

BRIEF MENTIONS

BRUCE MORRISSETTE

Intertextual Assemblage in Robbe-Grillet: From Topology to the Golden Triangle

Fredericton, N.B.: York Press, 1979. Pp. 84. \$12.95.

Bruce Morrisette, noted scholar and interpreter of the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet, has inspired and guided readings of the French author's fiction, on both sides of the Atlantic, for nearly two decades. With the publication of *Intertextual Assemblage in Robbe-Grillet: From Topology to the Golden Triangle*, he has once again provided a very useful and illuminating study of the novels of Robbe-Grillet, devoting his attention here to Robbe-Grillet's most recent fiction.

The novels to which the title of Morrisette's text refers are the two that Robbe-Grillet has most recently written: *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (1976; translated by J. A. Underwood as *Topology of a Phantom City*), and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978; a translation is in progress but has not yet appeared). Just as Robbe-Grillet's novels of the 1960's were a definite departure from his earlier work, these two novels represent yet another stage in his writing. *Topologie* and the *Triangle d'or* are what Morrisette calls "assemblage novels," defining "assemblage" as the "reinsertion into a novel of whole structural units of preexisting text, in unaltered form" (p. 9). All but the last five pages of *Topologie*, and forty percent of the text of the *Triangle d'or* were originally written by Robbe-Grillet as nine separate works, varying in length from short pieces to a full-scale "novel." The seven preexisting works that constitute nearly all of the text of *Topologie* were written from about 1970 to 1975. The three works which are incorporated into the *Triangle d'or* (a part of one work is in *Topologie*, its continuation is in the *Triangle d'or*) were published from 1975 to 1978. Of these nine preexisting texts, Robbe-Grillet has divided the three longest into several sections which he has placed in the two novels in such a way that they alternate with the other previously written texts. Morrisette describes the process of assemblage in detail and points out the rare occasions

where Robbe-Grillet has made small changes in the earlier texts in incorporating them into the assemblage novels. In a "Constructional Appendix" he summarizes bibliographical data and offers a concise outline of the source of the text—whether preexisting or newly written—of each section of the two assemblage novels.

Of even greater interest to Morrisette than the process of assemblage is the method of writing which Robbe-Grillet has employed in the earlier texts. Eight of the nine preexisting works (the ninth work was "commissioned" by Suntory, a Japanese liquor manufacturing company, and was used as an advertisement in Japanese newspapers; Morrisette, pp. 30, 79), in their original form, consisted of a text by Robbe-Grillet accompanied by a series of etchings, lithographs, paintings, or photographs by Paul Delvaux, Robert Rauschenberg, René Magritte, Irina Ionesco, or David Hamilton. The artist's role in the creation of each of these texts varied. Delvaux, for example, participated actively. Robbe-Grillet describes having written a text which he sent to Delvaux, who responded with an engraving that recast and transformed Robbe-Grillet's own themes. The latter then wrote a second text and the process continued (quoted by Morrisette, p. 17). Magritte, on the other hand, died in 1967, before Robbe-Grillet began to select from among his paintings the ones that are included in the longest of these earlier works, the Robbe-Grillet/Magritte "novel" *La Belle Captive* (1975).

Most of these eight picture-texts (the publications that include works of art and text) are nearly impossible for the general reader to obtain. Issued in limited, deluxe editions, several are very expensive; the Rauschenberg work has not yet even been published. Morrisette's study provides descriptions of selected paintings, lithographs, etchings, and photographs from these works, points out certain images that occur in the works of more than one artist, traces the initial appearance of an image in either a visual work or a text and its reoccurrences both in the text and in further visual works, and analyzes Robbe-Grillet's use of the visual material as generators of his text. Thus his *Intertextual*

Assemblage is both the only available source of information, for the general reader, about these picture-texts and also, for the reader whose training is in literature rather than in art, probably more informative than an undirected study of the visual works alone would be. Ideally, as Morrisette himself suggests, one would use his study as an introduction to, and as a guide in analyzing, the picture-texts themselves.

Morrisette's interest in the relationship between the visual material and the text in these works is readily understandable. Although there may have been as many texts written describing works of art as there are art works that illustrate texts, Robbe-Grillet's use of selected elements taken from works of art as generators of a text which neither describes nor attempts to re-create the total art work is very new. Robbe-Grillet's method is a form of intertextuality expanded to include quotations from nonliterary works. It incorporates the quoted elements as intrinsic parts of the newly created text, and as generators of the continuation of that text. Robbe-Grillet's method, then, reminds us of Charles Baudelaire's terrible vision in "Un Voyage à Cythère," a poem inspired by Watteau's pastoral "Embarkation for Cythera." Perhaps it is even more reminiscent of Stéphane Mallarmé's abstraction, from Edgar Allen Poe's real tomb, of the elements he incorporates into his "Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe." Neither the painting nor the real tomb can be visualized by the reader of the resultant poems. Yet Robbe-Grillet's texts are longer and even more complex, in that each is inspired by a series of works of art which serve not only as a point of departure, but to which he repeatedly returns for new images which continue to engender the development of the text. The closest contemporary parallel is perhaps Italo Calvino's *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969, 1973; translated as *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*), which uses sequences of tarot cards, illustrated in the text, as generators of the fiction. But there are great differences between the traditional tales that Calvino's narrator "reads" from various arrangements of the cards in two tarot decks and Robbe-Grillet's recent fiction in which increasingly traditional images (eggs, melons, seashells, shoes, and daggers), originating in the visual works, are incorporated into a text in which events and characters are carefully kept in a state of constant metamorphosis.

The importance of the generative function of the visual material in the individual picture-texts suggests the question of how the two assemblage novels, *Topologie* and the *Triangle d'or*, which are published without any of the visual sources, are to be read: solely as novels that are complete in themselves, or both as individual novels and simultaneously as the separate picture-texts that they incorporate, with reference to the (almost unobtainable) works of art which served as their generators. When this question was raised at a roundtable discussion at Washington University in St. Louis in October of 1979, Robbe-Grillet responded by calling the preexisting picture-texts "des livres provisoires" ("temporary texts"). Insisting that *Topologie* and the *Triangle d'or* are complete works in themselves, he argued that demanding that a reader know everything James Joyce did before attempting to read *Ulysses* would be comparable to asking his readers to study the picture-texts in order to read the assemblage novels.

Morrisette immediately objected in a pleasant but firm manner, and one understands why he did so. Robbe-Grillet, as author, has to believe that the two assemblage novels must be able to stand independently if he has been successful in developing a new method of writing. But the responsible critic may not ignore the unusual origins of these two novels; for him, Bruce Morrisette's *Intertextual Assemblage* provides a much needed and very useful explanation of the construction of these two remarkable works, and offers assistance in his search for an answer to Robbe-Grillet's concluding words in the *Triangle d'or*: "Qu'ai-je dit? Qu'ai-je fait?" ("What have I said? What have I done?").

Emma Kafalenos

JACQUES BERTHOUD
Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase
 Cambridge: Cambridge University
 Press, 1978. Pp. 191.

This book, the ninth in a series (British Authors Introductory Critical Studies), is an attempt "to understand" Conrad's work "in terms of his own understanding of himself" (p. 5; Berthoud's italics). *A Personal Record* is