaubert, whom he values for their successive technical contributions to the form. Yet there is every justification for this aesthetic historicism, even if it is a mode of synoptic literary criticism not greatly favoured in this country. Anyone who has read Erich Auerbach's remarkable series of *explications de texte* in *Mimesis* will be reluctant to admit that aesthetic forms do not evolve consciously, or that their true history cannot be written. Auerbach's subtitle for that book, 'The Representation of reality in Western Literature', indicates how closely aesthetic forms are connected with new ideas in philosophy, cosmology, psychology, and so on. In the same way, Marxist critics, and notably Georg Lukács, have never ceased to explore the links between forms of representation and the economic substructures of the societies that favour them. The New Novel belongs with that way of thinking which sees the notion that there exist absolute forms of representation as an absurdity, and insists that the novelist should question all attempts to pretend that it is not.

One of the most frequent and helpful of all the terms that have been used to classify the sort of novels we are concerned with, therefore, is that of 'anti-novel'. The known history of this term goes back a very long way. In France, for instance, it was in 1633 that Charles Sorel published a book called *L'Anti-roman*, which was in fact a re-edition of a book he had published six years before under the title *Le Berger extravagant*. Sorel's intentions were to mock the conventional pastoral modes of contemporary fiction by grossly exaggerating them—to write a novel as an act of literary

criticism. This significant publication has not escaped the notice of one particularly acute and archaeologically-minded modern French critic, Jean-Pierre Faye.[1] Quite properly, Faye relates the critical and didactic intentions of Sorel to a novel published earlier in his century which still remains the greatest of all anti-novels, *Don Quixote*. Cervantes's novel mocks the conventions of the romances of chivalry not by exaggeration but by deformation; they are made to seem ridiculous by being overlaid on the events and characters of contemporary reality. They are not the conventions appropriate to a contemporary citizen of Spain; indeed the man who accepts them, Don Quixote, is a victim of alienation or madness: his environment has become a fatality which he finds himself powerless to change in accordance with his wishes. The attitude of Cervantes to the novelistic conventions he was assaulting is precisely that of the New Novelists to the conventions that they would abolish: these conventions are unwholesome because they perpetuate outmoded philosophical and thus, Marxists would add, economic systems.

To some extent all considerable novelists of the past have been anti-novelists, since they must all have found something unsatisfactory about the formal conventions which they inherited or which they saw being seriously misapplied by their contemporaries, and have been determined to give new life to the novel as a tradition by restoring its vital ties with reality. Their intentions may have been largely burlesque, as in the case of Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, conceived as a parody of Richardson; more severely moral, as with Jane Austen and her notorious distaste for the more preposterous fictions of her time; or altogether ambivalent, as with Flaubert, whose Emma Bovary is destroyed by the insidious myths imprinted in her mind by a diet of reading which might have been that of any young French Romantic of the nineteenth century.

If the term 'anti-novel' had been used more generously since it appeared in the seventeenth century, then it might have lost the aggressive implications which it has today and the aesthetic philosophy to which it alludes might have appeared less wither-

1 See his essay, 'Surprise pour l'anti-room' in *Le Récit hunique* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1967).



ingly negative. But the explicit category of 'anti-novel' seems not to have been resurrected until soon after the Second World War by Jean-Paul Sartre, in the Preface which he wrote for Nathalie Sarraute's *Portrait d'un inconnu* in 1947. In this Preface, Sartre, after what now seems the mild eccentricity of classing Evelyn Waugh among the anti-novelists (and the startling prescience of adding to Waugh's the name of Nabokov), defines the anti-novel as an attempt, just like that of Sorel, to undermine the accepted forms of the novel from within:

> Il s'agit de contester le roman par lui-même, de le détruire sous nos yeux dans le temps qu'on semble l'édifier, d'écrire le roman d'un roman qui ne se fait pas, de créer une fiction qui soit aux grandes œuvres composées de Dostoëvsky ou de Meredith ce qu'était aux tableaux de Rembrandt et de Rubens cette toile de Miró, intitulée 'Assassinat de la peinture'. Ces œuvres étranges et difficilement classifiables ne témoignent pas de la faiblesse du genre romanesque, elles marquent seulement que nous vivons à une époque de réflexion et que le roman est en train de réfléchir sur lui-même.[2]

The final words of this quotation are a particularly valuable definition of that much more widespread movement in the western arts of which the New Novel is demonstrably a part. This movement, in music and painting especially, is one that has shown a gathering obsession with technique, which is why it has always been accused of aridity, sterility, and obscurity, of producing work that can only be appreciated by other artists. Quite so: it also follows that if the non-artist feels the urge to appreciate such work then he must struggle to learn the trade of the artist and turn himself into something more than a passive and opinionated consumer. It seems to me that with the New Novel writing has begun to measure itself against music and the plastic arts, where it has

2 It is a question of challenging the novel through itself, of destroying it in front of us at the same time as seeming to be building it, of writing the novel of a novel which cannot be written, of creating a fiction which is to the great composed works of Dostoevsky or Meredith what Miró's canvas entitled 'The murder of painting' was to the pictures of Rembrandt and Rubens. These strange, difficult to classify works are not evidence of the weakness of the novel form, they simply indicate that we are living in an age of reflection and that the novel is engaged in reflecting on itself.

been understood for many years that a work of art may be shown to be a process as well as a product. Hegel can be quoted in support of the view that this represents a gain in vitality: 'The work [of art] is, therefore, not by itself really an animated thing; it is a whole only when its process of coming to be is taken along with it'.

It is unfortunate that the concept of an 'anti-novel' should appear to be such a negative and destructive one, for this has led to a quite misleading emphasis being put on certain antithetical aspects of writers like Robbe-Grillet, and a consequent neglect of more positive aspects. All revolutions or revaluations *can* be interpreted, though not objectively, as negative, for the good reason that the form which revolt takes is determined by the form of what it sets out to replace. But the negative, as all faithful students of Hegel will remember, is not less than the positive but more, it is a transcendence of the determinate content and tends towards a new and richer synthesis.

The writers of the New Novel know very well, therefore, that the old certainties and contentions which they have set out to challenge will be present in the minds of those who read them. It is against these conventions, certain reflections of which are preserved in the text of the *nouveaux romans* themselves, that they expect their books to be read. Robbe-Grillet has announced that he *wants* his readers to feel disappointed, and that if they do feel disappointed then he knows he has succeeded. But a feeling of deprivation, which is an essential part of the purpose of the New Novel, certainly does not exhaust this purpose.

A negative definition of the New Novel, the one which has been so often made, is justified only as a moment in a wider and more positive definition. Every refusal to pursue a certain course is also a proposal to follow another course. The considerable hostility and ill-informed derision which the New Novel has sometimes aroused in France and elsewhere is a predictable response to its negative ambitions. The loudest opposition has been expressed in terms which we, in England, should be able to understand more readily than most, since they are robust and sceptical, rather than analytical. Hostile critics have been furious at being deprived of 'plot' and 'characters'. Sometimes it has seemed that the novels



they are complaining of contain nothing at all, no events and no human beings. Of course they contain both, all that has changed is their presentation; Robbe-Grillet has declared that if he finds it impossible to 'tell a story' he is stressing the word tell and not story. The 'plot' is no longer so confident or coherent; things happen, but the relation between them is seen to be problematical, a fiction. 'Characters' appear but they too are problematical, they are exposed for what characters in novels have always been, projections of the novelist's own intimate concerns. What the New Novel is depriving its readers of are the consolations of a mechanistic sequence of events, with its confident marriage of causes with effects, and of an essentialist psychology which lends a spurious coherence to the activity of unknowable other minds.

It is important to realize that the New Novel is not (or need not be) in the least bit negative in its attitudes towards life or reality — no-one could be more glowingly optimistic at times than Michel Butor—but only in its attitudes towards certain literary conventions. Critics have before now implied that Robbe-Grillet's admittedly aggressive modernism is seeking to destroy the literary monuments of the past. This is not the case at all. In its dealings with this past it seems to me that the New Novel is activated by a much more refined and profitable ambition, which is to deny the timelessness of these monuments, to prevent them, that is, from being uprooted from the age that produced them in the interests of a pious and misguided belief that art is eternal even if man is not.

Robbe-Grillet has never once said that the conventions of the traditional novel were not valid for their own time, only that they are no longer valid for ours. Indeed, it is just because they *were* valid for their own time that it has become imperative to replace them. Many of the more significant novelists of the twentieth century have already done so, of course, yet their lessons have not been generally absorbed. One of the aims of the New Novel might therefore be said to be the vulgarization of the innovations of certain mandarin and lonely predecessors.

The novels of Balzac or Stendhal were, according to Robbe-Grillet, the entirely logical products of an age when 'tout visait à

imposer l'image d'un univers stable, cohérent, continu, univoque, entièrement déchiffrable'.[3] But to those people who demand that today's novelists should model themselves formally on the nineteenth-century masters, he says: 'Pour écrire comme Stendhal il faudrait d'abord écrire en 1830.'[4] Robbe-Grillet does not claim or show himself to be a great reader of other men's work, and it is perhaps a pity that he should have selected for his demonstration Stendhal, a novelist so little of his own age as to be led to declare 'Je serai lu vers 1925'; yet this supports rather than invalidates Robbe-Grillet's argument, since Stendhal was looking forward to an age that would appreciate the conventions of his own fiction even if the present one did not. Moreover, the most famous of all passages in Stendhal's novels, the description of Fabrice's experiences at the Battle of Waterloo in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, is surely a brief anti-novel in its own right, directed at contrasting prevalent literary conventions of military glory and heroism with the reality.

The *nouveau roman* is thus in revolt only against literary habit, against the formal stereotypes which we accept because we suppose them wrongly to be absolute or essential in the philosophical sense, rather than relative or existential. The novel is in need of redefinition, and the responsibility of the novelist is now to show what a fiction consists in, and, by extension, what the role of the imagination is in our daily lives.

Yet it is inevitable that such an attack on the conventions of the novel should be interpreted as an attack on reality itself. An earlier writer of this century who did much to modify the hitherto stable forms of fiction and also suffered for it in misunderstanding and outright hostility, was Proust, who predicted the reception his own great novel would get in the text itself: 'D'ailleurs toute nouveauté ayant pour condition l'élimination préalable du poncif auquel nous étions habitués et qui nous semblait la réalité même, toute conversation neuve, aussi bien que toute peinture,

[3] everything aimed at imposing the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, wholly decipherable universe (*Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 31).

[4] In order to write like Stendhal you would first of all have to have written in 1830 (ibid., p. 9).



toute musique originale, paraîtra toujours alambiquée et fatigante.[5]

Critical complaints of excessive formalism, such as were made against *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and such as have been made since against many other lesser books, including those of the New Novel, are thus exposed as the defence mechanism of minds that are determined for one reason or another to cling to their stereotypes, either from the sheer inertia that seeks comfort and repose for the brain in changelessness, or deliberately and perversely as an attempt at ideological repression in a monolithic state, such as Russia in the time of Zhdanov.

Yet those who, like the Stalinists, set out to curb or suppress formal experiment in the arts, are showing a clearer understanding of what is at stake than those in democratic societies who decry formalism simply as a vexation or as a deprivation for the artist's public, which has been used to something different and apparently more substantial. Because to change aesthetic stereotypes *is*, ultimately, to help in changing reality. When Robbe-Grillet uses as the title of an essay 'Nouveau roman, homme nouveau' he may seem unduly optimistic about the effects of the *cordon sanitaire* he has tried to throw around the traditional narrative forms, in view of the very restricted public there is for the novel. But he is aware that the artist does have this responsibility, that he is, in however small a way, one guardian of a society's myths and that it is these myths which are reality, to a greater or a lesser degree, for all of us.

The *nouveau roman*, therefore, asks to be interpreted in terms of a contemporary *Zeitgeist*, if its technical or structural methods are to be seen as a conscious and necessary response to the age. Any talk of a *Zeitgeist* tends to arouse strong feelings of animosity in those of a more positivist turn of mind, for whom all such outbreaks of Hegelianism call for an immediate antidote. But to characterize aesthetic manifestations by reference to the corpus of philosophical ideas prevalent in the society within which they arise is not

[5] Moreover, the condition of any novelty being the previous elimination of the stereotype to which we had become accustomed and which had seemed to us to be reality itself, any new conversation, just like any original painting or music, will always appear over-subtle and wearisome.

in any way deterministic. Something like the New Novel is not the *inevitable* product of the age, even though it may be, in many aspects, a conscious reflection of it.

In order to fix a starting-point for an investigation into which fundamental notions of the time can be used to elucidate the structures of the New Novel I shall return to Sartre's Preface to *Portrait d'un inconnu*. There he characterizes the present age as one of reflection. In this he has been echoed, much more recently, by Michel Butor, a most elegant and persuasive apologist for modernism in the arts. In an essay called 'Critique et invention' Butor compares the new forms of the novel with those that have become apparent in the theatre and cinema (elsewhere he has made the same comparison with music and painting as well): 'Cette réflexion est une des caractéristiques fondamentales de l'art contemporain: roman du roman, théâtre du théâtre, cinéma du cinéma . . .; elle l'apparente étroitement à celui de certaines époques antérieures, l'art baroque en particulier; dans les deux cas ce repli interrogatif sur soi est une réponse à un changement de l'image du monde.'[6]

Reflective, interrogative: these are certainly the moods that characterize the *nouveau roman*, which has tried to systematize the questionings and self-consciousness already apparent in novelists like Joyce, Kafka, Gide, or Proust. But what are the ways in which our image of the world has changed, to the point where traditional narrative forms are seen to be invalid? To reply to so vast a question with a hurried encapsulation may well seem tendentious or one-sided, but it is a question that cannot be suppressed altogether.

Why reflective, therefore; why does the novelist now have to be self-conscious, and expose the process of composition? No one, presumably, would deny that interest has grown exaggeratedly in recent years in the techniques of production of every sort, mechanical and, more generally, cultural. This new interest may be a function of increased leisure, of an increased social mobility

[6] This reflection is one of the basic characteristics of contemporary art: the novel of the novel, the theatre of the theatre, the cinema of the cinema . . .; it links it closely to the art of certain earlier epochs, baroque art in particular; in both cases this interrogative falling back on oneself is a response to a change in the image of the world (*Répertoire 3*, p. 18).



(which can often be a reward for technical skill), or of an increased scepticism towards all imaginable forms of imposition, whether they be technological or ideological. The result, in any case, is a widespread phenomenon: answers no longer have the authority they once did unless they show the working. A comparison between the arts and cooking is especially apt for my purposes in this book, as I hope the chapters on Robbe-Grillet will prove, and by no means intended facetiously; a trend in restaurants has been towards exposing the chefs as they work to the scrutiny of their customers.

The novelist (or the chef) who denies himself the ancient prerogative of invisibility, is certainly one who identifies himself more sympathetically with his audience. He can find no justification for maintaining the pretence that he possesses supernatural powers; for one reason or another his whole philosophy has changed. Forced to rationalize what might well be an intuitive stance towards his work, as easily adopted in order to be modish as to be scrupulous, he could do so most embracingly by reference to the death of the confident metaphysical beliefs which subtended the great fictions of the nineteenth century and most of the lesser fictions of this one: the modes of realism and naturalism. The philosophy and psychology that sustained positivistic conventions in the novel have not been tenable for many years. Mechanistic philosophies with their simple chains of cause and effect are outmoded, so are mechanistic psychologies; they have been replaced by systems that are dynamic and allow for uncertainty or unpredictability—that is, where they have been replaced by systems at all. Moreover, the status of the mind has changed in respect of its epistemological links with the external world. Realism and naturalism were 'objective' modes, by means of which the novelist gave the impression that what he was describing, people, places, and events, were objectively 'there', that anyone else who happened to be passing at that moment might have witnessed what he witnessed. The need for selection and for invention on the part of the novelist is concealed, with the ultimate result that his own presence on the scene is made to seem fortuitous.

Such objectivity could be justified by invoking the scientific

ideas of the nineteenth century; it can no longer be justified by those of the twentieth. The old simplified models of the physical world have vanished; it is no longer supposed that we can ever know or legislate for the thing *an sich*, physical and other theories being now acknowledged as constructs of human intelligence and in need of constant revision. It was long ago discovered that the behaviour of particles was affected by the presence of the observer, or at least by the light, which was the condition necessary for his observations. It was discovered, too, that precise prediction in physics was impossible, that it was only possible to determine the limits between which particles moved. And with Einstein it became the common belief that there were no longer models in the physical universe, in terms of motion or position, for the absolute viewpoint which might set the observer free from the predilections or prejudices of his own time and place.

Such a brisk summary of a few major scientific revaluations is, no doubt, naïve, yet these are ideas that have spread outside science into the minds of intelligent non-scientists, and it is such ideas, absorbed, it may be, most often in an incomplete or even inaccurate form, which will condition the approach to his work of any novelist who is not content to inherit without question the formulae of his profession from his predecessors. Confronted with the movement towards relativism and incoherence of scientific speculation in this century, the response of a novelist alert to the metaphysical implications of his chosen techniques must surely be to question or to abandon the traditional role of God or Absolute Mind. The cloud of unknowing that now floats between the hypotheses of the human intellect and the natural world makes us suspicious of definitive attempts to impose order on things. All absolutisms are now seen as dishonest, and a writer who proposes one must feel guilt, or so the argument would run. And the French writer, traditionally more influenced by current ideologies of one sort or another, has more reason to feel guilt than any other, having read Sartre's furious pre-war attack on François Mauriac for his divine pretentions.

The divergence and fragmentation of human knowledge are usually interpreted as a cause for alarm and confusion, but they can also converge into a single conviction—that when knowledge



is so compartmentalized then there are no gods among us, but only men. The physicist speaks for physicists, the philosopher for philosophers, and so on. The age is one that favours the redefinition of spheres of influence and authority. The New Novelist, then, is intent on showing in his novels that he is simply a man, equipped with the universal human power of imagination. He does not ask any more that his readers should identify themselves with the creatures of his fancy, but that they should understand the act of creation itself. There are obvious parallels here with what has been happening in the theatre and the cinema since the last war. Dramatists, having learned from Brecht, Artaud, and others, as well as from the theatrical conventions of countries (particularly Eastern countries) where realism has never been countenanced, now know how to alienate the spectacle by the use of intermediary presences beside the stage, by extreme formalization of the once naturalistic décor, by putting the actors into masks so as to divorce them visibly from their role, and so on; while film directors achieve the same sort of effects by using hand-held cameras that do not keep still or level, sequences speeded up or slowed down, interpolations of flash-backs so brief as to be almost subliminal. In both the theatre and the cinema, as well as the extreme *avant-garde* of modern music, a great belief in improvisation has grown up, which exposes the procedures of creation or composition to public view. The effect of these manoeuvres is to distinguish representation from reality and to define the true syntax of the particular art-form.

Other stimuli, too, have prompted the self-questioning that the New Novel displays, ones again that can be linked with the prodigious growth of science in this century, science in both its meanings: as a discipline and as a body of knowledge. This enormous and continually accelerating advance, in terms both of capacity and prestige, has brought with it a promotion in the epistemological virtues of the public or scientific fact. Nor is it only the status of the fact that has improved: so has its availability; there was once a time, perhaps, when there were hardly enough facts about the world to go round: now there are too many. Those who crave the unknown rather than the known, and respect the urge to supplement facts with fancies, have been forced to retreat from strong-

hold after stronghold in the face of scientific investigation. Through use of film it is now possible to have incontrovertible visual evidence of what is going on anywhere in the world and even the nearby atmosphere.

This expansion of the field of empirical inquiry and of science's provision of verifiable data, poses a sinister threat to the continued existence of a form of writing, fiction, which is by definition non-fact. The death of the novel has indeed been vigorously proclaimed many times over the years, sometimes mournfully and sometimes almost with satisfaction. More books are being read, but the increase is in manuals of instruction, in travel books, in biographies, in the sciences. But these weighty proclamations go disregarded because there are always other commentators who can point to some ancient precedent for them. This defence is surely too optimistic; every patient, however resilient, eventually dies, and repeated bulletins about his condition are hardly an indication of robust health. The pious horror often expressed at the thought of a society in which no new novels were being written is not always convincing. Do we have to have new novels? There are a great number of excellent old ones in a great number of languages and if, as some people suppose, the functions of the novel are now usurped, it would be far healthier to accept the demise of this particular form of writing, rather than allow it to become thoroughly degraded. If the novel dies a dismal death it may take its past down with it.

It is a contention, and a very important one, of the *nouveau roman*, that many of the purposes which the traditional novel once served can now be more satisfactorily and persuasively served by different types of book or different media altogether. Why should we any longer go to novels for information about certain sectors of society, or about certain 'types' of character? The behavioural sciences, sociology or psychology, can provide this information perfectly well, with the guarantee that it is 'true', that it has resulted from statistical or experimental techniques which remove from it almost all taint of subjectivity.

The New Novel, then, refuses to be a vehicle of documentary facts about the real world, to abrogate the function of other types of writing, or of other media. The argument is that there is no



longer any point in inventing 'real' people, when we are surrounded by opportunities for reading about or watching real people who have not been invented. What is at stake is the authority of a liar in a society swarming with people accepted and even revered for telling the truth. There is a further extension of this same argument; that there is no point either in inventing 'real' stories in books when we are surrounded by newspapers and television channels quite capable of telling real stories that 'actually happened'.

Nathalie Sarraute has expressed not only the self-doubt that may attack the novelist but even more the guilt. By choosing her examples carefully she is able to suggest something dishonourable or even inhuman about the novelist who invents stories in a world full of terrible events:

> Quelle histoire inventée pourrait rivaliser avec celle de la séquestrée de Poitiers ou avec les récits des camps de concentration ou de la bataille de Stalingrad? Et combien faudrait-il, de romans, de personnages, de situations et d'intrigues pour fournir au lecteur une matière qui égalerait en richesse et en subtilité celle qu'offre à sa curiosité et à sa réflexion une monographie bien faite?[7]

At the moment most monographs are not 'well-made', because those who write them lack the literary skill and incentive to turn them into works that will appeal outside the boundaries of their own specialization. But what would happen if practised novelists did abandon fiction as such and attempt a monograph? One writer who has done this with a perverse success is the American novelist, Truman Capote. His cunning piece of reportage, *In Cold Blood*, was signalled by his British publishers as a 'non-fiction novel'. This description gains an unexpected accuracy from the macabre nature of what Capote was attempting. *In Cold Blood* is the patient record of a multiple murder in the American mid-West, written as the result of lengthy interviews with all those

[7] What invented story could compete with that of the woman prisoner of Poitiers or with the accounts of the concentration camps or the Battle of Stalingrad? And how many novels, characters, situations, and plots would it take to provide the reader with a subject equal in richness and subtlety to that which a well-made monograph offers to his curiosity and his reflection? (*L'Ère du soupçon*, p. 82).

connected with the crime and in particular with the two murderers themselves. Capote's book was not published until after the two men had been executed, and since much of what it contained had been communicated to him, and only to him, by the murderers, their deaths altered the status of *In Cold Blood*, at any rate in theory. The question is: is it possible to write a documentary book about the dead? If the difference between fact and fiction is that one can be verified and the other cannot, then the death of the murderers turned *In Cold Blood* from fact to fiction, in so far as their own evidence was concerned.

Of course I am not suggesting that these apparently hair-splitting questions of definition influenced Messrs. Hamish Hamilton's qualification of Capote's book. What they presumably meant to convey was that here was a 'true' story that was the equal if not the peer of any invented ones, a banal enough proposition among publishing houses and book reviewers, and one which adds its own measure of prestige to the real world at the expense of imagined ones. It is a proposition, on the other hand, which contradicts the memorable and shrewd dictum of the film actor, Humphrey Bogart, that 'life writes lousy plots'. The writers of the New Novel are on the side of Bogart, they are anxious to expose a plot for what it is, a conspiracy; the conspirator is the novelist and the victim is reality.

The readers of a book like *In Cold Blood*, and it has attracted millions of them, do not worry, I imagine, about *actually* verifying the facts it purports to contain, it is enough that the book should offer them the *possibility* of verification. Truman Capote is accepted as having told the truth, irrespective of his technical problems in the selection and arrangement of facts, and irrespective too of the impact of his own personality and philosophy on those of the murderers with whom he communicated over a period of years. The possibility of verification is all that matters.

A novel, on the other hand, can be defined on an exactly contrary principle, that it is *impossible* to verify it in any way at all. The characters it presents have never existed, the events it records have never taken place. A novel deploys or projects a private world, it is a full record of successive states of consciousness of the person who writes it. It is, as Michel Butor has written, 'le



domaine phénoménologique par excellence'. By this he means that it is a domain of pure consciousness, containing both subject and object; but this subject and object are not independent entities, they are twin poles of a single relationship.

* * *

The *nouveau roman* has thus tried to redefine the proper territory of a fiction, in response to the challenge of scientific knowledge and ideological fragmentation. As yet science is not able to record (or to verify) the activities of the human consciousness in such a way as to communicate them in full to another consciousness. These activities can, of course, be submitted to certain forms of scrutiny—by electro-encephalographs, for example, which measure the regularity and intensity of electric currents in the brain. But the graph which these machines inscribe are of little interest to anyone except a neuro-surgeon or other scientific investigators. It is not, in human terms, a meaningful record of another person's thoughts; successive peaks of activity on the graph may relate to totally disparate images in the patient's mind and, until these are differentiated, their significance is minimal. The only forms of transcription which make thoughts communicable in an ordinary sense are ideographic or linguistic ones. Some time in the future no doubt far more sophisticated machines will be developed, able to transcribe the neural patterns in a brain into pictures on a screen. Society's more distinguished creative minds—if such terms still have any meaning—may then be forcibly conscripted into the provision of public entertainment, simply by being suitably wired up.

For the time being, however, the contents of the individual consciousness remain private unless that individual feels the urge to express them. There is no great difficulty, then, in situating the action of the New Novels which I shall later analyse: it takes place in the reflective consciousness of the novelist. The New Novel subscribes to the old Platonic belief that imagination is memory, and what it does is to dramatize the processes of imagination. This involves a partial or, in some cases, a total disconnection of the mind from the events of the external world. The writer no longer pretends (or if he does so pretend then he makes it clear

that he *is* pretending) to be able to be in more places than one, sitting writing at his desk as well as roaming the world outside. The withdrawal into the reflective consciousness is itself modelled on the withdrawal into the place of work; once he has started to write, the novelist's praxis on the material world is dramatically restricted to a few objects that are within reach, a factor which has inspired, in the case of one of the subtler and more gifted of the post-New Novel writers in France, J. M. G. le Clézio, a fascination with ash-trays.

The narrative tradition to which the *nouveau roman* belongs is therefore that of the interior monologue, generally agreed to have been systematized for the first time by the Symbolist writer Edouard Dujardin, in *Les Lauriers sont coupés*, which appeared in 1887. This novel of exasperated sensuality might have remained submerged for ever in the past if James Joyce had not later acknowledged his own debt to it for the use he made of Dujardin's technique in *Ulysses*. Although the narration remains strictly within the narrator's mind in *Les Lauriers sont coupés*, Dujardin does not exploit the freedom which this allows him very forcefully. He is much more concerned with the psychological implications of the technique than its ontological ones. His hero is an incompetent young man whose retreat into the refuge of the imagination can only be interpreted as a defence mechanism —it is a stage in the Decadents' fastidious dismissal of reality as being unequal to the demands of their minds.

The same sort of charges have naturally been freely made against the writers of the New Novel, and I will examine these later. But it does not seem to me that they are justified as they are in the case of Dujardin, for the good reason that these writers are simply drawing attention to the fact that *any* novel is the creation of a mind temporarily disconnected from reality; the psychological or social pressures that might be construed as having led to this disconnection are irrelevant. Directly or indirectly, the New Novelists have been influenced profoundly by the phenomenologist philosophers—I will also examine this question in more detail—and one of the brightest achievements of the phenomenological movement has surely been to rescue epistemology from psychology. The difficulty it has had in persuading



people of this is dismally illustrated by the readiness with which Sartre, whose philosophical works are furiously opposed to all psychologism, has been criticized in psychological or sociological terms, particularly outside France.

One especially interesting detail of *Les Lauriers sont coupés*, which links this novel directly with the preoccupations of the New Novel, is the name of the hero: Daniel Prince. This name suggests, though it does not of course prove, that Dujardin wanted to express by it his concept of the sovereignty of consciousness over its own microcosmic domain. If this was his intention then it is ironic, since Prince's position in Parisian society is a peculiarly futile and unprincely one—he is the unseeing slave of a mercenary and vicious *cocotte*. But it is striking that both Michel Butor and Robbe-Grillet should have repeated, or re-invented, Dujardin's device, by bestowing names which likewise indicate the degree of authority of the consciousness that has been set free from the mechanical necessity of its involvement in the natural world.

The novelist as a king of creation? The idea sounds a somewhat rhapsodic one, and it needs to be defined more precisely. The sovereignty of the reflective consciousness is the measure of our freedom as human beings: 'all that separates us from objects', says Sartre in *L'Être et le néant*, 'is our freedom'. This freedom stands dialectically opposed to the necessity of physical involvement with the external world, our praxis. It is the interval of time during which the mind can be made up, its contents that is to say reassembled in such a way as to enable the body subsequently to act in a purposeful manner. To use a metaphor that has been exploited in different ways by both Michel Butor and Robbe-Grillet, the reflective consciousness, of whose operations the novel contains a record, represents the 'play' in the machine of necessity. But if the New Novel wants to dramatize the creation or attempted creation of a fiction it also needs to make clear to its readers within what limits this creation takes place, or what the obstacles are that stand in its way. The intrusion of necessity must also be represented, in ways which I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow.

All play takes place within certain limits and also in accordance

with certain rules. The play of the mind as it is embodied in the *nouveau roman* is constituted by our freedom to rearrange the images or memories of the past without reference to a perceived reality. The images are irreducible facts, the patterns that are made with them are fictions. The relationship between facts and fiction is also paralleled on the linguistic plane. Here the rules of the game which the sovereign consciousness must recognize are the rules of language, those governing the meaningful combination of words. In respect of language as in respect of reality the powers of the mind are truly combinatory and not inventive; we cannot add to the stock of language (except by neologisms based on existing formations) any more than we can add to the stock of matter. The freedom of the individual speaker is perfectly defined in the terms first introduced by Saussure; the necessity that he must accept as the guarantee of his being able to communicate at all is the *langue*, what he is free to invent is his *parole*. More simply, the speaker, or the writer, invents a message by selection from a pre-existent code.

This particular relationship between freedom and necessity is crucial in any assessment of the aims and achievements of the New Novel. At the same time, the freedom of the individual speaker, or writer, to invent his own *parole* can easily be exaggerated; indeed the relationship of a human subject to an enclosed system such as language is a lively source of contention in the evolving debates about structuralism's underlying ideology. But without adopting extreme attitudes, of the apotheosis or the annihilation of the individual, it is still proper to admit that the influence of phonetic association on the individual's *parole* is immense. Many people find it reprehensible that in prose the sound of a word should take precedence over the concept it denotes, as it is sometimes encouraged to do in poetry. The autonomy of language, as it is displayed for example in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, seems to pose a further threat to the integrity of consciousness. Yet no one who was honest about his own utterances would deny that the sequence of concepts is determined for him sometimes by the sequence of sounds. Certainly, both Claude Simon and Robbe-Grillet, who write in a continuous mode as compared to the discontinuous mode of



Michel Butor, accord the homophone an important role in determining the sequence of their *parole*.

* * *

The methods of the New Novel will remain mysterious and apparently perverse unless this crucial distinction is kept in view: that the mind is free but the eye is not. The imagination comes into play only once the eye is closed—'the man who looks through an open window never sees as many things as one who looks at a closed window', wrote Baudelaire. The New Novel, indeed, has distinguished literary antecedents in Romanticism. Of course, the eye does not have literally to be closed for the imagination to be operative, since it is possible to look at one thing and see another. Moreover, two people looking at a single object do not see the same object, since the significance of that object for each of them remains invisible until such time as they betray it by expressing it in words or by some other form of physical action.

What the imagination has to work with are public facts that have been absorbed into the private consciousness and retained in the memory. It is the discontinuity of these facts—a discontinuity which is also reflected in our direct perceptions of the external world—which enables us, indeed solicits us, to assemble them into a fiction. A true total recall, one which brought back the past in its entirety, would need to be co-extensive in time with the original experience and would deny the possibility of a fiction; it would be an actual re-living of the past.

An important element of the sovereignty of the reflective consciousness is thus its capacity for denying the chronology of the past. We can, and invariably do, examine our past in a different order to that in which it was actually given to us. This new order will, inevitably, be a more personal and revealing one, it is the order which the psychoanalyst must try to extract from his patient by techniques of verbal association. The contiguities of chronology may well be peculiarly trivial compared with those of apparently heterogeneous images evoked successively in the mind. Chronology is mechanism and necessity; there can be no final escape from its harsh sequence, so we must cherish the play

we are allowed in relation to the clock by withdrawing into the time-scale of consciousness itself.

In order to relate these two time-scales, that of the public world and that of the private, to each other in a comprehensible way it might be useful to borrow the terms applied to them by the founding father of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl, and to go on to determine briefly the close connection that exists between the ambitions of the New Novel and this particular form of philosophy. One of the reasons why the New Novel has been lamentably misunderstood in many quarters is the Anglo-Saxon ignorance of a philosophical tradition which is now apparently taken for granted in France and other European countries. I am not proposing that the three New Novelists I am concerned with here, or others of the same persuasion, have a profound grasp of the technicalities of this difficult philosophy—though Michel Butor very likely does—but simply that the ideas of Husserl, Heidegger, and other less charismatic figures have penetrated in simplified forms into the minds of intelligent laymen, especially through the writings of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. One does not need to be a practising philosopher to share the epistemological standpoint of phenomenology, and one recent French commentator, R.-M. Albérès, has gone so far as to say that we are all phenomenologists these days even if we don't know it. Robbe-Guillet himself, moreover is in no doubt about the significance of the movement having written: 'la phénoménologie occupait progressivement tout le champ des recherches philosophiques',[8] an insular statement, but an indicative one.

Husserl, then, distinguishes between the two time series we are concerned with as 'cosmic' time and 'phenomenological' time, the first being that of science and of public reference, the second that of the individual experience of the world. That these two series can be wildly at variance is an acknowledgement embodied in many popular locutions, for example, 'the last hour has gone terribly slowly'.

The writers of the New Novel are concerned with pheno-

[8] phenomenology progressively occupied the entire field of philosophical research (*Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 120).



menological time as a reality and, in the case of Butor at least, with cosmic time only as a convention. The relationship between the two is one which Husserl himself seems to have struggled to define, and his own adumbrations of it are frequently too complex or technical for a non-philosopher to follow. But there are moments when Husserl seems to be excluding cosmic time altogether from his purview since, like the substantial world *an sich*, it is transcendent to our consciousness of time: 'Just as a real thing or the real world is not a phenomenological datum, so also world-time, real time, the time of nature in the sense of natural science including psychology as the natural science of the physical, is not such a datum.'[9]

Phenomenological time is constituted by the celebrated Husserlian disconnection from the natural world, the phenomenological reduction or 'epochè'. That is to say, instead of being wholly absorbed within the punctual 'now' the consciousness becomes aware that this point *is* the 'now', and that it is related to other past 'nows', that time in fact is an indivisible flux, and a duration. Duration is itself constituted by modifications of the contents of consciousness, so that it is simple to see how a novel can be written without reference to the objective measurement of time at all, it creates its own temporal series as it goes along. Traditionally, the novelist unfurled the events of his story in cosmic time, introducing gaps to account for the fact that a story narrated, say, in four hours (if read at a sitting) had taken five years to happen. But Claude Simon and Robbe-Grillet rely on the coincidence of the time-scale of the narration with the time-scale of what is narrated; Michel Butor extends the narrative of his novels in cosmic time, but only in order to display the final inadequacy of any such public scale to reveal the profound structures of the individual consciousness.

The epistemological importance of the Husserlian *epochè* is clearly considerable, and thoroughly relevant to the schema of the New Novelists. By it the consciousness is withdrawn from its object, which is a mental image, sufficiently for its relation to that object to be made apparent to it. The aim is to furnish philosophy with 'a pure descriptive theory of the essential nature of the

[9] *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, p. 23.