

# Robbe-Grillet's *Un régicide*: An Extraordinary First Novel

EMMA KAFALENOS, *Washington University*

*Un régicide* is Alain Robbe-Grillet's first novel, completed in 1949.<sup>1</sup> His earlier writings consist only of five poems, a short story, which has been lost, and an account of what he calls a "political" trip to Bulgaria in 1947.<sup>2</sup> Nearly thirty years after it was written, *Un régicide* was published at the end of September 1978, simultaneously with Robbe-Grillet's latest novel, *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, and a special issue of *Obliques* that is devoted to his work and contains other previously unpublished texts (including three of the five poems and the account of his Bulgarian trip). *Un régicide* is an extraordinary first novel.

Presumably it was not published at the time when it was written because it was considered too difficult. Robbe-Grillet accepted the decision of the publishers to whom he had submitted the manuscript, and wrote and published *Les Gommés*. He considered revising his first novel then, but instead went on to write *Le Voyeur*. Only after finishing *La Jalousie*, he tells us in his introduction to *Un régicide*, did he seriously turn his attention again to his first novel. This time he rewrote the fourth through the tenth pages of his text, and changed the name of his protagonist from Philippe to Boris (reminding this reader, at least, of the passivity and the ultimate fate of Gide's young foreigner in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*). It is this version of the text, incorporating the changes made in 1957, and otherwise with only an occasional word altered or a change in punctuation, that has at last been published.

One of the difficulties in reading *Un régicide* now is in situating it in the literary scene of the 1940's (and in forgetting everything that has happened since). Camus's *L'Étranger* appeared in 1942. The characterization of Meursault has apparently influenced certain aspects of Boris, the potential regicide who plans a regicide (the word carries both meanings in French as in English). Boris's decision to kill his king is the result of his desire for an intimate relationship with his monarch. After rejecting as insufficiently intimate the possibility of becoming the king's valet or one of his guards, Boris settles upon assassination as a "connection that is certain, and in a sense decisive" (pp. 80-81). In spite of the similarity in motive between Meursault's crime and Boris's projected crime, *Un régicide* is a much more modern novel than *L'Étranger*. In the latter there is no doubt that a man has been killed; speculation centers on the reasons for the murder. The reader of *Un régicide* remains unsure, after finishing the novel, whether the king is alive or dead, or, if he is dead, if Boris was his assassin.

By now we are growing accustomed to contradictory plots in fiction. Robbe-Grillet himself, in *La Jalousie* (1957), suggests the death of Franck and A... in an automobile accident and also their safe return from their trip.

---

<sup>1</sup>Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Un régicide* (Paris: Minuit, 1978), pp. 227.

<sup>2</sup>According to Robbe-Grillet in an interview with Michel Rybalka, "Robbe-Grillet commenté par lui-même," *Le Monde*, 22 Sept. 1978, p. 17. All translations are mine.

I am grateful to Michel Rybalka, Professor of French at Washington University, for the opportunity to read proofs of the novel before a published version was available.

Even in this later novel, however, the reader can still rationalize the contradiction and explain the scene of the accident as existing only in the overwrought imagination of the narrator during the night that A... spends away from home with Franck. Few readers seriously question that Franck and A... are alive at the end of the novel. By 1961, however, in Philippe Sollers's *Le Parc*, the contradictory plot could no longer be rationally explained. The adult "he" in the novel, the first-person narrator's good friend, dies. But the death is described in so many ways that readers cannot agree that any one manner of death is more plausible than another. In *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965) and later novels, Robbe-Grillet also makes full use of this new technique.

Yet already in *Un régicide* the description of Boris's decision to kill the king on September 18, the day the king is to visit the factory where Boris works (p. 124), is followed by a description in the present tense of Boris's assassination of the king (pp. 125-28). In case the reader has not understood that the entire scene has taken place only in Boris's mind, he is told that it has all been "imagined, it must be admitted" (p. 146). However, another description of the regicide follows (pp. 153-69), apparently taking place on the projected day. Yet at the end of this episode even Boris is so unsure of what has happened that "his last hope" of finding out is to read the explanations that the newspapers will surely publish the next day (p. 169). The next morning he plans to buy a newspaper and imagines reading about the "heinous crime" (p. 173), but instead he listens to a radio in a restaurant and hears the king giving a speech in his usual tone of voice (p. 178). Later, towards the end of September, the king is reported to be ill (p. 193). By this time both Boris and the reader are convinced that the king is alive, although neither Boris nor the reader knows how to interpret what seemed to have been a successful attempt by Boris to kill the king. Near the end of the novel, even this is thrown in doubt by a comment "since the death of the king" (p. 124) made by Laura, who is perhaps the only character in the novel whose factual statements we have come to trust. Such a contradiction in what should probably be considered the central action of the novel, resulting in the reader's simply not being able to determine whether the protagonist has committed the crime which gives the novel its title, was a major innovation in 1949.

Another technical innovation in *Un régicide* is found in the point of view from which the novel is told. The text opens with a section reported in the first person. Two pages later, in a third-person narration, the protagonist, Boris, is introduced by name. Thereafter first-person sections alternate with third-person accounts of Boris, until the penultimate chapter (XIII) which is written entirely in the third person. The final chapter (XIV) is told throughout in the first person.

The use of more than one restricted point of view in a novel was not new in 1949 (James, *The Golden Bowl*; Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*; Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*). But Robbe-Grillet is here doing more than that. As one reads, it slowly becomes apparent that Boris, who is the subject of the third-person narration, is the same person as the "I" who speaks in the sections told in the first person. In 1949 this was an amazing innovation. In a development from Butor's introduction of a second-person narration (*La Modification*, 1957), Carlos Fuentes constructed his *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) with each chapter divided into three sections—a first person, a second person, and a third person—in each of which Artemio Cruz speaks (first), speaks to himself (second), and speaks about himself and his family in other periods of time (third). Robbe-Grillet's own introduction in *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965)

of what Bruce Morrisette calls the "floating I" (the "I" that refers sometimes to one character and sometimes to another) is probably the only innovation in point of view that is more recent.

Boris lives in a city of some size that is the capital and seat of the government, and works as an accountant in a large factory there. The "I" lives on an island that is swampy, dark, and shrouded in mist. No ships ever dock at its ports, and none of its inhabitants, who until the arrival of the sirens are all male, ever leave. When Boris is in the midst of a crowd of his fellow citizens in front of a newspaper stand, while a falling stone breaks the tranquil surface of deep green water surrounded by rocks (p. 30), one suspects that he is simultaneously in the city and on the island. When, having bought the newspaper, Boris crumples it and throws it into the water, and the "I" watches it float away (p. 40), one can no longer question that Boris and the "I" are one and the same. Neither the "I" nor Boris, however, seems to have any awareness of the other's existence at the beginning of the novel. Slowly Boris begins to remember—part of the lyrics, for example, of an old sea ballad (p. 88) that the "I" has said everyone on the island knows (p. 86). The "I" seems to remain unaware of Boris's life.<sup>3</sup> At this point it would seem as if the protagonist were mentally ill, perhaps schizophrenic,<sup>4</sup> responding to a name in the real world, but with an insufficient sense of self to give himself a name in his imaginary existence on the island which presumably is located only in his mind. Nathalie Sarraute had established the tradition, as early as 1939 in her first *Tropismes*, of using pronominal characters to depict representatives of what is common to all human beings, without individual characteristics.

Yet, as one would expect from later novels by Robbe-Grillet, this is too simple an answer to explain all of the occurrences in the novel. If the first-person passages exist in Boris's mind, then there is no need for him to name himself; we rarely think of ourselves by name. Then too, Boris is actually seen on the island in the third-person sections (pp. 121-22, 151, 162). Finally, late in the novel (pp. 191-93) Boris decides to clean out the drawers in his apartment, and finds things he knows must be souvenirs although he cannot remember where he got them: flowers, pebbles, a dried starfish, and a tiny ring made of a grey metal. We suspect that these things come from the island, that the ring, which is too small for a woman, fits the mermaid with whom the "I" spent most of his summer.

Presumably the life of the "I" and the island exist only in Boris's mind. Boris lives in what we can accept as a real world; the island seems a place of fantasy. Transitions from the third-person narration (Boris) to the first person generally depend upon a reinterpretation of something Boris sees in the city: the crumbling mortar of the building opposite his office window becomes the sand of the island's beach (p. 44); touching the knife (p. 162) with which he intends to kill the king (its blade, *lame* in French, has been mentioned earlier in the text) brings the waves that surround the island into

---

<sup>3</sup>There is one passage (p. 159) in which the "I" seems to remember Boris's surroundings during the latter's attempt to kill the king. Since the part of the sentence that refers to Boris is in the past tense, I prefer to read it as a momentary return to Boris's life in the city. See the discussion on the use of tenses that follows.

<sup>4</sup>Robbe-Grillet, in the interview mentioned above, refers to the "schizoid life" of his character, remembering this his "plan for the book was to work on two registers, to show someone who lives in two realities at the same time." He also proposes an interpretation of the novel as set in a future time in which a government would furnish fantasies by remote control; thus the island could be "only a parallel world prescribed as an escape by an extremely codified society."

view (*lame* is also used elsewhere meaning "wave"). Transitions from the first person to the third person are more abrupt; usually third-person sections begin with Boris's waking up in the morning.

Most discrepancies can be explained as occurring only in Boris's mind. Several friends of the "I" who are otherwise seen only on the island take part in a mock trial scene apparently set in the factory (p. 209), but the entire scene can easily have been imagined. The objects Boris finds in his drawers are the hardest to explain. Perhaps Boris has picked them up, maybe years earlier, and forgotten them in his conscious mind; yet without his realizing it they could still be the source of all his imaginings about the island. Perhaps it is better not to insist upon a rational interpretation, and instead to allow the objects to remain the real souvenirs of an imagined adventure.

Already in this novel Robbe-Grillet is experimenting with time. The third-person sections on Boris's life in the city progress chronologically and cover a period of about six weeks, from August 18 to the end of September or the beginning of October. The time of the "I" also appears to move chronologically, but covers a different and longer period of time. No dates are given, time is recorded instead by seasonal changes. In the beginning of the novel it is winter for the "I." Slowly spring arrives, and the warm days of summer are accompanied by the arrival of the sirens, who depart at the first sign of cooler weather. The novel ends in midwinter, having completed an entire seasonal cycle. Although the times of the year of the two plots are different, their climaxes coincide. Boris's crime, if it takes place at all, occurs on September 18, in Chapters X and XI. On the island the sirens arrive in Chapter IX, remain throughout the hot summer days (of the regicide, in another time and another place), and depart in Chapter XI.

The first-person narration is generally in the present tense, changing to the future for an event that is foreseen and desired (the prospective arrival of the sirens, pp. 132-33). The third-person narration remains generally in the past tense, but changes to the present for the scene in which Boris imagines that he will kill the king (pp. 125-28). The pattern, apparently, is for the narrator to describe Boris's actions in the past, and for Boris's thoughts to be given in the present—both his plans for killing the king and his imaginings of life on the island. This interpretation can be used, if one wishes, to elucidate a curious two-page section (pp. 214-16) at the end of Chapter XIII, the penultimate chapter and the last to be told in the third person. This section differs from the rest of the chapter, and from all of the third-person passages in the novel, in two ways: there is no mention of Boris, and it is written in the present tense. The scene is the intersection of two major roads, in the midst of plowed fields. A series of trucks goes by, stopping at a checkpoint before proceeding, and possibly carrying materials for the building of more new roads to encourage the growth of commerce and industry in an underdeveloped country. Perhaps the scene is in the present tense because it is occurring in Boris's imagination. Laura has just told him that "nothing can be accomplished here" (p. 213). Perhaps he is imagining another land where he might be more successful in carrying out what he plans to do than he has been in his regicide.

There is equally good reason to assume, however, that Boris is not mentioned in this section because he is no longer aware of the real world at all, his mind finally refusing to consider anything except life on the island, where the "I" appears to be dying by the end of the next and last chapter. Early in the novel, in fact, Robbe-Grillet has introduced a scene suggesting

that Boris is either already dead or already a murderer. Shortly after over-hearing a conversation about a foreigner (perhaps a student, perhaps a spy) named "Red," who has been "shot down" and whose body has been found outside the city, Boris remembers that he had not left the center of the city the day before (p. 56), and soon afterwards comes across a flat tombstone, recently inscribed "Ci gît Red" ("Here lies Red"). Suddenly, in a word play foreshadowing the verbal generation in Robbe-Grillet's most recent novels, the three words seem to reassemble in an "accusatory anagram": "Régicide" (p. 58). The relationship already implied in this scene between Boris (who, from his name, may also be a foreigner) and Red is strengthened, late in the novel, in a scene in which Boris returns to work after a long absence and finds Red and Red's enormous black dog occupying the only two chairs in his office (pp. 207-08). Boris leaves, and shortly thereafter disappears from the novel (p. 214). Meanwhile the "I" remembers having once amused himself by deciphering the characters that covered a certain flat rock on the island, which he refers to as a "tombstone" (p. 183). Red and Boris seem to exchange roles in the way that the change in inscriptions on the tombstone indicates. Red, originally the victim, returns from Hades (the island?) bringing Cerberus with him, to usurp Boris's role in the real world and condemn Boris to his grave. Boris, who as a result of Red's death becomes a murderer (if not by killing Red, at least in being destined by the "accusatory anagram" to regicide), at the end of the novel seems ordained to lie in Red's grave on the island, under the stone bearing the word "Régicide."

The political aspects of this novel demand study, as does the question of why Robbe-Grillet has avoided similarly overt references to political situations in all of his later novels. Autobiographical elements are also probably more apparent in this novel than in his later fiction. Robbe-Grillet speaks of the factory where Boris is employed as the one where he himself worked for two years in Nuremberg, Germany; he suggests that the island of the novel is composed of scenes from his childhood in Brittany, and adds that the "first pages of the book are the precise description of a recurrent dream" that he had had a number of times when he was about twelve.<sup>5</sup> Also of interest in this novel is the possibility of tracing the influence of earlier writers, much more precisely than one can in the later works. At the time when he wrote *Un régicide*, Robbe-Grillet remembers, he had been impressed by only a few novels: *Das Schloß* (*The Castle*) by Kafka, *Alice in Wonderland*, *La Nausée*, *L'Étranger*, and Queneau's *Le Chiendent*.<sup>6</sup> The influence of Kafka is particularly evident; a number of themes and images remind one of his works: the tower and the labyrinthine aspect of the island in certain seasons; the references to guilt, trial, and judgement that pervade the final sections of the novel; the power of the church; the impression that Red's huge black dog seems to grow even larger as Boris gazes at it, and Boris's nightmare in which his co-worker turns into a horse that seems to have stepped out of the pages of Kafka's "Ein Landarzt" ("A Country Doctor"). *Un régicide* may in fact prove to be the necessary intermediate step for tracing Kafka's writings as a source of the contradictory plots of later novels by Robbe-Grillet and others.

When asked how he would place his first novel, retrospectively, in his work as a whole, Robbe-Grillet responded that it was more ahead of its time, more ambitious, and more strange than *Les Gommages* or *Le Voyeur*.<sup>7</sup> In plot, perhaps, *Un régicide* is not as advanced as any of the novels that followed it. If one wishes to do so, one can explain all the events of this novel as the distorted

<sup>5</sup>*Le Monde*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup>*Le Monde*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup>*Le Monde*, p. 17.

perceptions (of Boris's life in the city) and the imaginings (about the life of the "I" on the island) of a seriously disturbed mind, that of Boris, who is even aware to a certain extent of his mental state, and can report on his migraine headaches and his difficulty in remembering earlier events in his life. Even in *Les Gattes* an equally rational interpretation of the events is impossible, because of the circularity of time in that novel. *Un régicide* seems closest in subject matter to *Le Voyeur*, which it prefigures in its verbal mapping of an island and in its several references to the number eight. It lacks the hole in time (the moment of the crime) and the hole in narration (the absent first-person narrator) introduced respectively in *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie*. Yet in its shifts in point of view and in time schemes, and its repetitions and contradictions in plot, it can perhaps be considered technically as advanced as any of Robbe-Grillet's early novels, through *Dans le labyrinthe*. Clearly *Un régicide* is a *nouveau roman*, in following the subjective vision of an observer whose state of mind is not shown directly but only in the distortions in what he perceives, in its repetitions, in its juxtapositions of times and shifts in tenses, in its total amorality, in the ambulatory nature of most of its action, and in its central theme of a quest or mission which remains unfulfilled or unaccomplished. *Un régicide* preempts the position of *Les Gattes* as the first *nouveau roman*.