The nouveau roman and the poetics of fiction

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE
MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, U.S.A.
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

First published 1980

Photoset and printed in Malta by Interprint Limited

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Jefferson, Ann
The nouveau roman and the poetics of fiction.
1. Fiction
2. Criticism – France
I. Title
808.3'00944 PN3331 79-41507
ISBN 0 521 22239 7

for Anthony, Amy and Laurie

Contents

Acknowledgements

This book has benefited from advice and encouragement given by many people. I would particularly like to thank the following here: first and foremost, Jonathan Culler who supervised my D. Phil. thesis on Nathalie Sarraute, and whose example, teaching and support helped me find my feet in the relatively new and sometimes mistrusted field of poetics; secondly, the late Will Moore whose teaching, talk and interest were always encouraging and invigorating; thirdly, Terence Cave who read the manuscript and whose comments, criticisms and suggestions helped to make a more consistent and more readable book; fourthly, the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford, whose offer of a research fellowship gave me time to complete this study; and lastly, Judy Egan of Wolfson College day-nursery who looked after my children: without her help none of what follows could have been written.

Parts of this book originally appeared in the form of articles in *PTL*, the *Modern Language Review*, *Comparative Criticism* and *Mensen van papier* (ed. Mieke Bal). I gratefully acknowledge permission from the respective editors to use versions of those articles.

All translations are my own except where otherwise indicated.

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

(Barthes, 1975, 93)

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This reflexivity has often been regarded as the special feature

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

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

[3] For a discussion of the practical definition of the nouveau roman see Ricardou, 1973, 5–25.

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

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

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

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

1

Unnatural narratives

Last things first

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

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

as an alternative: 'The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.' This second version, which inverts the time-sequence and is organised to make more of the question 'why?', shows that causes tend to be more powerful structuring devices than sequences, and that sequences are most interesting when they imply a cause (*post hoc ergo propter hoc* attests to this preference). In the first example it is the tiny phrase 'of grief' which plays the most effective role in narrativising the elements, since it provides a causal link between two events and so enables us to make sense of them in thematic terms. It is not the events in themselves which make a story, but the meanings that are proposed to link them. Forster's second example illustrates more amply what one might term the semantic delay which narratives create and depend on for the production of meaning. 'No one knew why' is the condition of the narrative's existence before it reaches its goal where the revelation of 'grief' as an organising principle is all the more forceful for its final position. As a structuring element, meaning is far more important than time: in the second example the inversion of the order of events, which tends to diminish the significance of the temporal elements, actually strengthens the causal or thematic aspect of the story.

These examples suggest that there is nothing inherently narrative about an event or a series of events. Events only become narrativised with the addition of a meaning, which may have the appearance of a goal towards which everything tends, but which is nevertheless an imposition from without. One only has to substitute 'of poverty' or 'of boredom' for 'of grief' to change the meaning of the narrative. The report of the two deaths remains unaltered ('The king died and the queen died') but the causal explanation radically alters their significance.

Viewed in this light it seems that it is sense that makes narratives, although as readers our normal procedure is to turn to narrative to make sense. When we give a summary of a novel (perhaps of anything), we tell its story because we assume that by doing so we also convey its meaning. Gérard Genette summarises Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* in the phrase:

'Marcel becomes a writer' (1972, 75), and so conveys some of the sense of the novel. However, it is only possible to summarise in retrospect, and Genette's summary of *A la recherche du temps perdu* can only be made after reading the very last pages of the novel. Meaning is never given *in toto* before the end is reached, and reading consists in the recognition that the meaning always lies ahead and in the expectation that the close will bring thematic illumination. In his introduction to *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* Robbe-Grillet draws attention to this alteration in the availability of meaning depending on whether one is placed in the middle or at the end. Having summarised the film, he goes on to say: 'Let us note straight away that the synopsis provides us first and foremost with "meaning"; this is its avowed aim; but it is the synopsis which is least able to account for the structural organisation of the film' (12). The contrast between narrative organisation and structural organisation may be particular to Robbe-Grillet in this case (especially in its subversive aspect) but the combination of uncertainty and anticipation which guides us through a story is common to all narrative forms. The end determines all that precedes it, and it is only this finality that enables the sense of the whole to be constructed. Norman Friedman's categorisation of basic plot types (1955a) shows very clearly that it is a comparison of beginning and end that enables us to distinguish between, say, a 'tragic' and a 'sentimental' plot, and to make this typological distinction is already to begin to organise meaning. In a 'tragic' plot the hero is partly responsible for the misfortune to which he finally succumbs, whereas in the 'sentimental' plot, the sympathetic and responsible hero undergoes a number of perils from which he emerges finally as a victor. We identify one plot as 'tragic' because the hero is vanquished *at the end*, the other as 'sentimental' because the hero prevails *at the end*. It is always the end which determines the significance of the whole.

In his essay 'Vraisemblance et motivation' (1969, 71–99) Gérard Genette has demonstrated very clearly how the dynamic of plot operates retrogressively, working backwards against the unfolding of the text. If a story beings with the words 'The marchioness went out at five o'clock', whatever follows will

be determined not by the possible sequels to this act (going for a drive, visiting a friend), but by the conclusion. So that if that conclusion is suicide, for example, then everything that intervenes will derive from that suicide and not from the marchioness's exit. If we read the phrase 'the marchioness, in despair . . .' it is a consequence not of what precedes it, but of what succeeds it: 'took a pistol and blew her brains out'. The teleological structure of plot makes the final suicide determine the despair, and not the despair the suicide. In plot, the determinations are always what Genette calls 'retrograde', means always follow from ends, causes are produced by their effects. This knowledge, that it is the goal or *telos* that governs all that precedes it, is an important part of reading. Indeed, it may be what makes any reading possible, since there is no directionless reading. Reading consists of asking questions (like 'and then?' or 'why?') and these questions, precisely because they are questions, are highly directive. They orientate our reading and, more importantly, they imply an answer. We read on on the assumption that mysteries will finally be explained, problems solved, truths revealed. 'Mystery is essential to a plot', says Forster (1949, 84), essential because by forming a question it directs reading towards the end and an explanation. 'The queen died, and no one knew why' poses a mystery, and by virtue of that act directs us towards the answer: 'through grief at the death of the king'.

The choice of *telos* is partly a question of literary convention. In Friedman's enumeration of the forms of plot one can see, if only from the examples that he provides for each category, that certain forms are more frequently associated with one genre, period or author than another. For example, the 'intrigue of action' (where the only question raised is 'and then?') is particularly frequent in popular literature (Friedman cites R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*). The 'tragic plot' is of course most frequently associated with tragic drama (*King Lear*, *Oedipus the King*). The 'maturing plot' where the hero begins by being inexperienced and naïve and finally matures as the result of his experiences, is particularly frequently associated with the novel (Friedman cites Dickens's *Great Expectations*). The 'pathetic plot' where a sympathetic but weak hero suffers misfortunes which he in no way deserves and to which he finally succumbs, is exemplified by Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and is typical not only of all Hardy's fiction but of that period in the nineteenth-century novel which we call naturalist. The 'degeneration plot' where all the hero's initiatives fail, so that he finally abandons his ideals, is the form of *Uncle Vanya* and *The Seagull*, and is indeed the form that we conventionally associate with Chekhov. Our cultural experience will often orientate our reading, so that confronted with a new Chekhov play or a new Zola novel, we anticipate (although on the understanding that it is nevertheless provisional) the degeneration plot and the pathetic plot, respectively.

In addition to this general orientation, texts themselves, as Roland Barthes has shown, provide us with material which provokes questions and so points us to the possibility of solution. In his discussion of what he calls the codes of the literary text, he distinguishes between the 'proairetic code' (or the code of actions) and the 'hermeneutic code' whose function is to pose, sustain and finally solve an enigma (1970a, 25–8). This indication of an enigma and the delaying of its solution profoundly structure our reading of the text and the sense which we ultimately make of it:

> Truth is skimmed over, deflected, lost. This accident is structural. The hermeneutic code does, in fact, have a function, the same as the one attributed [. . .] to the poetic code: just as rhyme (notably) structures the poem according to the expectation of and the desire for its return, so the hermeneutic terms structure the enigma according to the expectation of and desire for its resolution. The dynamic of the text (from the moment that it implies a truth to be deciphered) is thus paradoxical: it is a static dynamic: the problem is to *maintain* the enigma in the initial absence of its reply; whereas the sentences hasten the 'unfolding' of the story and cannot help leading the story on and advancing it, the hermeneutic code exercises a reverse action: it has to set *delays* in the flow of discourse (obstacles, halts, diversions); its structure is essentially reactive, for it counters the ineluctable advance of language with a play punctuated with halts.[. . .] In this way expectation becomes the condition on which truth can be founded: the truth, these narratives tell us, is what lies *at the end* of expectation. (1970a, 81–2)

Narrative is thus a delayed truth, and its truth is that which is delayed, a pattern which was already evident in Forster's miniature narrative: 'The queen died, and no one knew why [a phrase which simultaneously creates an enigma and delays its solution] until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king', where grief is the truth that awaits us at the end of the sequence and solves the mystery.

When Todorov asserts that no narrative is ever natural he seems to have every reason for doing so: narratives work backwards against the 'natural' flow of time and the almost as 'natural' flow of language; the essential element of narrative, the magnetic current which links its elements into a chain is both constructed and arbitrary (since meanings are never found, and always have to be made). 'No narrative is natural, choice and construction will always direct its appearance; it is a discourse and not a series of events. There is no "proper" narrative in contrast to "figurative" narratives (just as there is no proper meaning); all narratives are figurative. There is only the myth of proper narrative.' (Todorov, 1971, 68). The myth of proper narrative is indeed extremely powerful, and it is one which the polemical writings of the new novelists delight in exploding. But their essays should be read with caution, as they are coloured with a marked tone of indignation that so-called realist fiction could have beguiled us so successfully with this most unnatural (but perhaps finally most irresistible) of artifices.

Robbe-Grillet firmly consigns plot to his pile of 'outdated notions' (1963, 29–32). It is with scorn that he records the primary definition of the novel as narrative: 'For most readers – and critics – a novel is primarily a "story". A real novelist is someone who can "tell a story". His vocation as a writer is synonymous with his gift for telling stories, which carries him through from the beginning to the end of his work. Inventing thrilling, moving and dramatic incidents constitutes both his joy and his justification.' (29) In contrast to this supposedly naïve and old-fashioned view, the modern novelist recognises that 'story-telling has become strictly impossible' (31). The reason for this impossibility is that a story lends an utterly artificial air of naturalness to a novel. The presence of narrative in a novel is doubly deceitful: first, narratives pretend to give a real view of the world ('A tacit agreement is set up between reader and author: the author will pretend to believe the story he is telling, the reader will forget that everything is invented and will pretend to be dealing with a document, a biography, some real-life story', 29–30); and secondly, the very order and coherence of the plot give a false view of the world as ordered and intelligible.

> All the technical elements of narrative – the systematic use of the preterite and the third person, the unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, a regular graph of the emotions, the structuring of each episode towards an end, etc.; everything was designed to impose an image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unambiguous, entirely decipherable universe. Since there was no doubt about the intelligibility of the world, telling stories posed no problems. The novel's writing could be innocent. (31)

The natural air of narrative is false because it does not give us the world as it is, or as we experience it, and so must be condemned for its lack of realism. Equally, at the other end of the representational scale, plot deceives us by masking the fact that the novel is constituted by writing, and so mistakenly suggests that writing is innocent, something copied from or dictated by the world to which it supposedly refers: 'Even if we admitted that there was still something "natural" in the relationship between man and the world, writing, like all art forms, proves, in contrast, to be an invention. The very strength of the novelist is due to the fact that he is totally free to invent.' (30) Whichever of these two points of view one chooses (that of realism or that of the freedom of writing) Robbe-Grillet seems to be claiming that the narrative form of fiction no longer has any value or currency.

The same scornful tone is evident in Nathalie Sarraute's discussion of plot. It is a prejudice on the part of critics, she says, to insist that a novel 'is and will always remain, above all, "a story where one sees the lives and actions of characters"' (1956, 55). Plot for her is an artificial form of representation which 'by wrapping itself around the character like a bandage,

creates an impression of coherence and life, but also gives him the rigidity of a mummy' (64). For Sarraute, plot is a literary convention which gives a false illusion of the real, is merely *vraisemblable*, and it is in the name of a greater realism that her condemnation of plot must be read. There was a time, she implies, when people experienced their lives in the form of a narrative and for this reason the use of narrative in fiction was justifiable. But this era is over and the way in which we experience the world in the middle of the twentieth century can no longer be faithfully represented in narrative form. The reader 'has seen time cease to be the rapid current which carried the plot forward to become instead a stagnant pool at the bottom of which things slowly and subtly decompose; he has seen our actions lose their usual motives and their accepted meanings, he has seen unknown feelings appear and even the best-known ones change in appearance and name' (1956, 65). To convey this new concept of time and motivation, we must, she says, dispense with narrative.

For all their evidently polemical rhetoric, these attacks which date from the early days of the nouveau roman (Nathalie Sarraute's from 1950 and Robbe-Grillet's from 1957), seem nevertheless to be aimed at the foundations of the way in which our reading of novels is structured and to threaten the ways in which we go about making sense of them. Are we then to take these writers at their word? Should we look for alternative structuring principles in our attempts to make sense of the nouveaux romans? Was the incomprehension and suspicion which greeted the appearance of these works in the 1950s proof that the expectation of a narrative form is indeed a handicap to our appreciation of them? But if we can no longer read novels as stories, how are critical and interpretative activities to proceed? What kinds of things should we be looking for?

One answer is not to dispose of narrative at all, but instead to alter the way in which we look at it. Michel Butor in his essay 'Le roman comme recherche' (1960, 7–11) suggests that the novel is best regarded as the 'laboratory of narrative' (8). His starting-point is that we hear of the world and speak of ourselves to a great extent in narrative form. Narrative is: 'one

of the essential constituents of our apprehension of reality. Until we die, and from the moment that we understand words, we are perpetually surrounded by narratives, first in our family, then at school, then through the people we meet and the books we read.' (1960, 7) In this bath of narrative the novel appears simply as one 'particular form of narrative' (7). Its particularity lies in its fictionality: the events which it narrates cannot be verified, and fictional stories stand or fall by something other than the fidelity of its representation. The novel is thus free to explore various *forms* of narrative and, perhaps, being itself narrative, can make us aware of the narrative forms in which we habitually but unconsciously perceive; hear and talk of the real.

Instead of employing narrative as a form of mystification and trying to pass plots off as natural, the novel as laboratory will revel, on the contrary, in the consciousness of plot as unnatural: 'Exploration of different novelistic forms reveals what is contingent in the form that we are used to, unmasks it, frees us from it, and allows us to discover beyond this fixed narrative everything which it camouflages or passes over in silence, all the fundamental narrative in which our whole life is steeped' (1960, 9). In another essay Butor writes: 'Narrative gives us the world, but it is doomed to give us a false world' (1964, 88), and it is the incorporation of this recognition into our reading of novels which makes of them a laboratory, and enables us to be rid of the otiose and rather invidious distinction implied by Robbe-Grillet's writings between naïve or deceitful fiction on the one hand, and modernist fiction on the other. *All* novels can be read as a laboratory of narrative. Butor makes of this a general principle: 'The novel tends naturally and it must tend towards its own elucidation' (1960, 11). This self-elucidation is not a key to crack the code, or what Proust called the price-tag on the goods (*A la recherche du temps perdu* III, 882), but implies that what is brought into play in fiction is not only the object of representation but also the means of representation. The poetics of fiction become engaged in the reading of fiction and are incorporated into its 'subject matter'.

The exploration of narrative form is a feature not just of

the nouveau roman (although the nouveau roman may oblige us to acknowledge that exploration more cogently than other novels), but is a striking feature of most fiction of this century. Even as long ago as the eighteenth century we find that such novels as Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* very explicitly and playfully incorporate questions of poetics into their subject matter. And Todorov, in his analysis of the thirteenth-century work, *La quête du saint-graal*, discovers that 'narrative appears as the fundamental theme of *La quête du graal*', and adds, importantly, 'as indeed it is of all narrative, but always in a different way' (1971, 149). It remains now to see how far this theme (or, at least, different aspects of it) is present in the nouveau roman.

The absent 'telos': 'Les gommes'

Les gommes, Robbe-Grillet's first published novel, and, indeed, one of the earliest of all the nouveaux romans (it appeared in 1953) lends itself admirably to the kind of reflexive reading that I am proposing as a general method of approach. *Les gommes* presents itself, at least superficially, as a detective story and, in addition, the text is studded with allusions to the Oedipus legend. These two genres, the detective story and Greek tragedy, both depend heavily on a delayed truth which is only revealed at the end. Both genres are highy teleological and seem to conform closely to the structural norm which emerged from the foregoing discussion of narrative organisation.

W. H. Auden, in his essay on detective stories, 'The guilty vicarage' (1962, 146–58), makes an explicit comparison between the detective story and Greek tragedy and finds many points in common between the two. The most essential of these he describes as follows: 'there is Concealment (the innocent seem guilty and the guilty seem innocent) and Manifestation (the real guilt is brought to consciousness)' (147). The very words *concealment* and *manifestation* indicate how central is the notion of a delayed truth to both forms, although in the detective story it is primarily the reader who is kept waiting for the

truth, whereas in tragedy it is the hero who awaits a final recognition. *Oedipus*, for example, ends when Oedipus himself discovers that he has unwittingly fulfilled the oracle's prophecy. The detective story closes with the discovery of the murderer, and, very often with an account by the detective of how he pieced together the clues to arrive at the truth (a piecing together which the reader is by definition incapable of and which can only be grasped in retrospect).

Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* is punctuated with frequent invocations of the 'truth'. Already at the beginning Oedipus makes it clear that the discovery of truth is his prime purpose: 'I'll find the truth', he asserts (line 132), and as the events move to a climax and the horror increases, he stubbornly insists, 'I *will* know the truth' (line 1027). When he finally learns the true story of his birth, he leaves the stage, lamenting in anguish, 'Ah God! This is *the truth, at last*' (line 1137, my emphasis). The truth is out *at last* and the entire plot is structured around the anticipation of its revelation. Robbe-Grillet picks up this theme of the final truth and alludes to it in the epigraph of *Les gommes*: 'Time, which sees to everything, has given the solution, despite you', a version of two lines from Sophocles's tragedy: 'Time sees all, and Time, in your despite,/Disclosed and punished your unnatural marriage' (lines 1165–6). In both the original and the altered form, these lines emphasise the notion of (inevitable) revelation, be it in the form of *solution* (to an enigma) or *disclosure* (of a truth). The novel itself, however, fails to reveal anything or to solve any mystery. The detective, instead of uncovering a murderer, commits the crime himself at the end of his enquiry. As Jean Ricardou says, 'the enquiry *precedes* the murder and, in preceding it, *engenders* it' (1973, 35). This is the reverse of *Oedipus the King* which ends with the revelation of the origins of the sequence of events, namely the circumstances of Oedipus's birth and upbringing. Time does indeed reveal all in Sophocles's tragedy, but, contrary to the claim of the epigraph to *Les gommes*, Robbe-Grillet's novel neither reveals nor solves anything. Not only is there no murder until Wallas, the detective, pulls the trigger at the end, but the several mysteries which are raised during the course of the investiga-

tion remain unsolved. If we accept that there is a gang under the leadership of a certain Bona which is responsible for a murder committed at the same time every day, we certainly never discover whether or not the minister Roy-Dauzet is in league with them. The so-called victim, Dupont, and a certain Marchat are said to belong to an organisation whose nature and function remain obscure. Dr Juard who hides Dupont after the first murder-attempt and falsely certifies his death, might in fact belong to Bona's gang – the question is never settled. It is normally the function of a detective novel to elucidate all the aspects of a mystery (often in the detective's final explanation), so that, for example, the strange behaviour of an innocent suspect is accounted for and placed in the overall pattern of events. But in *Les gommes* mysteries are multiplied rather than solved. The novel constantly invites us to ask 'why?' but then declines to answer.

If the detective aspect of the novel proves unfruitful, one might look for narrative coherence in another strand. And here it would seem reasonable to turn to the title as a guide to the theme of the narrative. Wallas's search for the ideal eraser coincides with his search for the (non-existent) murderer on a few occasions, but the two pursuits seem never to be meaningfully integrated. Although the proprietress of one of the stationer's shops visited by Wallas is Dupont's ex-wife, although she has a large picture of Dupont's house in the shop window, and although the agent Garinati buys a postcard of the house in the shop, these facts are never woven in with Wallas's criminal investigation. The erasers seem more likely to lend themselves to being integrated with the Oedipal theme, which then might make possible a rereading of the criminal themes of the novel: Wallas-Oedipus kills Dupont-Laius, and the role of Jocasta is then filled by the seductive Madame Dupont pictured in Wallas's mind's eye as 'the attractive young woman waiting for him [Dupont] in front of the open door of her bedroom . . . with her cooing little laugh, which seems to rise from her whole body . . . provocative and inviting' (187). The specific place of the erasers in this formulation is implied by Wallas's description of the one he is searching for: 'The brand

name was printed on one side, but was too worn to be legible any more: only the two middle letters "di" could be deciphered; there must have been at least two letters before and two more after' (132). This name is easily completed as 'Oe-di-pe' (a completion, which, however, the young woman is unable to make). But once this association with the legend has been made, what are we to make of it? For here too there is a profusion of loose threads, allusions to significances which are never revealed. There are many references to the Oedipus legend in the novel: the riddle, the Sphinx (in the form of the 'fabulous animal' in the canal), the shepherds rescuing an abandoned child (depicted on the curtains in the houses in the town), the chariot with its symbolic figures signed by 'V. Daulis', the picture of the ruins of Thebes in the stationer's shop, Madame Jean's recurrent nightmare with its 'sybilline writing', the unintelligible oracular loudspeaker at the station, the Rue de Corinthe, the Apollonian sculpture of an athlete killing a dragon, the blind old man being led by a child, Wallas's swollen feet.[1] But none of these references seems to contribute towards the revelation of a truth: the riddle is never properly formulated and Wallas never answers it, there is no deciphering either of the sybilline writing or of the oracular loudspeaker, and if Wallas's feet swell, he suffers neither the anguish nor the self-inflicted blindness of his potential counterpart in the legend.

Much has been made of the fact that Wallas gradually remembers that he once visited this nameless town as a child to visit his father – whom he never saw. But the text does not give us enough information to allow us to integrate this memory into a significant relation either with Dupont's death or with Wallas's hand in it. The Oedipal associations are all in peripheral details:

[1] Morrissette's study of this novel includes useful explanations of these allusions. For example, the name Daulis can be read as an 'allusion nette, mais qui échappe naturellement à Wallas, à la "route de Daulia" dans *Oedipe-Roi*, sous une forme (Daulis) qui renferme en plus, comme par pure coïncidence, une anagramme de Laïus'. The sculpture of the athlete killing the dragon is apparently a reference to the classical pose in which Apollo, the god of oracles and prophecy, is frequently represented. The old man being led by the child is an allusion to 'Tirésias guidé par un jeune garçon dans *Oedipe-Roi*' (Morrissette, 1963, 57).