

The Ex-centricities of Jean Ricardou's *La Prise/Prose de Constantinople*

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. . . l'écrivain est peut-être celui qui, par l'écriture, se lie si étrangement au langage qu'il se trouve aussitôt immensément démuné et de soi et du sens . . . bien qu'il le concerne, son texte lui apparaît comme une bizarrerie: autre chose. Et lui-même s'y découvre comme une excentricité: non au centre mais aux frontières. Moins une cause qu'un résultat.¹

All novels, even the most traditional, act as their own pedagogical tool, teaching the reader how he or she can (should?) read them. However, whereas in the traditional novel the subject of the "lesson" usually lies somewhere within the fictional reality created by the work, the new novel tends to displace this interest onto the text itself. Self-conscious and self-illustrating, these novels designate to the reader their structure and also, in many cases, their mode of production, thus revealing, if not explicitly, at least indirectly, the theory of writing at work in the text.

The discovery of the theoretical base of a novel is not, unfortunately, without difficulties; Ricardou's *La Prise/Prose de Constantinople*² is a good case in point. Encouraged by the author's "purely" theoretical writings (*Problèmes du Nouveau Roman, Pour une théorie du Nouveau Roman, Le Nouveau Roman*) and by his detailed account of the novel's generation ("Naissance d'une fiction"³), the reader-critic faces a strong temptation to reduce the work and, consequently, its theoretical dimensions to a compendium of processes, operations, and functions—i.e., an ingenious and well-developed series of word games. Such an interpretation offers grist, of course, to those who would see in Ricardou a mere creator of gimmicks and puzzles. Certainly, the element of play is very important for Ricardou. However, this article will attempt to show that the games he plays are not gratuitous and that they serve as a vehicle for elaborating aspects of his theoretical notion of writing.

At the beginning of *La Prise/Prose*, Ricardou has placed a quote from Pliny the Elder: "Une telle figure est le lieu de convergence de toutes ses parties et doit être son propre support." Just a few pages into the novel, the reader discovers a curious paragraph which echoes the exergue:

Les fortifications proposent une matière bleuâtre, polie, lucide, distribuée en surfaces entrecroisées que gauchissent, multiplient, et décalent divers effets de réflexions réciproques. A chaque déplacement de l'oeil, des arêtes, des rentrants imprévus, à chaque déplacement de l'oeil, des arêtes, des rentrants imprévus, des perspectives paradoxales se déclarent, à chaque déplacement de l'oeil, des arêtes, des rentrants imprévus, des perspectives paradoxales se déclarent selon un ordre incomplet que pénètre l'esprit, à chaque déplacement de l'oeil, des arêtes, des rentrants imprévus, des perspectives paradoxales se déclarent selon un ordre incomplet qui pénètre l'esprit et y accrédite l'idée qu'il existe un point de cet espace d'où il est possible de percevoir simultanément la convergence des rythmes de toute la configuration et d'en pénétrer les arcanes en tous sens à chaque déplacement de l'oeil. (p. 8)

This description of a citadel on the planet Venus presents a certain ambiguity: does the passage simply describe the imaginary space (the setting) within which the story (or *la fiction*, to use Ricardou's terminology) unfolds or does it also designate the physical space of the text (i.e., the chain of signifiers, *la narration*)? The latter hypothesis seems favored by both the *fiction*—which has already begun to contest itself: the citadel is a median point in the transformation of a medieval fortress into a sand castle—and the *narration*—which calls attention to itself by the cyclical or canonical structure of the paragraph.

A series of additional textual encounters confirm the reader's initial impression. The above passage is repeated, almost exactly, four times (pp. 23, 48, 110, 175). Variations of this idea—involving a “point privilégié,” a “foyer central,” a “passage d'où se perçoivent indubitablement tous les rythmes de l'ensemble”—are found on pp. 64, 90, 93, 185, 203, 216, 226, and 255. Moreover, numerous other descriptions, through allusions to circles, reenforce the notion of a structure having a central point. Generated in the very first sequence as the moon, “cercle au dessin parfait” (p. 4), the circular configuration repeats itself in the form of a fountain basin with a tiny rock island in the center (p. 12), two *ronds-points* surrounded by bushes (p. 18), a round table on which a doily displays its concentric circles (p. 84), and the gigantic round lenses of Dr. Baseille's eyeglasses (p. 136). In short, just like the space commandos looking for the Venusian city of Silab Lee in one of the four stories which make up the novel's *fiction*, the reader is also sent off on a search—for the “passage privilégié, centre rayonnant de toute la configuration” (p. 75), “le centre secret du livre” (p. 245).

Ricardou himself, however, undercuts this interpretation, pointing out that he structured the novel so that it would have no center: three parts, each containing eight chapters, and between chapters 4 and 5 of part II only a blank. “Ce dispositif sera repris, à hauteur de fiction, par l'obsessionnelle évocation du lieu vers quoi tout converge. Unitaire, centralisé, rassurant, cet agencement n'est qu'un leurre: la partie *centrale pleine* n'aura elle-même qu'un *centre vide*, une absence de centre . . .”²⁴ Therefore, one might want to conclude that the search for a center is a means of deceiving the reader through the use of a false *mise en abyme*, a deception designed to prevent him or her from reducing the text to a single passage or idea or operation.

Nevertheless, one should not accept completely Ricardou's statement. Part II of the novel deals with a group of adults playing a parlor game. After an introductory section, the other seven chapters each present one of seven adults acting out the same mini-drama; each scene includes the reading of a passage from a book, and the text of the passage is integrated into the description of the scene. Only once, in the fourth or central scene, does the reading get interrupted (pp. 125-129). Curiously, the exact center (middle of page 127) of this central passage contains the following exchange:

—Nous nous sommes perdus. Jamais nous ne retrouverons le fil secret du texte. . .

—Constantinople, à mi-chemin de Venise et de Jérusalem, c'était donc ça: le centre autorise la suite, et non les extrémités. . .

The spatial and lexical convergence of the notion of center suggests that, although perhaps not the secret center of the book, it should not be totally discarded. Rather, one can see in this statement (“le centre autorise la suite, et non les extrémités”) a theoretical formulation of one aspect of Ricardou's project: the contestation of the

récit. In *La Prise/Prose* the complex games Ricardou plays with the *fiction* (for example, the unannounced transitions from one story to another thanks to similarities in names and in actions) and the *narration* (for example, the reprise, with or without variation, of numerous passages) attack directly the linearity of the traditional *récit*, a linearity which depends on a progression—either direct or, if indirect, at least reestablishable—from one extremity (the beginning) to the other (the conclusion). In addition, such a *récit* has its own internal logic; as suggested by Tomashevski's notion of motivation;⁵ if an episode is to end with a certain action (for example, a shooting), then, somewhere in the scene, the writer must provide the necessary props for the action (i.e., a gun for the murderer). In other words, the conclusion determines (or generates) the middle. However, *La Prise/Prose* functions in a quite different fashion. A simple analysis of its very beginning (the word "Rien") and its end (the word "LE LIVRE") reveals two important facts: (1) the beginning of the book is also its center—i.e., the empty space, nothing; and (2) it is not the conclusion (LE LIVRE) which has determined the choices made by the author, but rather it is the center which has generated the text from the very start—the paradoxical act of writing the word "Rien" on the page engendering a second enunciation ("Sinon, peut-être, affleurant, le décalage qu'instaure telle certitude.") which in turn leads to a third declaration ("Le noir.") and so on.

The preceding analysis recalls Flaubert's dream of a novel built on nothing. In addition, Ricardou's critical statements constantly attack the twin processes of the traditional novel—representation (the novel as mirror held up to reality) and expression (the novel as a vehicle for the transmission of the writer's ideas and feelings). One is thus tempted to see in *La Prise/Prose* both the theory and practice of a "pure novel," completely self-contained and cleansed of all contamination by the world or by the writer as subject (in the philosophical sense of the term). However, it is necessary to guard against oversimplifying the question: insisting on the primacy of the writing act does not necessarily eliminate the world⁶ nor does emphasizing process, operations, and word games necessarily imply the absence of the personal subject from the work. If, for Ricardou, the theoretical center of a novel cannot be a meaning, that does not require that it be "nothing," i.e., a pure solipsism of language. Rather, the solution to the enigma must be sought elsewhere and in a manner which will take into account both the process (the movement, the activity) of writing and also the existence of the writer as a subject possessing knowledge of the world. Seen in this light, the structural metaphor of the circle—i.e., a figure formed around a center where all converges—is too static, too reductionist. In its place, one needs to put a figure more compatible with the exigencies of the modern subject which, as seen by Julia Kristeva, emphasizes "le procès plus que l'identification, le rejet plus que le désir, l'hétérogène plus que le signifiant, la lutte plus que la structure."⁷

Searching the text for additional possible *mises en abyme*, one discovers two other recurring geometrical motifs—triangles and ellipses. The triangle, while extremely evident as a graphic character (Ricardou uses it to mark the different sections of the text), appears only infrequently in the narrative discourse. On the other hand, the ellipse is a major descriptive element. It first appears on p. 12: ". . . une abeille se met à tourner, proche à se fixer, assidue, éloignant enfin selon de larges ellipses qui emplissent l'espace des variations de son zézaiement." Repeated associations with bees (pp. 66, 91, 110, 243) firmly link the ellipse to one of the book's key anagrammatical bases—ABEILLES→ISABELLE (source of the initial letters of the characters' names)→BEL ASILE→LE BASILE→BASEILLE→SILAB LEE→ILE (de) SABLE. In addition, ellipses abound in a multitude of contexts: descriptions of physical sites (pp. 18, 103, 212), lights patterns (pp. 82, 99), parts of the body (pp. 22, 146, 157, 238), medals and rings

(pp. 14, 86, 118, 138, 194, 240), maps (p. 102), and especially hand movements (pp. 31, 73, 91, 100, 110, 119, 134, 162, 246, 249). These direct references are complemented by multiple allusions to other elliptical shapes: parabolas, ovals, ovoids, ogives.

In basic geometrical terms, an ellipse is a closed figure each point of which is such that the sum of its distances from two fixed focal points remains constant. As a structural metaphor for *La Prise/Prose*, the ellipse offers two advantages over the circle. First, in terms of the text's practical economy, the ellipse manages to integrate the other two principal geometric metaphors: the circle and the triangle. The presence of two focal points allows for the generation of twin circles within the ellipse (one is reminded of the *ronds-points* and Dr. Baseille's glasses); any point on the circumference of the ellipse can be connected to the two focal points in such a manner as to form a triangle. Second, in terms of the theoretical concerns we are examining, the ellipse seems to satisfy the need for a metaphor combining the notions of structure and activity. Unlike the circle, which channels all its energy to a single point, the ellipse depends on the constant yet ever-changing tension between two different points. The temptation to pursue this line of interpretation receives even further encouragement when one considers the two signifieds attached to the French signifier ELLIPSE—i.e., "ellipse" (the geometrical figure) and "ellipsis" (omission of a word or words; mark indicating such an omission). Since the center of the novel is an "ellipsis" (nothing, an omission, the gap between II, 4 and II, 5), it is therefore possible that an "ellipse" may be the true "center," both practical and theoretical, of the text.

If the text can be represented by the figure of an ellipse, the reader's task is then diverted from looking for the "secret center" to a search for the two focal points. The text, in describing the ellipses flown by the bees, offers some help in this regard: ". . . les abeilles du lac tracent des ellipses dont les foyers, semble-t-il, pour chacune, sont deux pensées voisines entre lesquelles le vol hésite à choisir . . ." (p. 66). The ambiguity of the signifier *pensées*—pansies or thoughts—invites us to look for ideas that may be attached to the focal points. In addition, one would expect to find them in the first and third parts of the novel, and there should be some indication of a link between them. Our reading of the text suggests that these focal points are the passages and—on a theoretical level, the ideas expressed in these passages—organized around, in part I, *la Borne* and, in part III, *la Force*. Exceptionally, Ricardou capitalizes these two nouns; more importantly, the analogic relation between their signifiers—BORNE/FORCE—suggests the possibility of a link between their signifieds.

La Borne (the milestone, the marker or indicator) figures in one of the episodes dealing with the space mission to Venus (pp. 52-62). The expedition, commanded by Lou Dialis, a *linguist*, and by Capt. Edgar Word, while seeking the Forbidden City, Silab Lee (→Syllabe-Les→Les Syllabes), encounters and reencounters *la Borne*, whose influences induce numerous aberrations. The marker, which bears an inscription taken from Mallarmé's "Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poë," serves as a pretext for a number of analogies and word games illustrative of the techniques used by Ricardou to produce the text, techniques which the narration does not hesitate to designate: ". . . jeux de consonance entre les formes et les nombres, les couleurs et les déplacements, les gestes et les émotions . . . étoiles sémantiques, paronymes . . ." (p. 51). The entire passage underlines the primordality of words, the role played by language as the source not only of the text but of reality: "Le Réel n'est pas le simple monde extérieur, ni le pur phantasme, fût-il d'origine extra-terrestre, mais un volume (dont ils ne sont que des projections planes) où la présence de fait est le centre d'explosions, des repliements incessants de l'ailleurs, et qu'une prose, telle qu'on vient de la définir, à chaque instant institue" (p. 51). *La*

Force, on the other hand, deals not directly with language but rather with memories and imaginings. Introduced for the first time (p. 180) by Ed. Word, it has its full development in a passage (pp. 222-232) dealing primarily with the narrator's reminiscences from childhood. This sequence, which begins "Tout n'était pas faux pourtant, dans l'illusion qui s'achève," offers a basis in the narrator's childhood for each of the novel's stories. The narrator as a child vacationed near a lake, spent hours in the library reading, played games which involved acting out fairy tales, had a cousin named Isa for whom he dissimulated his great passion (which accounts for the central role of ISABELLE as generative base)⁸ and invented the character of Ed. Word, chief of the space commandos, through whom "une force hypnotique construisait en particulier, avec des éléments de notre passé ou des fragments de nos livres favoris, diverses situations dans la contemplation desquelles nous nous enlisions" (p. 230). In short, *La Prise/Prose*, as ellipse, depends on the "lutte," the tension, the constant interplay between words, syllables, phrases (i.e., language) and memories, fantasies, daydreams (i.e., a "subject").

In order to test this hypothesis, let us examine these two poles as they relate to the narrative fiction of the text and also to its theoretical implications. The fiction involves basically four sets of characters: (1) children on summer vacation (Blaise, Edith, Laurent, Léonie, Alice, Serge, Edmond, Isa); (2) adults, with the same names, playing the mini-drama parlor game; (3) children acting out a fairy tale. "La Princesse Interdite" (Bertrand, Emilie, Lucien, Laura, Armande, Sylvain, Edouard, Isabelle) and (4) interplanetary commandos (Berthold Toth, Elise Sas, Léon Doca, Lou Dialis, Annie Nahaut, Sylvère Dandolo, Edgar Word, Irène Blanc). Closer examination reveals, however, that these four can be reduced, in a first operation, to two sets: the children acting out the fairy tale are "really" the commandos who have inverted children's traditional activity—i.e., here, adults play at being children (see pp. 74, 75); similarly, the adults playing the parlor game are, as the result of another inversion, "fictive" characters created again by the commandos. In short, groups 2 and 3 are simply fictive functions of group 4, leaving, at this stage, groups 1 and 4. The latter two represent precisely the groups associated with *la Borne* (group 4, the commandos) and *la Force* (group 1, the vacationing children and, in particular, the narrator); moreover, the fictive activities of these two groups resemble each other: the commandos search for Silab Lee (part I), the narrator searches for Isa (part III). This initial reduction of characters gives way subsequently to a second reduction, prefigured by the explicit identification between Isa (group 1), Irène (group 4), and Silab Lee: ". . . la figure symbolique de la Cité—double approximatif d'Irène: Isa . . ." (p. 181). Ultimately, the narrator reveals that Irène is, consistent with the pattern of inversion, the fictive double of Isa and that, as discussed above, the commandos originated in the imagination of the narrator. Thus, groups 1 and 4 can be reduced to two "real" characters—the narrator and his cousin Isa. Who then is the narrator? Through the complex *glissements* to which Ricardou subjects the identity of the *je*, it is possible to determine that the narrator is Edmond who, by a series of linguistic operations, adopts various other identities. Moreover, the analysis of these displacements—phonetic, semantic, and graphic—lead eventually to the "subject" mentioned previously—i.e. EDMOND → EDMOT* → ED. WORD → EDOUARD → JEAN RICARDOU. Thus, the main axis of the ellipse, the "line" uniting its two focal points is the writer-narrator, in whom takes place the interplay between *la Borne* and *la Force*, between language and "subject."

It is in this context that one can best interpret the end of the text: "Certaine lecture consciencieuse suffit maintenant pour que l'irradiation de toute la figure élabore qui JE SUIS, et par un phénomène réflexif point trop imprévu, en un éclair, me LE LIVRE" (p. 258). If we take the capitalized letters and examine them from the point of view of each focal point (*la Borne* = language, the *narration*; *la*

Force = experiences, real and imagined, as well as memories, the *fiction*), we discover, thanks to the ambiguity of the verb *suis* (*être* or *suivre*), four possible readings:

LA BORNE

- (1) *suis* = *être*: "I (the narrator: *je*) am the book"—i.e., the narration produces the fiction.
- (2) *suis* = *suivre*: "I (the narrator: *je*) follow the book"—i.e., the narration reads itself and other texts in the process of production.

LA FORCE

- (3) *suis* = *être*: "I (the writer) am the book"—i.e., the book has its origin in the subject's experience.
- (4) *suis* = *suivre*: "I (the writer) follow the book"—i.e., the subject's experience is transformed by the process of writing.

All of these interpretations form a part of the theory of writing expressed in and illustrated by the text. Moreover, the latter is precisely the result of the interplay between writer and narrator, language and experience, a result which takes the form of an exploded *subject* (that of the writer and of the book).

Such a conclusion requires, nevertheless, some elucidation, for at first glance it might seem a restatement of a traditional view of writing which posits a struggle between content and style. This view carries with it some basic assumptions, among which are: (a) the belief in a hierarchical relationship between what one wants to say or do (based primarily on the writer's experience of the world) and how to say or do it (the art or craft of writing) and (b) the concept of a stable, centralized subject capable of controlling this hierarchy. *La Prise/Prose* reacts violently against such a notion of writing. The choice of the ellipse is dictated, on theoretical grounds, by the desire to emphasize process, activity, tension. The personal experiences which serve as sources for the fiction bear no guarantee of reality, for they are subject to transformation, transposition, and distortion. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator admits: ". . . de la fantasgonomie qui nécessairement se termine, seul peut-être cet épisode puise-t-il ses périclètes en une reminiscence indiscutable de mon enfance—et encore n'affirmerai-je pas, en l'occurrence, qu'une lecture plus attentive n'y puisse déceler maintes anomalies imperceptibles" (p. 250). Moreover, the "subject" of which it has been question is not located completely at one or the other focal point of the ellipse. Rather, it is the product of a constant *jeu* between memories, fantasies, thoughts, on one hand, and, on the other, the operations effected upon the writer's raw material—language. Both of these poles have, however, a similar source: "Comme je l'ai démontré plus haut, la Force qui m'a induit à des rêveries innombrables—et dont la Borne, probablement, là-bas, hors de la ville, dans la forêt singulière, n'est qu'une émanation—organise ses images selon des processus analogiques à partir de la situation présente" (p. 247). In other words, *la Force*—which might thus be ultimately understood as the impulses of the mind (both conscious and unconscious)—provides the energy which creates and constantly reworks the products of the mind, be they memories, fantasies, word games, and so forth. Like the "subject" which produced it, *La Prise/Prose* would then be a structure with a center which is a non-center or, if one prefers, a center with a center which is both plural and outside the center—i.e., an ex-center. Consequently, like the "subject," the book is open, dynamic, decentered.

The above analysis, while proposing a possible model for Ricardou's theory of writing, does not explore the "scientific" implications of this theory. A materialistic concept of writing having been posited, certain questions remain to be answered: for example, how does the psychic energy function in order to exploit the tension between experiences and language, between fantasies and word play? What relationship is there between conscious and unconscious activity in this process? What implications does this kind of functioning have for explaining the role and activity of the reader? The recent work of Lyotard, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida (to name but a few) seems to be directed at the exploration of just such questions.⁹ In addition, the fact that Ricardou raises these issues in and by *La Prise/Prose* tends to underline the similarities of concern which link him (despite the controversies that rage between them) with the writers of the *Tel Quel* and *Change* groups. From many sides, the "center" of the writing process is under attack and, both in theory and in practice, has become the object of a radical displacement.

NOTES

¹Jean Ricardou. *Le Nouveau Roman* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), p. 15.

²Jean Ricardou, *La Prise/Prose de Constantinople* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1965). This edition has no page numbers. In "Naissance d'une fiction" (see below) Ricardou speaks disparagingly of those critics who would reduce his text by numbering it; however, in the interest of allowing readers of this article to locate quotations from *La Prise/Prose*, I have succumbed to this temptation. In my numbering system, the initial word of the text ("Rien") appears on p. 3 and the final words ("me LE LIVRE") on p. 258.

³Jean Ricardou, "Naissance d'une fiction" in *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui*, (Paris: 10/18, 1972), II, pp. 379-392.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 389.

⁵Boris Tomashevski, "Thematics" in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lemon and Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

⁶See in particular the dialectic between language and the world as developed by Ricardou in his next novel, *Les Lieux-dits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

⁷Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974), p. 161.

⁸See the analysis by Hélène Prigogine, "L'Aventure ricardolienne du nombre" in *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui*, vol. 2, pp. 369-371.

⁹Cf. J.-F. Lyotard, *Discours Figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971); Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1972); Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967).