Robbe-Grillet in New York

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Robbe-Grillet criticism was long bedevilled by an inspired, but erroneous guess of Roland Barthes,[1] who claimed *Les Gommes* as "littérature objective." Robbe-Grillet propounded many theories[2] on the premise that the world of objects simply "was," it did not signify, and that the artist must resist the temptation to impose on objects a meaning of his own. It followed, or was made to appear to follow, that there must be no omniscient narrator. Yet from this another conclusion followed which went quite counter to the original premise, making a pattern familiar from our reading of the novels themselves (A, therefore B, therefore C, therefore A is wrong). For if the novelist was obliged to espouse the point of view of a character, who was no superman, and if his character was likely to fall into the same trap as the rest of us, and expect meaning in things (more than most, indeed, the protagonists of the early novels being, as Robbe-Grillet himself cheerfully remarked, a prey to strong sexual obsessions), then it was difficult to see how the novel could cure us of our propensity to myth-making. The theory was, however, several degrees less subtle than the practice, and it gradually emerged that the real key to reading Robbe-Grillet was to be found in a very different direction.

The purest, simplest, and in many ways still the finest example of Robbe-Grillet's art is *Dans le Labyrinthe* (1959). Here, although the text presents many apparent contradictions, it very soon strikes the reader that he can make sense of them if he assumes that the central character is inventing a story, and invention, like memory and day-dreaming, does not proceed in neat, logical steps. If it is true invention—artistic creation—and not just dreaming, coherence must be imposed on the fragments produced by the freely roaming imagination, whether it be logical or imaginative coherence. And Robbe-Grillet's narrator is preoccupied, in part, with autocriticism and revision. However his first drafts are there for us to read, and in the intricate web of variants and variations, a pattern emerges which does appeal to our imagination. But Robbe-Grillet does not leave it there. Our assumption that we are sharing the narrator's experience saves us from finding the work too incoherent, but it rests on a way of reading which derives from realism. Ultimately, Robbe-Grillet wishes us to realize that the novelist is bound only by the requirements—so subtle and intangible—of the imagination, not of logic. And so he introduces into his last chapter details which throw doubt on our interpretation, and which suggest that the novelist is manipulating the narrator as freely as the fictional narrator is manipulating his own invented characters. The same reading is probably valid for the previous novel, *La Jalousie* (1957), although that is usually taken as a portrayal of the thoughts of a jealous man. But the different chapters of that book could also be a semi-invention, with only the events of the last section "real," and there again, one or two details obstinately refuse to allow any interpretation to be water-tight.

In the sixties, Robbe-Grillet stressed more and more the theme of invention, and the role of pattern-making. The scenario of his first film, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), invents a character's past without disclosing from whose point of view the tale is being told, and we are left feeling that only the involved patterns of images and words has any reality for us.

A second film, *L'Immortelle* (1963), has the same ambiguity, especially in the last two shots. Returning to the novel with *La Maison de Rendez-vous* in 1965, Robbe-Grillet again makes invention his principal theme, but on a much more spontaneous level than in *Dans le Labyrinthe.* A few semi-erotic objects in a shop window are enough to set the narrator dreaming, as he says himself, and from them he gradually elaborates a story of murder and drug-trafficking in Hong-Kong. As with the earlier novel, events are reworked, reorganized, making four different versions altogether. They interlock to make a pattern which is less haunting than the tragic story of *Dans le Labyrinthe,* but which is nevertheless extremely refreshing, and often very amusing. The narrator is absorbed by his own fantasy to the extent of becoming indistinguishable from his main character.[3] For all its fascination, I have not found *La Maison de Rendez-Vous* as satisfying as the other novels, perhaps because the "game" element seems to be developed at the expense of any deeper human meaning, by which I do not wish to dissociate form from content—the game is the meaning, I recognize—but just to suggest that the Hong-Kong story does not, to me, have the same resonance as the four novels which preceded it.

Despite rumors that he had abandoned fiction for the film, in 1970 Robbe-Grillet gave us his sixth novel, *Projet d'une Révolution à New York.*[4] It continues further along the line of *La Maison de Rendez-Vous,* and at first I thought that it fell into the same trap, the excessive ingenuity diminishing the sense of mystery and value. Greater familiarity has however banished most of my doubts. This is not the place for a full exegesis of the often enigmatic text, but a brief summary is in order.[5]

Searching for some way to understand what is happening, the reader will probably quickly conclude that there is a narrator who is describing his life in New York, making no distinction between reality and his fantasies. The book opens with the narrator closing the door of his lodging behind him. His imagination immediately animates the patterns in the wood to make a fairly banal scene of violence. After this prologue there are four main divisions. The narrator apparently sets off to the subway, walks along deserted passages to the underground shopping mall. This narration is forever being confused by fantasies, which may include a fair amount of memories. Thus he frequently talks to Laura, a young girl, maybe his sister, whom he leaves in the house all day, and who herself has fantasies about agression, the agressor being on occasion the narrator. In the subway his observations merge into a fantasy about criminal gangs, who are being instructed in the perfect crime of violence. Part Two introduces a new character, JR, a high-class prostitute who in the narrator's fantasy spends the daytime looking after a young girl called Laura. JR is a member of the gang, involved in drug trafficking, and she disappears after a scene in which she is sexually assaulted by the narrator disguised as a policeman. A variant of this also occurs in a book which Laura (from Part One) is reading; in this version the pseudo-policeman as well as raping her, interrogates her. The book also reminds us of the scene depicted in the Prologue. Part Three is constituted by JR's wildest flight of fancy under interrogation, an incident which takes place on the Metropolitan, and it too includes an interrogation. In the final section the narrator makes several attempts to build all the many details and suggestions into new combinations, or new fantasies.

Although the notion of a narrator who confuses fact and fancy may help us to make some sense of the book, it soon becomes clear that the

articulation of the different fantasies is creating its own patterns and tensions, and that our realistic habits of reading are not really relevant to this book. We find ourselves reacting positively to qualities in the book which have little to do with simply solving enigmas. The wit, the sheer invention—often expressed through the manifest chaos of the surface events—is a wholesome and delightful thing. If we insist on trying to locate the dividing-line between the narrator's "reality" and his fantasies, we risk reacting negatively to what is surely the most captivating part of the creation: the way any fantasy, once entertained, becomes the semi-real basis for new fantasies, so that we end with a world which is at least 95% fantasy, but which does not get out of control, because of the intricate and satisfying way in which the different incidents relate to each other.

And indeed, we may wish to relinquish even the remaining 5%, for Robbe-Grillet does not really let us believe that his narrator has any autonomous existence. The narrator is a character like the others, created by a novelist who will not compromise his own freedom. Despite his earlier theoretical statements, Robbe-Grillet is always ready to enter the minds of his characters. When he does so, the narrator is described as a third-person character, who, because of his privileged situation—he is after all the narrator—can easily become, once again, the first-person narrator, as if the fiction is too unnatural to sustain for long. When it does, the spell is broken, and we are no longer in the mind of one of the characters. As these characters, we have assumed, are largely figments of the narrator's own imagination, the effect is slightly dizzying and never less than witty.

Readers cannot easily shed habits acquired from "realistic" fiction, and we are bound to wonder at times just what is going on. Robbe-Grillet builds this understandable reaction into the novel itself, including discussions with the reader. In one of the best of these, the reader objects to the excessive insistence on erotic detail, but the novelist can easily prove that there is much in the novel besides erotica, and he accuses the reader with incomparable elegance of living in a glass house: ". . . vos questions intempestives . . . montrent l'excessive importance que vous accordez vous-même à certains passages (quitte à me les reprocher ensuite) et le peu d'attention que vous prêtez à tout le reste" (p. 191). At times these interventions are quite helpful. But they are really all part of the joke.

We are forced therefore to say that this is a "novel," a poetic statement, its own justification. But we must be careful here. The claim does not mean that it is meaningless, irresponsible, fiddling while New York burns. It means only that the responsibility, the meaning, is aesthetic, that is, imaginative, and not social or political.

Take first the theme alluded to in the title, the plan for a revolution. Ignoring now the insoluble question of what "really" happens, we have what we can term a New York underworld with events of extraordinary violence and sexual tension.

We shall spare the reader an anthology of the passages which would support this statement, the countless appearances of the motif of blood, of female genitals, the scenes of rape and torture. Some are extended sequences; others are passing references, almost gratuitous, which serve to show how profoundly the texture is permeated with violence (pp. 32, 68, 119, 159 etc.). A fragment of "plot" suggests that Laura is to be cured of memories

of violence. The impression continues right down to the hasty final explanations.

At the same time, we are left in no doubt as to the meaning attached to these happenings. They are essentially therapeutic. This emerges most clearly in the lecture the narrator stumbles across (p. 38) and the explanations given to JR (p. 153): ". . . la série des 'Crimes individuels éducatifs' qui essaie d'opérer une catharsis générale des désirs inavoués de la société contemporaine" (p. 154). Of course, we cannot take these claims at face value. But we can see such theories as mirroring the therapeutic value of reading itself.

In the first place, we cannot fail to notice the contrast between the violence and the exceptional elegance of the style. Robbe-Grillet could say, with the author of *Lolita,* that there are no crude expressions in his book.[6] The connection of violence and elegance is made explicit in the description of the gang (pp. 37, 39). The elegance turns the savage cruelty into comedy. The best example is the extraordinary interrogation of JR by the narrator disguised as a policeman (pp. 96-105), explaining that he is going to rape her, in terms of old-world courtesy, and treating her throughout with the most exquisite attentions.

Robbe-Grillet himself, commenting on the novel, argues that we cannot avoid images of sex and violence in the modern city, any more than the Stoic could avoid death.[7] But like the Stoic, we can show ourselves superior—by forging our own creation out of these images. Forging our own creation means, for Robbe-Grillet, writing the novel of New York.

Robbe-Grillet does not let us forget the presence of another character whom we did not mention in our analysis: the novelist himself. Every so often he muses about what is happening, or about what he ought to be doing. As with the discussions with the reader, this is part of the text of the novel, and so part of the joke. At one point the remarks are addressed directly to the reader: "La raison, gros malin, qu'on ne peut pas tout raconter à la fois, et qu'il y a toujours un moment où une histoire bifurque, revient en arrière ou fait un bond en avant, ou se met à proliférer; alors on dit Reprise, pour que les gens sachent bien où ils en sont" (p. 157). Elsewhere the observations of the novelist are more discreet (pp. 28, 81, 116, 208, etc.).

Another aspect concerns the aesthetic parallels within this book. These have always been part of Robbe-Grillet's technique. We have to take them as pointers to the way we are to read Robbe-Grillet, though the precise relevance is not always clear. Thus, the film advertised in the subway (p. 29), the dialogue distributed among three characters (p. 37), the advertisement for masks,—an invitation to seek a fresh identity—(p. 52), the novel Laura is reading (especially p. 92), the invitation to JR to invent her story (p. 105), details of this narration (p. 159), and finally the report prepared by the narrator himself, which contains some factual errors concerning New York City: "Je fais mon rapport, un point c'est tout. Le texte est correct, et rien n'est laissé au hasard, il faut le prendre tel qu'il est . . . Personne n'a jamais prétendu que le récit était fait par un Américain" (p. 189).

There seem to me to be two ways in which *Projet d'une Révolution à New York* appeals directly to the aesthetic imagination of the reader. One is by the pattern, a very intricate one, as we have seen. If the parallels add

to the cohesion of the different levels, Robbe-Grillet's habit of crossing levels leads to incoherence on one plane, although on another plane, the book is perfectly coherent. But it follows, in Eliot's phrase, the logic of the imagination, not the logic of concepts. Secondly, it appeals by its wit, which is a form of art. Robbe-Grillet's patterns are nothing if not witty. Once we understand where we should place ourselves we can appreciate this wit. Robbe-Grillet reverses his signs, with a mathematician's indifference as to whether the result has any possible equivalent in the world of ordinary experience: ". . . on ne distingue rien de ce qui peut, *ou non,* se trouver à l'intérieur" (p. 8). He anticipates the reader's reaction: "L'image est toujours aussi forte et précise de la petite clef d'acier poli, demeurée sur le marbre de la console . . . Il y a *donc* une console dans cet obscur vestibule" (p. 12). There are some beautifully elegant inventions: the interrogation, already mentioned (one of the high spots of the novel for anyone who enjoys Marx Brothers humor), the idea that police efficiency is increased by having the criminal write the report of the crime (p. 130), and other slightly mad details. A *fervent* will relish particularly the use he makes of his own books, particularly the previous two novels, both by vague parallels, or by direct quotation, or by allusions to a character or a name (such as Johnson, pp. 66, 100, 135, 158).

It is indeed a novel of astounding inventiveness, and of remarkable elegance in expression. I myself find that it has a hallucinatory power, that it is more than a fantastically ingenious joke. The things he evokes, the gestures of the characters, jump off the page and lodge in the reader's mind. Even if your intellect does not always follow, there is a hypnotic spell cast. Partly this is due to the fact that we have the feeling that although the logical explanation escapes us, it is there somewhere, tantalizing and tormenting us, and so we pay particular attention to each word. Likewise, we appreciate the elegant shape and economy of each sentence. Everything combines to grip our attention.

What assessment do we make? I know the novel will not be to everyone's taste; it does ask for a certain kind of mental pleasure, if a reader is to take it seriously enough to work at it, and the raw material itself may put some people off. Personally, though I do not say that Robbe-Grillet is another Proust, I find that he has become part of my imagination, in a way which is only possible for an artist with something very original and positive to give us. And as long as a writer convinces me that he is a genuine artist, I do not much worry whether he then takes first, second or third prize.

NOTES

[1]Roland Barthes, *Critique,* 86, July 1954, 581-91.

[2]The most significant of these articles were collected in *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1963).

[3]See J. Goodstein, "Pattern and structure in Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de Rendez-vous*", *Critique,* 14 (1972), 91-9. (This is the American publication, not the French one referred to in notes 1 and 4.)

[4]Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Projet d'une Révolution à New York* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1970). It was reviewed by Jean Ricardou, "La Fiction flamboyante," *Critique,* 286, March 1971, 210-28.

[5]A full exegesis of the novel was included in my original script, but it made the article much too long.

[6]In the "prière à insérer" of the first edition, based on an article in *Le Nouvel Observateur,* 26 June 1970.

[7]Ibid.