

## BRUNO HILLEBRAND

Theorie des Romans

(Theory of the Novel)

München: Winkler, 1972. Pp. 530.  
DM 29.

There are, according to Professor Hillebrand, two ways for dealing with the theory of the novel. The first is the one taken by novelists who, relying on their own subjective experience, try to sum up their conceptions of the novel. The second is the one followed by theorists and non-writers of fiction who, after reading, analyzing, and examining different novels, attempt to recapitulate their observations as objectively as possible in the form of a theory of the novel that will always be valid.

Mr. Hillebrand rejects this "ahistorical" attitude, for, when theorists try to "x-ray" different novels, they are usually preoccupied by purely extrinsic aspects and neglect important elements like themes, characters, and subject matter which are all significant parts of the content.

After expressing his doubts about the possibility of laying down a theory that is valid for all novels, the author notices that theories about the novel show some recurring patterns that might enable us to go beyond the generic analysis and understand more about the novel as a literary object. For instance, the novel is more "inter-communicative" than other genres; it is aimed in the first place at entertaining and enlightening the reader; also, the novelist's main endeavor is to project "a panorama of the human scene" and to depict the "condition humaine."

The author is not interested in reproducing and rearranging well-known theories of the novel; he is primarily concerned with the "practical" aspects of the novel, but not without taking the different theories into consideration. He observes closely the development of this genre from its very beginning (the Hellenistic novel) to the present time (the so-called "anthropological responsible novel"). He thoroughly examines the themes, the styles, and the *zeitgeist* of each historical epoch and literary movement and—calling upon novelists and historians for proof and evidence—he presents a very clear and comprehensive history of the novel and its theories.

S.K.

## STEPHEN HEATH

*The Nouveau Roman:*

*A Study in the Practice of Writing*

Philadelphia: Temple University Press,  
1972. Pp. 252.

Heath's book is itself a Robbe-Grilletian labyrinth. A study in the practice of writing, the major authorities cited to combat the theories of Robbe-Grillet are linguists and semioticians, exponents of Russian formalism (Roman Jakobson, Julia Kristeva, etc.). Although Russian formalism is theoretically opposed to Marxist socialism, Heath views their position as essentially in harmony with Philippe Sollers and the staff of *Tel Quel*, who severed their relations with Robbe-Grillet in 1968 on the publication of their *Théorie d'ensemble* ("the theoretical work of the review that is seen as a contribution within Marxism-Leninism," p. 220). This political commitment is in stark opposition to Robbe-Grillet's single commitment, namely to literature itself.

It is remarkable, moreover, that in a review of the *New Novel* no attention is paid to the work of Michel Butor. The chapters on Nathalie Sarraute and on Claude Simon are concise and free of the "dialectic" of the longer chapters on Robbe-Grillet and on Sollers.

Heath emphasizes the fact that the "concept of *société*" has been abandoned by Robbe-Grillet (p. 95). By extension, Robbe-Grillet's denial of a rapport between persons and objects draws a more caustic comment: ". . . innocent relationship Robbe-Grillet wishes to establish is nonsense" (p. 104). The latter's "naïve materialism" is opposed to "dialectical materialism," and a passage from Marx, originally directed against Feuerbach, is now directed against Robbe-Grillet (p. 107). By undermining the importance of Robbe-Grillet, of course, Heath is magnifying the social role of Sollers, who continues and perfects, according to Heath, the practice of writing.

Because of a complicated sentence structure, Heath will alienate some readers, who might already be disappointed in the disproportion of space allotted to citations from critics (the formalists, Lévy-Strauss, Barthes, etc.) as opposed to space devoted to the novels themselves (only

*Dans le labyrinthe* has any importance to the author). Many sentences are unclear and even confusing, for example: "The situation of Barthes' conception of literature (as of Kristeva's) . . . is that which serves as part of the impetus for Derrida's interrogation of the sign, and the practice of literature can be regarded as within the dramatization of that economy of distribution grasped by Derrida in the term *différance* [sic], as recognition of the work of the *signifiant*, of the materiality of its inscription" (pp. 203-04). Here we are excising somewhat unfairly, inasmuch as the new term *différance* has already been introduced, but notwithstanding that fact, the passage remains imprecise and unclear.

A work of undeniable erudition, Heath's book will no doubt appeal more to adherents of the socio-linguistic school

of criticism rather than to those of a more traditional literary stamp. The latter, while judging Robbe-Grillet and his work as representing a departure, or even a rupture, from traditional norms, still tend to view him in contrast with the French novelists who preceded him (Sartre, Camus, Malraux, etc.). Pierre de Boisdeffre is a critic typical of this traditionalist school. Heath's method, on the other hand, is to cite works in semiotics, such as Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Russian Folk-Tale* (p. 211), as the basis for judgment on Robbe-Grillet's work. Finally, since as Heath explains on the last page, Sollers and the *Tel Quel* group feel that "the experience of limits cannot but be . . . political" (p. 242), the more traditional literary critics will conclude that this position of *Tel Quel* is a denigration of the role of literature, because it deprives literature of its independence.

Francis S. Heck

## DISCUSSION AND COMMENT

On Joan Givner's Article "Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty and *Ethan Brand*," *IFR*, 1 (1974), 32-37.

Professor Joan Givner takes an imaginative and perceptive leap to bring Hawthorne's Ethan Brand and the nameless heroine of Katherine Anne Porter's *Theft* together as perpetrators of unpardonable sins. In Ethan Brand's case this sin is his shameless pursuit of intellectual inquiry done at the expense of weakening his moral nature. The girl in *Theft* sins, according to Givner, in her inordinate pride which clouds her values so that she sees only magnanimity in her actions towards others, rather than the malevolence and gross evil that are actually present. Givner appears preoccupied with universal evil. She brings in yet another example by reference to Eudora Welty's *The Petrified Man* and its depiction of the sordid vulgarity of crude females venting their depraved frustrations on the whipping of an evil three-year-old boy. The main characters in Welty's story, as well as in *Ethan Brand* and *Theft*, are all evil because they are unable to love.

This omnipotence of evil works nicely for Ethan Brand's quest for the acme of sin, and for the insensitive creatures in *The Petrified Man*. However, Joan Givner will have to exclude her key entry *Theft* from these areas of evil if she follows the argument of my reading of the story.

The young aspiring writer's opening perceptive review of her previous day's encounters with three friends, when she still had the now missing purse, is subdued and genuine. She protects and aids each friend. Her purse, a symbol of her benevolence, intrudes at each meeting.