

BRIEF MENTIONS

ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

Topologie d'une cité fantôme
Paris: Les Editions de Minuit,
1976. Pp. 201. 26 francs.

Topologie d'une cité fantôme, Robbe-Grillet's most recent novel, is also his purest, purest because to a greater extent than any of his previous works it ignores the conventions of the novel (plot, character, meaning) and such external determinants as human psychology or political ideology. An archeological excavation furnishes the pretext for a series of visions, myths, anecdotes and dramas, all relating to a central terrain. However, the cohesiveness of the novel's scenes depends less on their common site than on the series of generating elements from which the scenes are constructed.

The novel's first "espace," "Construction d'un temple en ruines à la Déesse Vanadé," gradually builds up a set of elements which generate the novel's episodes. Foremost among these elements are four geometric shapes: rectangle, triangle (associated with the letter V), sphere, and line (also a short phallic stylus or iron bar). Other generating elements are naked young girls, a camera, blood, and a woman's scream.

The letter V is the most dynamic of these elements. It is born of the isosceles triangle which was the primitive form of the temple of Vanadé. In inverted form it recreates the erotic spread of two naked legs or the volcano which destroyed the city of vanadium. The letter in conjunction with the letters G and D gives rise to a series of words (listed on page 49) from which the narrator constructs one of the novel's myths.

In addition to these generating elements, one of the most consistent sources of Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction is his previous work. Thus, one finds in *Topologie* the image of a mannequin tied to an iron bed which appears in *Projet pour une révolution à New York* and *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, an allusion to the Villa Bleue at Shanghai (*La Maison de*

rendez-vous) and the description of a multi-roomed building which sounds sometimes like the hotel of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* and sometimes like the chateau of *L'Homme qui ment* (also recalled in *Topologie* by a game of blind man's bluff). In perhaps the most interesting allusion to Robbe-Grillet's previous work, the narrator refers to the problem of the "gommage" and replacement of a letter in a word by the following letter in the alphabet (for example G replaced by H) which was "traité de façon exhaustive dans le premier roman que j'ai publié jadis."

The novel begins with a five page "Incipit" in which the narrator as he is about to fall asleep calls forth images which will be the novel's central motifs: dripping water, ruins of an ancient city, the image of a young naked girl combing her hair before a mirror, a knife, and a pool of blood. The suggestion that the novel is the product of a dream is reinforced in the "Coda," a five page conclusion which begins as the narrator is awakened by a scream, and in which his preoccupation with butterflies (a motif of the novel) establishes an explicit comparison between the mounting of butterflies in a collection and the stabbing deaths of young girls as described throughout many of the novel's episodes.

Most of the episodes do in fact seem to relate to the murder of a young girl. Several versions of the murder stretch across historical periods from the mythological sacking of an ancient city followed by the massacre of its female inhabitants to the modern detective story version which presents the investigation of a series of knife slayings. The historical period of each episode determines the nature of the structures of the city as well as the nature of the murder which takes place in it. Ancient ruins give way to the rubble of a modern city destroyed by some kind of holocaust: war, fire, explosion, or earthquake. The central building, called the "cellule génératrice" in the first chapter, undergoes several transformations during which it maintains its prison identity (as torture chamber, site of a harem, reformatory) though in the more modern episodes it appears as a multi-roomed building and a theater.

Two names recur throughout the different episodes: Vanadé and David. The former is a mythological goddess whose temple is one of the earliest ruins on the site. David is first introduced as Vanadé's male counterpart, actually a hermaphrodite responsible for the fertilization of a race of women. In other episodes David is the "incestuous and fratricidal" twin of Vanessa (a variation on the name Vanadé). David is also the name of a biblical king, a twentieth-century photographer and the subject of two dramas described within the novel. In the Coda, Vanadé-Vanessa becomes the variety of butterfly: vanesse.

Topologie d'une cité fantôme is more difficult and less fascinating than its predecessor, *Projet pour une révolution à New York*. The many divisions of the text are a distraction and break down the cohesiveness of the novel. And the novel's descriptions never seem to attain the vividness and poetic strangeness of the earlier work. One section which strikes the reader with its freshness is the series of interior monologues of one or several young female prisoners who stare at themselves in a mirror and dream of an erotic escape with their other selves. The dedicated reader of Robbe-Grillet who has learned to expect from each new novel or film familiar images and techniques accompanied by a renewal of subject and style will not however be disappointed by *Topologie* which marks another important step in the continuing development of the *nouveau roman*.

Paul J. Schwartz

HUGH GARNER

The Intruders

Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976. Pp. 328.

Whether or not its author so intended, *The Intruders* forms the last part of a trilogy written over twenty-six years on the lives of the residents of "Cabbagetown," a slum district now suffering under an urban development scheme in Toronto. As a novelist (cum journalist) Garner's mission (like Joyce's) is to forge the conscience of a race—that is, to create a mythology,

an aim more accurately achieved for Mississippi by Faulkner whose novels focusing intensively upon carefully selected characters enlarges them, and so creates a mythic structure in which their environment, their *agon*, acquires profound meaning. A comparison of *The Intruders* with *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance, is salutary in identifying how sociological realism respectively ought not be and can properly be handled in fiction. Both novels deal explicitly with the sufferings of people congenitally a part of a traditional culture and society whose bases shift under the pressure of economic change and the intrusion of a new and foreign population. Unlike Garner's, Faulkner's novel succeeds both as narrative and as a humanistic document in that the environment and situation explored in the work find their proper place in relation to the author's more central concern with the mystery of his characters—that is, assimilated into their common struggles on the one hand, and made symbols of their individual mentality on the other. Conversely, the worst fault in Garner's writing—and one by no means present in the finer and more tightly knit, sensitively focused, craft embodied in many of his short stories and in the 1962 novel *Silence on the Shore*—is his synoptic view of his wasteland, a stance that precludes anything but a cursory descent into the inner lives of his characters (they come in multitudes), and so palliates the intensity of his labyrinthine urban vision making it automatic, nonhuman.

The failure of *The Intruders* as a novel is, then, a failure of vision, of form and of point of view. A quotation from one of the twenty-five or so main characters moving throughout the book will illustrate: "Everybody deserves to get away from down here! Just leave it to the Bohemian-cum-hippies-cum arty types-cum dissident middle-class!" "What brought on that rhetoric?" The question almost devastates its author. "Rhetoric" rather than differentiating patterns of language and thought is what builds up the longer speeches (many of them are sociological treatises) of more than a dozen protagonists in this novel. True, Syd Tedland (a printer) and Elsie Dales (chairwoman of Cabbagetown's community association) emerge as two members of the slum's varied citizenry with finely moulded personalities and clear voices of their own, scatalogical and direct. But they alone are not enough to transfigure the novel's sprawling action into a significant human form and thus to give Garner's