The nouveau roman a study in the practice of writing

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## The Nouveau Roman:

A Study in the Practice of Writing

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Temple University Press Philadelphia Temple University Press, Philadelphia 19122

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Published in Great Britain by PAUL ELEK BOOKS LTD., LONDON

Printed in Great Britain

International Standard Book Number: 0-87722-050-6 Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: ·72-83512

For Dominique

## Contents

	Preface	1
1	The Practice of Writing	1.
2	Nathalie Sarraute	4
3	Alain Robbe-Grillet	6
4	Claude Simon	15
5	Philippe Sollers	17
	Select Bibliography	243
	Index	249

Ts'ui Pên diría una vez: Me retiro a escribir un libro. Y otra: Me retiro a construir un laberinto. Todos imaginaron dos obras; nadie pensó que libro y laberinto eran un solo objeto

J. L. Borges, 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan'

## Preface

To write a book on the nouveau roman is already a paradox. How, after all, is one to write about a project the whole impetus of which is centred in its aim for foundation as experience of reading? It is as well, then, to recognize from the outset the limits of this book, fragmentary and repetitive as it is, which offers no more than, literally, a pre-text to the nouveau roman. Written in French, it might well have been called Lire le nouveau roman, for if it functions properly as an introduction, it is precisely in so far as it emphasizes and prepares for the problem of reading posed by modern French writing in the novel. Thus the reader will find here neither a detailed descriptive history of the nouveau roman nor an exhaustive analysis, work by work, of all the novelists who have been associated with the nouveau roman, a procedure that could only be -- for reasons that I hope will become clear-essentially reductive. No apologies need be offered for the number of novels and novelists not directly discussed in the short course of this book.

What is in question here is an attempt to present the context of ideas and research directed towards the investigation of the nature and possibilities of the novel form as represented in the work of some of the key French novelists writing today, from Nathalie Sarraute to Philippe Sollers. The latter, strictly speaking, comes after the nouveau roman but in the kind of account I am attempting this is not a reason for excluding him from consideration. The extension of my argument to take stock of the work accomplished by Sollers and the Tel Quel group with which he is associated seemed necessary in order to obtain some sort of perspective on the practitioners of the nouveau roman as generally understood and to reemphasize certain premisses central to my discussion of the nouveau roman and to the situation of it which I am here concerned to propose. My aim is not to define narrow boundaries for something called

the nouveau roman, including this and excluding that novel or novelist, but to present a certain contemporary work situated in the context of a shift in literary consciousness that I shall call the practice of writing.

The term 'work' should be stressed, for it is essentially a work that is carried out by these writers, a work in and on the novel form which runs into and stems from a constant process of reflection on the whole nature of the novel. It is a question for these novelists, that is, of a practice of writing. There is thus nothing of the habitual rigid distinction between novel and theoretical writing (so that I am uneasy about the term 'novelist' in this context), though the degree of connection and interaction may vary from writer to writer, and this fact is reflected in the present essay, the purpose of which has involved giving major attention to the theoretical reflections of the novelists discussed and to the writings of those thinkers whose work has been of seminal importance in this fundamental questioning of the novel form. The differences in length and organization between the various chapters devoted to particular authors again followed necessarily from the nature and purpose of my account. There could have been no question of treating every writer in the same way nor, as has been indicated, of treating each writer 'exhaustively'. Each novelist to whom particular reference is made is presented in the terms he or she seems to demand, but also in the terms of the general aim of this book, the presentation of an exploration of the novel form. In however modest a fashion, this book does ask to be read straight through as a discussion of that particular literary form, and does, in fact, represent an offshoot from a larger work in progress devoted to a study of that form in relation to the implications of the term 'realism'. But this last point is a personal note, of interest perhaps only to myself.

It is pleasing to be able to record here my gratitude to those who have afforded me the benefit of their help and encouragement. The teaching of Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton gave meaning to three years spent as an undergraduate at Jesus College, Cambridge. A research fellowship at Downing College has made possible, among other things, the writing of this book and the advice I received from two of my colleagues there, Brian Vickers and Christopher Prendergast, both of whom struggled with versions of the manuscript, made it so much easier. Professor Graham Hough has offered me help of every kind, as have M. and Mme Pierre Maillard: to them, as to my parents for their unfailing support, I am deeply grateful. My

greatest debt, however, is to the work and teaching of Roland Barthes. The pages of this book, for all their inadequacy, would not have been written without the help of his example.

Stephen Heath, Paris, May 1969

Various circumstances have delayed the publication of this book. In the meantime a good deal of new work has appeared from the various writers with whom it deals and I have tried to revise my text to take account of this. Nothing of the argument has changed, however, and the book is substantially that completed in 1969. Parts of Chapter 2 appeared in the Winter 1970 issue of *Novel* and I am grateful to the Editors for permission to reprint that material here. I should like to thank Les Editions de Minuit, Editions Gallimard and Editions du Seuil, and the authors of the books published by them, for their kind permission to quote from copyright material. Full details of first publication are given in the Bibliography.

S.H., Paris, November 1971

## The Practice of Writing

'Idéal littéraire, finir par savoir ne plus mettre sur sa page que du "lecteur".'

PAUL VALÉRY

'ce système de significations, qui est à l'intérieur du livre, va être une image du système de significations à l'intérieur duquel le lecteur est pris, dans toute sa vie quotidienne, et à l'intérieur duquel il est perdu.'

MICHEL BUTOR

'La Société française allait être l'historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire.' Balzac's famous project in the Comédie Humaine poses a problem of writing, but the writing itself does not in any way represent a problem. The problem is the task—its extent, its magnitude, its performance—not the means by which the task is to be performed. Witness in this respect the relationship posited between the novelist and the reality to be described: the novelist is, as it were, a scribe taking down his contemporary and immediately precontemporary society from a kind of visual dictation. The chronology of the task is clear for Balzac in his role as secretary to Society: observation, then expression: 'l'auteur pense être d'accord avec toute intelligence, haute ou basse, en composant l'art littéraire de deux parties bien distinctes: l'observation-l'expression.'2 Cuvier, poet of the nineteenth century ('n'est-il pas le plus grand poète de notre siècle?'3), who finds a place in Balzac's pantheon of the four great lives of the age ('Quatre hommes auront eu une vie immense :

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> La Comédie Humaine (Pléiade edition) I, p. 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ibid. XI, p. 174. <sup>3</sup> Ibid. IX, p. 29.

Napoléon, Cuvier, O'Connell, et je veux être le quatrième'4), expressed the relationship of the natural sciences to the world they study as that of 'deux vastes tableaux, dont l'un devrait être la copie de l'autre', a formulation that captures equally the intended relationship between the science of social observation of Balzac (that 'docteur ès sciences sociales') and the French society observed. The 'tableau de la Société' is to be copied in a 'reproduction rigoureuse', and the Comédie Humaine will be the vast tableau of the 'natural history' of Society, standing in relation to its object as the natural sciences stand to theirs for Cuvier.

The problem posed by the writing of the Comédie Humaine is then precisely that of the natural sciences of the period, one of classification and the establishment of a valid scientific typology, and the importance of the place held in Balzac's thinking by Cuvier and Saint-Hilaire causes no surprise. The act of reproduction that is the Comédie Humaine involves an order, 'cette multitude d'existences exigeaient des cadres, et, qu'on me pardonne cette expression, des galeries. De là, les divisions si naturelles de mon ouvrage . . . ': 9 it involves, that is, a construction, but the construction is natural, realistic in the nineteenth-century sense of the term, faithful to the object it copies or describes. This is the point of the concern to establish a scientific typology as opposed to the Romantic typology of a Walter Scott, a concern and a contrast explicitly developed and worked out in the introductions written by Félix Davin, at Balzac's prompting, for the Etudes philosophiques and the Etudes de moeurs au XIXe siècle.10 The copy is more than a copy, the novelist must 'surprendre le sens caché dans cet immense assemblage de figures, de passions et d'événements', 11 must, in an act of understanding, seize the significance of the outward circulation of the social reality ('Chez moi . . . l'observation était déjà devenue intuitive . . . elle saisissait si bien les détails extérieurs qu'elle allait sur le champ au-delà'12), and arrest its movement in a final moment of comprehension. This comprehension for Balzac is a mode of evaluation; writing 'à la lueur de deux Vérités éternelles: la Religion, la Monarchie', 18 Balzac will demonstrate to the reader the malaise of contemporary society,

<sup>4</sup> Lettres à Madame Hanska, ed. R. Pierrot (Paris, 1968), II, p. 374. <sup>5</sup> G. Cuvier, Rapport historique sur les progrès des sciences naturelles depuis 1789 (Paris 6 Comédie Humaine VI, p. 183. 1810), p. 4. <sup>7</sup> Ibid. I, p. 8. <sup>8</sup> Ibid. I, p. 7. <sup>9</sup> Ibid. I, p. 13 (my italics)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. XI, pp. 203-51.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. I, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. VI, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. I, p. 9.

reveal, for instance, 'le sentiment d'insubordination sociale caché sous le mot égalité'. 14 This final stage, as its description as 'final' suggests, succeeds, in Balzac's chronology of literary production, the reproduction of the reality, of, in Davin's words, 'la vie telle qu'elle est'. 18 It attends (and that attention is, of course, its guarantee) the reproduction to demonstrate and confirm its typicality as commentary, whether that of the author ('Quand à Paris une femme a résolu de faire métier et marchandise de sa beauté, ce n'est pas une raison pour qu'elle fasse fortune . . . Voici pourquoi...<sup>16</sup>), that of an observer figure, type of the novelist in the analytical comprehension of his probing observation (as, for example, Bianchon the surgeon : 'entre la nécessité de faire fortune et la dépravation des combinaisons, il n'y a pas d'obstacle, car le sentiment religieux manque en France . . . Voilà ce que se disent tous ceux qui contemplent, comme moi, la société dans ses entrailles.'17), or, as generally is the case, that of the two together.

Thus a chronology of the writing of the Comédie Humaine might be proposed as something like: observation-expression or reproduction—commentary. All the inadequacy and naïvety of such a schema can be recognized at once: what is in question here is simply the fact that it is in terms of such a schema that the writing of the Comédie Humaine is proposed and, drawing out the implications of this proposition, that that which is, after all, the centre of the Comédie Humaine is absent, or rather, non-problematically present: namely, the activity of writing. 'Le monde écrit'; 18 Davin's description of the Comédie Humaine is exact, but the writing is understood merely as mirroring imitation. The Comédie Humaine is not a process of composition but of representation, and it is this latter emphasis that provides all the images for the activity of scription which are largely drawn from painting-'tableau', 'cadres', 'galeries', and so on. Balzac 'takes down' the 'real' 'realistically' and the word 'realistically' here poses a problem not at the level of the writing, but at that of the observation the writing records. Hence language and writing can be regarded, as a passage in Illusions perdues suggests, as perfected instruments, having, like the printing press, an 'evolutionary' development, progressing from early crudity to the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Ibid. IV, p. 978. <sup>15</sup> Ibid. XI, p. 244.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. VI, p. 264 (my italics).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Ibid. VI, p. 501.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Ibid. XI, p. 213.

achievement of their present perfection.19 Language, in fact, is taken-for-granted in Balzac's project, which therefore defines itself firmly in what might be called, after Husserl, the natural attitude towards reality. Balzac's language, the instrument of the Comédie Humaine, is conceived in terms of what Michel Foucault has characterized as the positivist dream: 'un langage qui serait maintenu au ras de ce qu'on sait : un langage-tableau.'20 Language is thought of as self-effacing in the process of the presentation of things, in the reproduction of society, not grasped in its specificity as the milieu of the articulation of the reality known by a given linguistic community. Balzac's writing is thus a writing that knows no limits, or, if there are limits, they are not at the level of the writing itself, but 'outside', referred to as History or Society or even God. (This exteriority can be seen as a fundamental assumption of traditional conceptions of literary realism: 'ce qui définit le réalisme, ce n'est pas l'origine du modèle, c'est son extériorité à la parole qui l'accomplit.'21) It is here that the fact of the 'perfection' of Balzac's writing may be understood; not source of the real, but instrument of its representation, its limits are the limits of the real itself (and not vice versa): it is the quicksilver of a mirror that directly reflects in image the tableau of Society. Certainly Balzac can acknowledge limits in the reflection: 'Paris est un véritable océan. Jetez-y la sonde, vous n'en connaîtrez jamais la profondeur. Parcourez-le, décrivez-le? quelque soin que vous mettiez à le parcourir, à le décrire; quelque nombreux et intéressés que soient les explorateurs de cette mer, il s'y rencontrera toujours un lieu vierge . . . quelque chose d'inouï, oublié par les plongeurs littéraires.'22 Limits such as these, however, in no way call into question the perfection of the writing; they are but the limits imposed by the magnitude of the task Balzac sets himself in the project of the Comédie Humaine, that task the accomplishment of which was to allow him, rightfully, to take his place alongside Cuvier in the gallery of the great men of the age.

19 Ibid. IV, p. 588: 'pour arriver à leur perfection, l'écriture, le langage peutêtre... ont eu les mêmes tâtonnements que la typographie et la papeterie.' Modern linguistics rejects this kind of speculation: 'The truth is that every language so far studied, no matter how "backward" or "uncivilized" the people speaking it, has proved on investigation to be a complex and highly developed system of communication. Moreover, there is absolutely no correlation between the different stages of cultural development through which societies have "evolved" and the "type" of language spoken in these stages of cultural development.' John Lyons, Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics (Cambridge, 1969), p. 44.

Les Mots et les Choses (Paris, 1966), p. 309 (my italics).
Roland Barthes, Essais critiques (Paris, 1964), p. 199.

<sup>22</sup> Comédie Humaine II, p. 856.

This attitude to writing is basic to realist literature, understanding by that not simply what is historically known as Realism, but equally Naturalism (which questions Realism at the level of its social comprehension not at that of its writing: 'Le réaliste', comments Maupassant in discussing the progress from Realism to Naturalism, 'ne se préoccupe que du fait brutal sans en comprendre l'importance relative et sans en noter les répercussions.'23) and also the vast majority of novels published today. With reference to work done by Roman Jakobson and Mikhail Bakhtin, one can describe this realist writing as metonymic and monologistic.<sup>24</sup> Jakobson distinguishes two fundamental modes of arrangement in verbal behaviour; selection and combination:

'The selection is produced on the base of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymity and antonymity, while the combination, the build-up of the sequence, is based on contiguity.'25

These two modes Jakobson characterizes as the metaphoric and the metonymic respectively, since they find their most condensed expression in those two rhetorical tropes. As Jakobson points out,<sup>26</sup> it is the latter mode, the metonymic, that typifies realist writing, a writing that traces the real in, on its terms, a potentially endless notation ('il s'y rencontrera toujours un lieu vierge'), an endless passage from detail to detail in a monologue of re-presentation. Here is the basic sense of Bakhtin's idea of monologistic writing: realist writing is face to face with the real in a direct relation of instrumentality, it covers the real exactly in its progression, leaving no trace, absent in that which, outside it, founds and guarantees its realism.<sup>27</sup>

Realism then, as it has come to be understood in connection with the novel, is always grasped finally in terms of some notion of the representation of 'Reality', which is reflected in the literary work as

<sup>23</sup> Préface, Lettres de Gustave Flaubert à Georges Sand (Paris, 1884), p. xv.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Cf. R. Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', in Style and Language, ed. T. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass., 1966); Fundamentals of Language (with M. Halle) (The Hague, 1956); M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World (Cambridge, Mass., 1969); La Poétique de Dostoevski (Paris, 1970).

<sup>Linguistics and Poetics', p. 358.
Fundamentals of Language, pp. 53-4.</sup> 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> It has been necessary to sketch here the attitude to writing proposed in Balzac's project. This does not mean, however, that that proposition is to be accepted without question. On the contrary, to *read* the Balzac text it would be crucial to bring out the conventions of its structuration as a text which found its very *readability* as 'realistic'. Cf. Roland Barthes, S/Z (Paris, 1970; discussed below, pp. 210 ff.).

in a mirror. It is in the development of the novel in the nineteenth century, under the impetus of the desire to achieve a 'social realism', that the relation of realism in the novel and image of the mirror is definitively forged. Thus George Eliot, for example, can offer her novels naturally as an attempt to 'give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind'.28 This is the same kind of 'innocence' that was encountered in Balzac's description of the Comédie Humaine as a 'visual dictation': the idea of an account introduces a notion of selection but without in any way revealing a problem, without challenging the assumptions of the natural attitude; no problem is posed by saying that the account is to be a realistic account and, indeed, it is precisely this that prevents the recognition of any problem. Yet if the term 'realistic' is examined and the question formulated as to what is 'realistic' (and the work I shall be concerned with in this book is one element in our ability to formulate this question), it will be seen that the answer cannot lie in any absolute conception of 'Reality' (of 'the Reality'), but, on the contrary, in the recognition of the representation of reality which a particular society proposes and assumes as 'Reality'. 'Reality', that is, needs to be understood not as an absolute and immutable given but as a production within which representation will depend on (and, dialectically, contribute to) what the French Marxist theoretician Louis Althusser has described as 'practical ideology', a complex formation of montages of notions, representations, images and of modes of action, gestures, attitudes, the whole ensemble functioning as practical norms which govern the concrete stance of men in relation to the objects and problems of their social and individual existence; in short, the lived relation of men to their world.29 In this sense, the 'realistic' is not substantial but formal (a process of significant 'fictions'), and, in connection with the novel, it may be described in the notion of the vraisemblable of a particular society, the generally received picture of what may be regarded as 'realistic'; such a vraisemblable being founded in our own culture by, amongst other things, the novel itself. Evidently, this vraisemblable is not recognized as such, but rather as, precisely, 'Reality'; its function is the naturalization of that reality articulated by a society as the 'Reality' and its success is the degree to which it remains unknown as a form, to which it is received as mirror of 'Reality', ever confirmed by a fixed source exterior to its discourse.

It is within the space of this discourse that the realism of a literary work for a society is defined. For a particular society, in fact, the work that is realistic is that which repeats the received forms of 'Reality'. It is a question of reiterating the society's system of intelligibility. There is a moment in A la recherche du temps perdu when the narrator, arrived at a restaurant just outside Paris and awaiting Saint-Loup, studies the owner of the restaurant and comments: 'il avait l'habitude de comparer toujours ce qu'il entendait ou lisait à un certain texte déjà connu et sentait s'éveiller son admiration s'il ne voyait pas de différences.'30 The mode of realism that has been described here is exactly that: the repetition of a certain text which is, in its very familiarity (its 'naturalness'), diffuse, unknown as text. Nombres by Philippe Sollers speaks of the 'theatre' of representation 'où nous allons et venons encore, récitant sans y penser le texte ancien, embrouillé, menteur . . . "31 What founds this text in part, and to an extent that has grown steadily since the beginning of the nineteenth century, is the novel and what assures this foundation is its readability ('unreadable' being a term with which we trace the horizon of our sense, of our desire not to read our limits). This readability is relayed by a series of codes and conventions, by the text of the already known and written: that work is readable, therefore, which is cast within their horizon, which repeats them in their naturalized transparence. In these terms, the novel, through the development of realist writing (and most of the novels written today are 'Balzacian' in the sense of their commitment to the premisses of that writing), has become the form of a certain social seeing; a form, like other social forms (and this is the guarantee of its stability), to be learned, repeated and consumed. It is thus, as Sartre tried to say in La Nausée, that we conceive and live our lives as novels, within the conventions (though they are not felt as such) which the novel provides. There is a passage in his Logiques in which Philippe Sollers gives a very powerful description of this condition:

'LE ROMAN EST LA MANIÈRE DONT CETTE SOCIÉTÉ SE PARLE, la manière dont l'individu dort se vivre pour y être accepté. Il est donc essentiel que le point de vue "romanesque" soit omniprésent, évident, intouchable; qu'il ait ses chefs-d'oeuvre indéfiniment cités, commentés, rappelés; ses tentatives difficiles; ses demi-réussites; ses échecs. Il est essentiel qu'il dispose de tous les registres: naturaliste, réaliste, fan-

<sup>28</sup> Adam Bede, Ch. XVII.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> See below p. 190.

<sup>30</sup> Pléiade edition, II, p. 406.

<sup>31</sup> Nombres (Paris, 1968), p. 37.

tastique, imaginaire, moral, psychologique et infra-psychologique, poétique, pornographique, politique, expérimental. Tout se passe d'ailleurs comme si ces livres étaient désormais écrits par avance; comme s'ils faisaient partie de cette parole et de cette pensée anonymes, toutespuissantes, qui à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur, de l'information publique jusqu'à l'intimité la plus silencieuse, règnent, exagérément visibles et par conséquent invisibles. Notre identité en dépend, ce qu'on pense de nous, ce que nous pensons de nous-mêmes, la façon dont notre vie est insensiblement amenée à composition. Qui reconnaît-on en nous sinon un personnage de roman? (Qui reconnaissez-vous en moi qui vous parle sinon un personnage de roman?) Quelle parole échapperait à cette parole insidieuse, incessante, et qui semble toujours être là avant que nous y pensions?

The limits of the novel are confounded with the limits of the natural attitude, hence its naturalness, its triumphant mirroring, and Sollers can define it precisely as an area of man's captivity, the area in which he is held captive then indeed being termed 'the readable'.

The basis of this repetition, as was seen earlier, is an absence of writing; language is lost in a monologue of re-presentation. The purpose of this book is to present one moment in the development of a radical shift of emphasis in the novel from this monologistic realism to what I shall call the practice of writing. This shift is not to be understood in the traditional terms of a change from 'social realism' to 'psychological realism' or whatever, but in terms of the deconstruction of the very 'innocence' of realism. Its foundation is a profound experience of language and form and the demonstration of that experience in the writing of the novel which, transgressed, is no longer repetition and self-effacement but work and self-presentation as text. Its 'realism' is not the mirroring of some 'Reality' but an attention to the forms of the intelligibility in which the real is produced, a dramatization of possibilities of language, forms of articulation, limitations, of its own horizon.

This attention may be defined as an activity of hesitation. The term is explicit enough in Finnegans Wake, signed as an 'HeCit-Ency', the text as 'scribenery', 'epiepistle to which . . . we must ceaselessly return', activating a perpetual circulation of signs only within which is to be read any subject ('author', 'history', etc.); as it is too in A la recherche du temps perdu where the painful ex-

perience of the child, in the moment of awakening, of a hesitation of the conventional forms, through the habitual stability of which the subject realizes his presence, becomes the work of Proust's text which can find an 'essence' only in the activity of reading these forms, the text thus taking the status of 'la seule vie par conséquent réellement vécue'; as it is again in Thomas Mann's Zauberberg, where Hans, plaything of dialectical rivalries, is the figure of the dramatization of a shifting series of forms, of a whole space of discourse that moves on the scene of the text in that incompletion of interpretation which gives the irony of the book and defines it within a Nietzschean perspective. These texts of the practice of writing variously propose themselves in terms of an activity of reactivation: it is a question not of the repetition of the vraisemblable of a society but of the reading of the forms of that vraisemblable; not a monologue, the repetition of a discourse as absence of discourse, but a dialogue, a mise-en-scène of forms. The series of forms of realist writing, naturalized as writing 'without thickness', as non-formal, miming 'Reality' as its direct expression, is now deconstructed, grasped as production. In the space of the text in the practice of writing there is no longer a movement forward to the fixing of some final Sense or Truth, but on the contrary, an attention to a plurality, to a dialogue of texts, founding and founded in an intertextuality to be read in, precisely, a practice of writing. As Sollers has emphasized: 'La "réalité" n'est plus, ainsi, l'éternel morceau préexistant à découper dans tel ou tel sens, mais le procès de génération qui TRANSFORME.'83

If the term 'realism' is to be retained in connection with these texts, it must be understood in terms of the totally new emphasis it finds in such formulations as the following: .

'Le nouveau réalisme se pose d'abord comme une expérience nécessaire de l'écriture (et non du style) et de la rigueur. Trop souvent cette désignation masque une confusion faite entre naturalisme, ou vérisme, et réalisme. Zola, pas plus que Sartre, n'est un réaliste.<sup>34</sup>

'Le réalisme, ici, ce ne peut donc être la copie des choses, mais la connaissance du langage; l'oeuvre la plus "réaliste" ne sera pas celle qui "peint" la réalité, mais qui . . . explorera le plus profondément possible la réalité irréelle du langage.'25

35 Roland Barthes, Essais critiques, p. 164.

<sup>32</sup> Logiques (Paris, 1968), p. 228.

<sup>33</sup> Tel Quel, Théorie d'ensemble (Paris, 1968), p. 393.

<sup>34</sup> Jean-Edern Hallier, 'De l'art sans passé', Tel Quel No. 6, Summer 1961, p. 43.

Instead of effacing itself before a 'Reality' projected as its precedent, language, in this emphasis, is grasped as specific locus of the articulation of the real, of its real-ization. The practice of writing, as was stressed above, can be defined exactly as a radical experience of language. This experience, however, is not to be understood as some decorative reference to language as the style of an author, as the inversion of representation into the expression of the individual (the first of the formulations given above is explicit on the need to avoid this confusion); what is in question indeed in this experience is a hesitation of our very conception of the 'author' as an originating moment of discourse.

That conception has, in fact, an essential corollary, criticism. Author and criticism have developed together over the last hundred and fifty odd years until the achieved situation of today when the institutionalization of 'literary criticism' (in faculties, journals, newspaper reviews, etc.) in replacement of the discipline of rhetoric (founded not on the 'author' but on the orders of discourse) depends on and sustains the author (enshrined in syllabi and examinations, interviews and television portraits). The task of criticism has been precisely the construction of the author. It must read the author in the texts grouped under his name. Style in this perspective is the result of the extraction of marks of individuality, a creation of the author and the area of his value. Criticism, in short, is the modern hermeneutics; the passage from God to Author. Never do we open out a problematic under the question 'Who speaks?' ('What is an author?'), instead we strip away what is spoken to reveal an identity, the source of the author in his expression through the text. Author and criticism thus constitute modes of limiting the order of discourse, of placing it in an area of identity, origin and expression in which the problem of language ('who speaks?') will have neither reality nor position.

Such a reality and a position are given in the activity of the texts of the practice of writing. What can it really mean to speak of the author as the source of a discourse? Far from being the unique creation of the author as originating source, every text is always (an)other text(s) that it remakes, comments, displaces, prolongs, reassumes. A text opens in and from that complex formation of modes of articulation that gives, as it were, the theatre of its activity, a series of settings always already there as its very possibility; as the setting of language is always there, without origin and elsewhere to any individual moment of discourse, always received

'such as it is'. In this perspective, Balzac's text may be said to come not from 'Reality', via the transcription of its secretary, nor, in an immediate sense, from him as full source; rather, he is written in it (in its inscription), an effect of the text, held in an empire of signs, imposed by orders of discourse that no more than he could provide a simple moment of origin. It is this whole problematic that is constituted in the writing of a text such as Finnegans Wake and that constitutes the point of its 'realism'.

The recognition of the difference between Joyce's text and the work of Balzac in relation to this shift in the possibility of the concept of 'realism' may be developed a little further here with reference to a remarkable description of Joyce's practice given by Jacques Derrida in the course of the introduction to his translation of Edmund Husserl's Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie:

'[la tentative de James Joyce:] répéter et reprendre en charge la totalité de l'équivoque elle-même, en un langage qui fasse affleurer à la plus grande synchronie possible la plus grande puissance des intentions enfouies, accumulées et entremêlées dans l'âme de chaque atome linguistique, de chaque vocable, de chaque mot, de chaque proposition simple, par la totalité des cultures mondaines, dans la plus grande génialité de leurs formes (mythologie, religion, science, arts, littérature, politique, philosophie, etc.); faire apparaître l'unité structurale de la culture empirique totale dans l'équivoque généralisée d'une écriture qui ne traduit plus une langue dans l'autre à partir de noyaux de sens communs, mais circule à travers toutes les langues à la fois, accumule leurs énergies, actualise leurs consonances les plus secrètes, décèle leurs plus lointains horizons communs, cultive les synthèses associatives au lieu de les fuir et retrouve la valeur poétique de la passivité; bref, une écriture qui, au lieu de le mettre hors jeu par des guillemets, au lieu de le "réduire", s'installe résolument dans le champ labyrinthique de la culture "enchaînée" par ses équivoques, afin de parcourir et de reconnaître le plus actuellement possible la plus profonde distance historique possible.'86

The passivity noted by Derrida is Joyce's response to the activity of language, to the plurality of ways of real-izing the world and the plurality of writings available and possible within a culture (*Ulysses* had already been constituted as a repertoire of forms of writing). Language is a source that can be continually worked, even at the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, introduction to E. Husserl, L'Origine de la Géométrie (Paris, 1962), pp. 104-5.

level of individual words; such a working (and this is its value) running into the 'history' of dream and myth, into the very 'origins' of fiction. Finnegans Wake (which is announced as 'polyhedron of scripture') offers the space of a work always in progress, the scene of a play of language ('scribenery') and not, as in realist writing, the (intended) linear progression of a process of notation. The writing here is the mise-en-scène of limits and it is this reading of limits that founds the activity of the text. Words 'rise to the surface', are broken, remade, collided, persuaded together in a series of fragmentary fictions that join and part in a multiplicity of differing ways in every reading of the text. All the 'action' takes place, in the circulation through the labyrinthine mesh of languages, on the threshold of sense in the moment of its production, of the passage from night into day, from the ecstasy of sleep into the wakefulness of speech;37 the moment of the opening of the play of repetition and difference, of the same and the other—'le seuil enfin au-dessus duquel il y aura différence et au-dessous duquel il y aura similitude', 88 the threshold, that is, of those articulations which, in the process of his self-realization, the subject must take as the real, ground of his very intelligibility: 'le réel, image fabuleuse sans laquelle nous ne pourrions pas lire.'39 It is that image that becomes the fable of Finnegans Wake in its narrative of forms of sense, in the endless pluralization which is the basis of the attempt at totality described by Derrida. This totality, in contrast to that attempted by the limitless writing of Balzac which is defined in terms of the transcription of a whole Society ('j'aurai porté une société toute entière dans la tête'40), is a totality grasped in the movement of the endless process of fictions, read in the moment of a perpetual displacement of limits: every word plays against its limits, against that which it limits, limits which are transposed in the reinscription of different series of signs that is always to be reaccomplished in the text. At every word the text reads its own possibility, its own production ('Le langage se réfléchissant', in Mallarmé's phrase), trembling on the edge of unreadability ('usylessly unreadable'), its real being the fable of language and not that of the natural attitude which provides an area of the 'readable' that is precisely an unconscious demarcation of its own limits. These questions of reading and readability, of the making and remaking of meanings, are, indeed, at the very core of its project. 'Ce n'est que dans le langage poétique que se réalise pratiquement "la totalité" du code dont le sujet dispose. Dans cette perspective, la pratique littéraire se révèle comme exploration et découverte des possibilités du langage; comme activité qui affranchit le sujet de certains réseaux linguistiques (psychiques, sociaux); comme dynamisme qui brise l'inertie des habitudes du langage.'41

There is finally at the heart of Finnegans Wake a silence, a silence against which every multi-tiered word in that unfinishing text reverberates. Paradox is profitable these days and the paradox of a literature of silence has been formulated joyously many times. The paradox is curious but significant in its dissimulation of writing as speech, and in fact there is no paradox. A project of silence and of making silent has been variously conceived within the development of what, since the Romantic age, we have called 'literature'; a project of 'saying other', of, exactly, hesitation. 'La littérature? C'est pouvoir dire par quels signes notre réalité vient vers nous.'42

To value literature thus is not to value a particular programme (Joyce is here an example, not a pattern), but simply to record an emphasis that has been insistent at least since the work of Lautréamont and Mallarmé and which is a moment of consciousness of creation, transformation, death even.<sup>48</sup> This moment is always felt as

<sup>37 &#</sup>x27;L'enfant,' wrote Mallarmé, 'abdique son extase' ('Prose', Oeures complètes, Pléiade edition, p. 57); a passage that may be glossed with this passage from an essay by the comparative psychologist F. J. J. Buytendijk, to which we shall have occasion to return later: 'L'animal n'a pas d'objets. Il ne fait que pénétrer extatiquement son environnement . . . L'homme, conclurons-nous, c'est pour ainsi dire, un animal qui s'étant frotté les yeux, regarde étonné autour de lui, parce qu'il aperçoit l'autre.' L'Homme et l'Animal (Paris, 1965), p. 82 (my italics).

<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Roland Barthes, introduction to A. Gallien, Verdure (Paris, 1967), p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Lettres à Madame Hanska II, p. 374.

<sup>41</sup> Julia Kristeva, Semeiotikė: Recherches pour une sėmanalyse (Paris, 1969), pp. 178-9.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Pierre Faye, Le Récit hunique (Paris, 1967), p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> The term 'literature' is always a problem. Its history is fully described in Roger Escarpit's pamphlet La Définition du terme 'littérature' (Université de Bordeaux, Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, 1961; now reprinted in Le Littéraire et le Social, ed. R. Escarpit, Paris, 1970, pp. 259–72). All that it is necessary to remember here is that our current usage of the term is of fairly recent origin, having been developed in the course of the nineteenth century, and that, at one level, its development increasingly characterizes the otherness of literature, its silence; the term quickly assimilating the stigmata of 'uselessness', 'futility', 'madness', and so on. There has, of course, also been an acceptable and accepted literature, relegated to a defined area of 'amusement', 'emotion', etc., and an official literature, which is less a particular pantheon of names—it can, after all, include, say, Joyce—than a mode of reading or rather non-reading, the principle of which is Human Nature, a mysterious and indefinable essence that is sometimes called, in a more 'modern' emphasis, Psychology. Human Nature, as will be seen, has figured heavily in the non-reading of the nouveau roman.

dangerous in the perspectives it opens on the production of ourselves and our reality and is resisted within the natural attitude, which at the extreme teaches literature as mad (Finnegans Wake becomes 'the aberration of a great man') or, with unconscious reason, as useless, by both of which, of course, it means other than itself. The relation of the experience of language and the idea of death was formulated by Hegel in the image of the first act of Adam ('der erste Akt') as the constitution of a mastery over things in the process of giving names which, in converting them into idealities for man, annihilates them in their existence ('sie als Seinde vernichtete').44 If through this fiction can be grasped the moment of the appearance of the other, of difference, of silence (realized exactly in the opening of speech, in the babble of voices), of the death of negation and limitation, literature, as that term may be understood in the light of the practice of Finnegans Wake, may be seen as being constituted, utopianically, as the moment 'before', aiming to rejoin, to know that 'erste Akt', the reality of which is forgotten in the censorship of the particular language that knows itself as natural, direct re-presentation of 'Reality', remaining ignorant of the 'guilt' of its activity ('toute chose qu'on nomme n'est déjà plus tout à fait la même, elle a perdu son innocence'46). Such a literature, to the discomfort of the authority of the natural attitude the prime demand of which is that literature should unreflectingly repeat its taken-for-granted forms, will, in its silence, have nothing to say.

The recognition contained in the term 'utopianically' used above must be stressed; it is, indeed, a recognition that is the very force of the writing of Finnegans Wake. The idea of the 'erste Akt' can only ever be a fiction; innocence is always already lost (and already that formulation itself is caught up in the process of fiction). The practice of writing is not a lapse into the unreflective adoption of the fiction of some 'essence', but a constant activity of suspicion of language and forms, of their questioning and 'undoing'. Its silence is not the retrieval of some original depth untouched by any process of articulation, but the very movement of its activity, which in its effect of hesitation places writer and reader in the 'hollow' of the realization of the play of forms that opens 'Reality'; in what Nombres describes as 'la partie creuse et concave de l'édifice'. The problem

46 Nombres, p. 34.

is the reactivation of habitual inattention, the demonstration in the activity of the writing of the night that is the defining horizon of the daylight forms: 'Nous vivons dans le faux jour d'une langue morte aux significations bornées: nous manquons le jour dans la mesure où nous manquons la nuit que nous sommes. Mais nous ne sommes pas autre chose que ce mouvement nocturne et diurne du lisible et de l'illisible, en nous, hors de nous,—et cela nous ne voulons pas le savoir.'<sup>47</sup> The unease that is caused by Finnegans Wake and that demands the security of its definition as 'aberration' is exactly that it is a 'nightynovel'.

The situation of the nouveau roman is post-Joyce: Joyce, that is, is a major element in its situation. To say this is not so much to suggest particular points of influence, though no doubt these could be traced if it were felt to be important to do so (continuity is the backbone of the natural attitude), as to stress the position of the nouveau roman in the general context of the shift in literary consciousness that has been described here as the practice of writing, and so to indicate that the nouveau roman functions not on the grounds of the natural attitude (so that the feeling of the loss of innocence is strongly in evidence: 'Nous sommes entrés dans l'ère du soupcon . . .'), 48 but as a questioning of that attitude in its work of research in and exploration of the premisses and possibilities of the novel. Its situation is that work of textual reactivation in which the work of Joyce represents so important a stage. The 'Balzacian' novel thus stands for everything the nouveau roman is concerned to call into question and it is not surprising to find the destruction of that novel (of its 'innocence', and so of the whole form) consciously worked through in many examples of the nouveau roman, 'anti-novels' according to the famous description given by Sartre:

'Les anti-romans conservent l'apparence et les contours du roman; ce sont des ouvrages d'imagination qui nous présentent des personnages fictifs et nous racontent leur histoire. Mais c'est pour mieux décevoir; 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, qui ne peut pas se faire.'49

<sup>44</sup> G. Hegel, Sämtliche Werke, ed. G. Lasson Vol. XIX, I (Leipzig, 1932), p. 211.

<sup>45</sup> J.-P. Sartre, Situations II (Paris, 1948), p. 72.

<sup>47</sup> Philippe Sollers, Logiques, p. 240.

<sup>48</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, L'Ere du soupçon (Paris, 1956), p. 59.

<sup>49</sup> J.-P. Sartre, 'Préface'; Nathalie Sarraute, Portrait d'un inconnu (Paris, 1948), pp. 7-8.

This 'undoing' of the novel poses problems of reading. In relation to expectations of reading defined within the natural attitude examples of the nouveau roman, as is intended, produce an effect of unreadability; they remain unavailable for consumption, which means, in fact—and this is the unease they cause—that they have to be read. The texts of the practice of writing open, be it obliquely, the possibility of what Roland Barthes has called, in opposition to the 'texte lisible' of realist writing, the 'texte scriptible'; the text continually to be rewritten, a perpetual provision of differences. Where the novels of realist writing are constituted as objects, writing being no more than the incarnation of a 'Sense', the representation of a 'Reality' that reading must disengage, these texts are a production, an attention to the play of the signifiant, thus remaining (and the process of Finnegans Wake is exemplary here) without centre, calling us, in Barthes' words, 'à traverser leur écriture d'une nouvelle inscription'.50 What is presented is the text, which cannot be discarded for some represented presence; the novels of the nouveau roman, for instance, are not open to summary (whence the necessity for the recognition of the limitations of this present essay, which must hope to stay this side of the recuperation of these novels into the patterns of expectation): all the insistence is on the specificity of the text and the activity of its reading.

This insistence creates unease, and not merely (as is necessary) on the part of the custodians of Human Nature. There is little in the nouveau roman of what is generally understood, in the light of Sartre's famous essay on the nature of literature and the possibilities of the novel Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, by the term engagement. There is, for example, as has so often been pointed out, no 'analysis' or 'description' of the political situation in modern France, and there have been various criticisms of this 'lack of commitment' ranging from the simple abuse of the supporters of the mythical Human Nature (thus François Mauriac, and the tone is fairly indicative; 'Vous pouvez jouer aux osselets dans votre coin. Le poème en puissance, c'est au Vatican qu'il se manifeste.'51) to the serious assessments made from within the framework of traditional Marxist think-

'¡ Me parece (Il me semble) que la única jerarquía posible (que la seule hiérarchie valable) es la jerarquía (c'est la hiérarchie) de los problemas y de las necesidades (des problèmes et des besoins) de los pueblos de nuestros países (des peuples de nos pays) y ninguna otra! (et rien d'autre!). ¡ Me parece (Il me semble) que si estamos reunidos aquí (que si nous sommes réunis ici), es para discutir de esos problemas (c'est pour discuter ces problèmes) y no de los problemas académicos (et non des problèmes académiques) de una creación literaria (d'une création littéraire) con los cuales nuestros pueblos oprimidos (dont nos peuples opprimés) no tienen nada que hacer! (n'ont rien à faire!).'38

The writers of the nouveau roman, that is, remain aware of the problem in these terms even while insisting on the need for the notion of a writer's commitment to be understood at the level of the problems of writing posed in his practice. Such an insistence was made by Robbe-Grillet in the course of a conference held at Leningrad in 1963 in the very title of his communication: 'L'écrivain, par définition, ne sait où il va et il écrit pour chercher à comprendre pourquoi il écrit'.<sup>54</sup>

There are two points that may be made here in connection with this question of *engagement*. Firstly, in the same interview in which he made the remark concerning the impossibility of reading Robbe-Grillet in an underdeveloped country, Sartre also made, in continua-

<sup>50</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Musica Practica', L'Arc No. 40, p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> Cit. A. Delmas, A la Découverte du nouveau roman (Paris, 1965), p. 29. (Attempts are also made, of course, to retrieve the nouveau roman for Human Nature: thus J. A. G. Tans: 'Au coeur de ce qui a été souvent décrié à tort comme une révolution littéraire ahurissante et néfaste, nous avons vu à l'oeuvre l'esprit et le coeur français éternels.' Romans lisibles et romans illisibles (Groningen, 1963), p. 13.)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Cf. e.g. E. Lop and A. Sauvage, 'Essai sur le nouveau roman', La Nouvelle Critique No. 124, March 1961, pp. 117–135, No. 125, April, pp. 68–87, No. 127, June, pp. 83–107; C. Burgelin and G. Pérec, 'Le nouveau roman et le refus du réel', Partisans-February 1962, pp. 108–118. Cf. also the remarks on the nouveau roman in a survey of new trends in foreign literature by Raïssa Orlova and Lev Kopelev, Novy Mir No. I/1959, pp. 219–230.

<sup>53</sup> Claude Simon, Orion aveugle (Geneva, 1970), p. 106.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Esprit, July 1964, pp. 63-5.