

made at a crucial point in *Ship of Fools*. Dr. Schumann says: "Most of us are too slack, half-hearted, or cowardly, luckily, I suppose. Our collusion with evil is only negative, consent by default, you might say. I suppose in our hearts our sympathies are with the criminal because he really commits the deeds we only dream of doing."¹

That Dr. Schumann's works represent the author's own opinion is evident from her description of the theme of *Ship of Fools* and of her lifelong preoccupation:

Of course there were all the good worthy people who didn't believe in the clowns, but then good worthy people still let the clowns commit all the crimes good worthy people would commit if only they had the nerve. How else to account for the collusion in evil that allows creatures like Mussolini, or Hitler, or Huey Long, or McCarthy—you can make your own list, petty and great—to gain hold of things? Who permits it? Oh, we're convinced *we're* not evil. We don't believe in that sort of thing, do we? And the strange thing is that if these agents of evil are all clowns, why do we put up with them? God knows, such men are evil, without sense—forces of pure ambition and will—but they enjoy our tacit consent. . . . So you see, the tragedy of our times is not an accident but a total consent.²

A few years later, when John Kennedy was shot, Katherine Anne Porter described the first dazed look on his wife's face as "being replaced by a full knowledge of the nature of Evil, its power and its bestial imbecility."³

Professor Murad says "Givner appears preoccupied with universal evil." My own preoccupations are not at issue here. I believe that Katherine Anne Porter is concerned with universal evil and that she would readily concur with my description of her philosophy. That Katherine Anne Porter sees *Evil* as a physical entity I consider her major weakness. It is a narrow, simplistic, melodramatic view which undermines her work. I think it greatly mars an ambitious novel like *Ship of Fools*, and to a lesser degree a modest short story like *Theft*.

¹Katherine Anne Porter, *Ship of Fools* (Boston, 1962), p. 294.

²James Ruoff and Del Smith, "Katherine Anne Porter on *Ship of Fools*," *College English*, 24 (February, 1963), 397.

³Katherine Anne Porter, *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), p. 309.

Robbe-Grillet's "Microtexts"

For more than a decade critics have seemed determined to avoid any specific commentary on the ten short prose compositions which Robbe-Grillet wrote between 1954 and 1962 and published under the collective title *Instantanés (Snapshots)* in the latter year. Therefore, in a general way, we need to welcome two recently published essays which focus on "The Dressmaker's Dummy," the first selection in *Snapshots: Yves de la Quérière's* sometimes astute exegesis, "Robbe-Grillet dans le sens du texte: *Le Mannequin*" (*FR*, 46 [1973], 960-71); and Renée Riese Hubert's comparative study, "Microtexts: An Aspect of the Work of Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute," which, of course, appeared in the distinguished inaugural issue of *IFR* (Jan. 1974, pp. 9-16). Insofar as space allows, however, I must question Professor Hubert's reading of "The Dressmaker's Dummy," and attempt to explain that her method of

exemplification, which implies that "The Dressmaker's Dummy" epitomizes Robbe-Grillet's short texts, is, to say the least, ill-advised. (Incidentally, I do wonder where "Robbe-Grillet has referred to his texts as stories" ["Microtexts," p. 15]. It is true that the designation appears on the cover and the "copyright" page of the Grove Press ed. of *Snapshots*—trans. Bruce Morrissette [New York, 1968]; I quote from this ed.—and that at least two of the texts are pieces of narration; but if a generic title is to be used, I suggest "vignettes," "chossite descriptions," or, best of all, "snapshots.")

Professor Hubert contends that "The Dressmaker's Dummy" is a "series of snapshots" or a "verbal inventory," which does not add up to "any meaning" or arrive at any "coherent, overall view" (p. 12); she implies that the observer is equivalent to "the objective eye of the camera" (p. 12); she implies that the observer is equivalent only the image of a moment thus pointing to our divorce from reality" (p. 13—"divorce from reality"? how so?). Such a view is sufficiently reasonable if one is willing to ignore the conclusion of the "snapshot." After a break in the text (abnormal spacing between paragraphs), the observer concludes with four brief paragraphs which supplement in an important way the preceding semi-scientific description; abandoning the role of a more or less objective reporter, he offers judgments ("the room is quite bright," "the window is unusually wide"), employs his olfactory sense and judgment ("a good smell of hot coffee"), remembers the former positions of still visible objects (the dressmaker's dummy and wardrobe) and establishes a reason ("the fittings") for their present positions, and, finally, describes an object which is hidden from sight and visible only in his memory (the ceramic tile base on which the coffeepot stands). Although Professor Hubert remarks incidentally that Robbe-Grillet "even alludes to what cannot be seen" in the room (p. 12), she also claims that "the vision provided by the camera, which *excludes* literary, pictorial and personal memories, is held together by nothing more than the instantaneous exposure which will not be repeated" (emphasis added), and then concludes her analysis with brief, inadequate comments on what she mistakenly calls "the final paragraph" (see p. 13). As for the "meaning" of, or, more precisely, the implications implicit in "The Dressmaker's Dummy," I believe that several possibilities might be offered. For instance, after describing the complex interplay produced by objects in a room—reflecting surfaces, things, which in a sense perceive other things and cause them to appear reversed, unreversed, multiplied, distorted, and nearly annihilated—in the addendum the human observer may feel forced to acknowledge and illustrate that his own view of things is unlike that of an "objective . . . camera." As Robbe-Grillet himself warns in "A Future for the Novel," "even the least conditioned observer is unable to see the world around him through entirely unprejudiced eyes. . . . Objectivity in the ordinary sense of the word—total impersonality of observation—is all too obviously an illusion." (*For a New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Grove Press, 1965], p. 18).

Because of her comparative approach, perhaps it is partially understandable that Professor Hubert offers only scattered remarks on the nature of "snapshots": although she declares that Robbe-Grillet's volume "almost completely" lacks "unity" and mentions that, in one way, some of the "snapshots" "present different obstacles and problems" (p. 9), she also implies that in all of the ten texts Robbe-Grillet is primarily concerned with the relationship between "the eye and the object" (p. 9; "man and object," p. 10)—or, in other words, that all of the "snapshots" are, like "The Dressmaker's Dummy," phenomenological exercises; she also seems to believe that all of the texts are "photographic" accounts of scenes (p. 9), in which movement and time are inconsequential: ". . . the notion of 'instantanés,' by restricting perception to an instant, excludes time exposure or the unfolding of a time sequence" (p. 12)—a remark which is apt enough for "The Dressmaker's Dummy" but certainly not for some of its companions.

Only in the briefest way is it possible to suggest here how *Snapshots* is a diversified collection. "The Dressmaker's Dummy," which is probably tedious to all but a few devoted readers of Robbe-Grillet, gains in interest if one remembers that it is the first of a series entitled "Three Reflected Visions" (including "The Replacement" and "The Wrong Direction," all 1954), which are contrasting studies of reflecting surfaces and

differ in other ways; for instance, "The Replacement" is a cryptic narrative (with characters, dialogue, and duration), strikingly unlike its immediate predecessor. "In the Corridors of the Métro" (1959), another series, in which the three parts are numbered in the Minuit ed. (I, "The Escalator"; II, "A Corridor"; III, "Behind the Automatic Door"), appears to be a carefully designed and meaningful unit. "Scene" (1955), a description of a single actor's "performance" on a stage, is meant, I think, to be a perfect enigma, and perhaps best of all illustrates what Professor Hubert may have in mind when she speaks of "fragmentation," "discontinuity," and the "void" (p. 10). "The Shore" (1956) is a very different matter: it is a study of non-progressive "movement" and is also Robbe-Grillet's most lovely piece of prose, a prose-poem in my estimation (see "Microtexts," p. 15). But most important of all are "The Way Back" (1954) and "The Secret Room" (1962), complex and brilliantly executed experiments illustrating Robbe-Grillet's preoccupation with both time and description. In brief, by no means is *Snapshots* merely a collection of static "photographs." Robbe-Grillet certainly admits movement and time into some of his texts, but in ingenious ways he also attempts to avoid a completed process in a temporal continuum, and thus to achieve what, in *For a New Novel*, he calls "instantaneity." Finally, a number of Robbe-Grillet's explanations in *For a New Novel* are helpful glosses on *Snapshots* (for instance, see pp. 86-87, 148, 155).

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BOOKS RECEIVED

FICTION

Ashford, Jeffrey. *The Double Run*. New York: Walker, 1973. 192 pp. \$4.95.

Berger, Arthur Asa. *The Comic-Stripped American*. New York: Walker, 1973. 224 pp. \$7.95. "Arthur Asa Berger, professor of pop culture . . . wonders why whole libraries could be filled with studies of Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante (whom relatively few people read voluntarily), while comics, which hundreds of millions of people read, are almost totally ignored."

Benton, Kenneth. *Sole Agent*. New York: Walker, 1974. 128 pp. \$5.95.

Blankenship, William D. *The Programmed Man*. New York: Walker, 1973. 192 pp. \$5.95.

Boyd, Edward and Roger Parkes. *The Dark Number*. New York: Walker, 1974. 176 pp. \$5.95.

Chinese Literature. No. 5 (1973 - No. 3 (1974). Includes a considerable number of Chinese short stories (see *IFR*, 1 [1974], 75-76.), tales, sketches, Essays, poems, drama, interviews, and plates.

Creasey, John. *The Toff and the Terrified Taxman*. New York: Walker, 1973. 192 pp. \$5.95.