

The Boy and the Soldier, Companions in Robbe-Grillet's *Labyrinth*

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Near the conclusion of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, the unnamed doctor's voice fades into that of another voice, presumably the undisguised narrator's, which evaluates briefly the roles of several characters in the haunting story: the role of the unnamed boy, the first mentioned in the enumeration, is called "primordial," translated merely as "significant" by Richard Howard—"significant," the narrator pointedly adds, because the boy is indirectly responsible for the death of the unnamed soldier (p. 269).¹ Such a small reminder coming from a narrator who is, to say the least, not given to offering explicit advice on what is or is not important in his text is unusual and noteworthy. Commentators on the novel, however, have alluded only in passing to this "significant" child, and therefore I wish to consider here, in an inductive manner, the prominence and the nature of his role.² More generally, perhaps the following remarks will help to explain why *Labyrinth* is for me, and I hope for others, Robbe-Grillet's most memorable text.

Unlike *Jealousy*, *La Maison de rendez-vous*, *Project for a Revolution in New York*, and *Topology of a Phantom City*, *Labyrinth* contains a fairly straightforward narrative, but one interrupted of course in various ways and for various reasons—by visits to The Room, the narrator's "prison" or "workshop," which contains some of the raw materials which his imagination struggles to incorporate into a story; by "dreams" or "recollections" or material which may be designed simply or partially to fill in "textual time"; and by the narrator's experimental scenes, meanderings, hesitations, and impasses. Halting though the soldier's story may be, it is in brief as follows: on his first day in the unnamed city he unsuccessfully endeavors to keep his appointment, meets the child, visits a café, and then spends the night in an undesigned place and manner; on the second day he again meets the child, who leads (or lures) him to the apartment and later to the barracks; on the third day he again visits the café with the child, speaks with the middle-class man in the street, and shortly after rejoining the child is wounded and then carried to the apartment, where he dies, probably on the following day.³ Though it should be impossible to read the novel and to ignore this fairly definite

¹*Dans le labyrinthe* (Paris: Minuit, 1959), p. 217. All other page references are to *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: Jealousy & In the Labyrinth*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

²Didier Anzieu makes several odd but interesting remarks; see "Le Discours de l'obsessionnel dans les roman de Robbe-Grillet," *TM*, 21 (1965), 621 ("un petit garçon . . . qui représente vraisemblablement ce soldat enfant"), 624 ("le petit garçon . . . dont le drame est le double de celui du soldat"), 633. In her long chapter on *Labyrinth*, Betty T. Rahv does not document her most important comment on the boy (apparently derived from Anzieu): ". . . there are many suggestions that the boy and the soldier are one and the same, both left by a father, or at least that the soldier serves as a substitute father for the boy" (*From Sartre to the New Novel* [Port Washington: Kennikat, 1974], p. 105).

³I do not agree with James Lethcoe, who suggests that the events occur on two days (see "The Structure of Robbe-Grillet's *Labyrinth*," *FR*, 38 [1965], 505). Rahv (p. 104) echoes Lethcoe. The following pages contain references which would help to substantiate my reading: 153, 159, 160, 189, 228, 230, 234, 255, 258, 264.

chronological arrangement, it is essential to follow the boy and the soldier as they appear in the text—as they wander through the fourteen unnumbered sections of the Robbe-Grilletian labyrinth.⁴

Section 1 of *Labyrinth* contains only two references to “a child.” As the narrator begins to envision or to form a soldier and a street setting, he notices a door leading to a dark hallway and ajar far enough to admit “a child” (p. 148). The concluding words of the section may predict that “a child” will soon begin to emerge in the narrative: “And the entire scene remains empty: without a man, a woman, or even a child” (p. 149). In section 2 “a boy” does appear in the café depicted in the carefully described etching: he sits on the floor, “his legs folded under him, his arms clasped around a large box something like a shoe box” (p. 151)—a description which the narrator will have difficulty incorporating into his inventions or story. When the etching “comes alive,” the narrator chooses to describe a brief scene between only two characters, the boy and the soldier, as the café is closing; the scene is written as if the characters are only half alive, or as if the narrator has not yet been able to animate fully the newly conceived actors and to understand the relationship between them (see pp. 153-54). The child twice asks the soldier if he is asleep and then reminds him that he cannot stay in the café overnight. The scene concludes when the soldier says “your father” and the child corrects him—“He’s not my father.”⁵ Apparently annoyed, the child “turns his head toward the door” (p. 154), and the direction of his gaze causes the text to move outside the café. The narrator then tries to create a meeting between the child and the soldier and thus to begin shaping some kind of background for the brief scene in the café. At first the soldier is alone, wandering through the snowy streets, but then he meets a boy of about ten who wears a black cape and who has a “serious and alert” expression (p. 155). The soldier twice tells the child not to be afraid and asks where the road goes. The child finally gives brief responses—“I’m not afraid,” “I don’t know” (p. 157)—and then flees. Descriptions of the running, disappearing child, similar to the following, will appear frequently in the text:

And he looks again at this badly dressed, unshaven soldier who does not even know where he is going. Then, without warning, he makes a sudden turn, skillfully avoids the base of the lamppost, and begins to run as fast as he can along the row of apartment houses, in the opposite direction from the way the soldier came. In a few seconds, he has disappeared.

At the next street light, he appears for several seconds; he is still running just as fast; his cape billows out behind him. He reappears at each lamppost, once, twice, then no more. (p. 157)

After a few lines the narrator adds some ambiguous observations: “Yet it is this same boy with the serious expression who led him to the café run by the man who is not his father. And there was a similar scene under the same kind of lamppost, at an identical crossroads. . . . But the boy answered with just as much reticence . . .” (p. 157). Although some readers may wish to think of two meetings in the ordinary sense, in my estimation the narrator now seems

⁴Although Stephen Heath is quite correct in demanding that a reader of *Labyrinth* be aware of “the play of the text” or “respond to the activity of the text, to its construction” (*The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* [London: Elek, 1972], pp. 142, 149), the novel is a transitional work—the *nouveau roman* of 1959—and is considerably different from the meaningless “construction” called *Topology of a Phantom City*—the *nouveau nouveau roman* of 1977.

⁵The fact that in the etching a single child appears in a crowded, chaotic café may suggest that the proprietor, rather than a customer, is the father of the child.

puzzled because he has failed to “connect” the boy and the soldier prior to the brief scene in the café, and therefore attempts to imagine another meeting (the tense shifts from past to present as the scene develops). He records some brief dialogue between the soldier and the boy in the street, but again the child flees, becoming “smaller and vaguer at each reappearance [under the street lights], until there is nothing but a confused whirl of snow” (p. 158). After two failures, but ones which do contribute to the labyrinthine nature of the text, the narrator merely asserts, without any dialogue, that “it is certainly the same boy who walks ahead of the soldier when the latter comes to the café” (p. 158). The two enter, with the child leading the way.⁶

Section 3 opens when it is “daylight again” and when the soldier’s “beard may be a little darker” (pp. 160, 161). Now the child (a paragraph is used to describe him before dialogue commences) approaches the soldier on the snowy street. He looks at the soldier “without surprise, but also without the slightest indication of friendliness, as if he found it both natural and annoying to meet the soldier again” (p. 161). The child asks the soldier where he has slept⁷ and where his barracks is located, complains of the way he wraps his leggings, comments on his regimental number (12,345), and questions him about the contents of his box.⁸ The questioning wears the soldier, who is “almost ready to give the boy the package.” During the conversation the child becomes “increasingly self-assured.” But the soldier now formulates a complete question about the child’s father: “Does your father serve meals?”—to which the child replies “He’s not my father” and then walks “stiffly toward the half-open door,” slips through the opening, and “closes the door behind him” (p. 163). A few lines later the narrator presents what appears to be a deliberately obfuscating remark: the soldier, apparently disappointed by the child’s disappearance, thinks that “perhaps he will see the boy appear at one of the windows,” but then realizes that “he knows that the child in the cape does not live in this house, for he has already gone with him to where he lives” (p. 164). Clearly designed to disrupt a chronological movement, this isolated comment seems less weighty than the *series* of contradictory time markers in *Jealousy*. In any case, after the narrator returns to The Room and wonders particularly about the object of the child’s gaze in the etching, the story resumes with the boy looking around the corner of the building he entered on p. 163 and, in a “tone deliberate, calm, and not friendly” (p. 166), twice asking the annoyed soldier what he is waiting for (pp. 165-66). When the child disappears and the soldier cannot open the door the child had entered earlier, he walks on and shortly thereafter is attracted by a voice (see pp. 167-69—the child’s voice? the young woman’s?). The soldier notices an open door, enters, and eventually meets the young woman. While he waits in the totally dark, silent hallway, section 3 concludes with this “memory”: “The soldier closes his eyes and again sees the white flakes falling slowly, the row of street lights at regular intervals from one end of the snow-covered sidewalk to the other, and the boy running away as fast as he can, appearing and disappearing, visible each time for a few seconds in the successive circles of light at equal intervals of time, though the space is increasingly foreshortened by the distance, so that the boy seems to be running slower and slower as he grows smaller and smaller” (p. 171).

⁶The narrator also remarks: “Then the soldier must have met him several times, while walking in circles through the maze of identical streets” (p. 158). “Several times”? In the ordinary sense? Or in the sense of appearances in the text? Ultimately there is little difference.

⁷The child asks, “In the barracks?” (p. 161). The soldier agrees, but he is probably avoiding the truth.

⁸Perhaps the child, who looks attentively at a nearby partially open door when he questions the soldier about his box, suspects or knows that they are being overheard.

The child plays a relatively small role in sections 4 and 5. While waiting in the hallway the soldier again briefly envisions the fleeing figure (p. 172), and the child also makes brief appearances during the scene in the apartment (pp. 175, 178). The interview between the soldier and the young woman is interrupted for several pages (pp. 180-84), during which two paragraphs are devoted to describing the child's footprints in the snow (p. 182), visible records of the child and one of the soldier's preoccupations.⁹ When the narrative proper resumes within section 5, brief references are made to the boy in the apartment (pp. 185-91), where he becomes "timid and curious" (p. 186). The last three paragraphs of section 5, however, describe the child leading the soldier through the snowy night toward the barracks; the section concludes: "It is only a few steps farther on, once out of the circle of light, that he can again ascertain the boy's presence, a wavering shadow, the cape fluttering in the wind against the bright background of the next street lamp, five or six yards ahead" (p. 192).

The opening sentences of the first three paragraphs of section 6 may be sufficient to suggest the intense distress which the soldier feels at being left by the child: "And the child has disappeared for good." "The boy has left again; but instead of turning back, he has continued straight ahead in the same direction." "The soldier is alone, he looks at the door in front of which he is standing" (p. 193). It is in the next paragraph that the narrator himself shows obvious signs of distress, far more so than he does at any other point in the novel; within a few lines, as he attempts to describe what should be a simple matter (the soldier entering the barracks), he reaches three impasses, exclaiming "No" after the first two and "No. No. No" after the last (p. 194).¹⁰ Is it possible—and it definitely seems so to me—that the anguish which the soldier feels at losing the child-guide is transferred to the narrator, whose creative work now proceeds with painful hesitation? Later when the soldier is sitting on his bed and removing his leggings, a "memory" appears in the text: he recalls the child's earlier comments about his leggings and the child's questions about the place where he slept (the previous night, according to my calculations); then, in a surrealist paragraph he envisions the fleeing child, who, with "his serious eyes still staring at the soldier," glides backwards until he is "suddenly swallowed up toward the horizon" (p. 201). A little later, as the soldier is lying awake on his bed, the text includes a *reprise* of the first scene in the café. The section ends when the "live" scene merges into the etching.

While the reading of section 7 is in progress, one may assume that time is passing for the soldier in the barracks; the section, in other words, fills up "textual time," and it shifts "feverishly" from one matter to another. In a long *reprise* which occurs in the apartment and in the streets on the way to the barracks, the child moves "faster and faster," getting "farther and farther ahead" of the soldier, who "is constantly afraid he has lost" him (p. 206). The child's footprints seem to lead to the building containing The Room, but as the stoop is crossed and the steps mounted, no pronoun is used. In a "feverish" passage (pp. 207-08) the soldier follows in the child's tracks, fears that he has lost them but finds the child waiting in front of the barracks, and, when he enters, "awakens with a start" (p. 208). After the soldier returns to his bed, in another "feverish" passage the boy seems to lure him to a door; the soldier enters and climbs toward The Room (p. 212). Obviously these scenes are susceptible to various readings. For instance, the narrator calls attention to the fact that he controls his creations,

⁹See pp. 164, 166, 207, 251, 256, 257-58.

¹⁰Another "No" appears half a page later (p. 194). The only other uses are on pp. 248 and 255.

who cannot invade his sealed Proustian room or “generative cell.” Or is the child endeavoring to lead the soldier to the safety of *The Room*? What is essential, however, is the “feverish,” labyrinthine nature of the sequence.

Section 8 is perfectly straightforward narration. The soldier receives some medicine and a new coat, and then, as he leaves the barracks, meets the lame man. As section 9 opens, the child and the soldier are again in the café, where they discuss the marble which the soldier has found in his new overcoat and has given to the child. Now the child “has lost almost all his mistrust” (p. 223). The narrator shows some confusion over the child (p. 223), and then the dialogue continues (see p. 224).¹¹ The soldier refers to the lame man as the child’s father; the child again declares “He’s not my father” (p. 225), turns his head toward the door, and moves away from the soldier. The text drifts into a description of the child and soldier entering the café. The soldier leaves, apparently not accompanied by the child. After the soldier speaks to the middle-class man and considers throwing his box into the sewer, the child appears again, walking in the soldier’s tracks. Perhaps because the soldier is ashamed of his apparent attempt to dispose of the box, he wishes he were strong enough to run away but then thinks that “probably this child has nothing against him” (p. 232). The child indicates that he has something to tell the soldier, but instead he asks why the soldier wanted to throw the box away. The child’s “low voice is now without mistrust, his questions are not hostile” (p. 233). The soldier, though exhausted by the child’s conversation, “fears still more that his companion will run away, abandoning him in the empty street where night will soon fall” (p. 234). The section ends when they hear the “distant sound of the motorcycle” (p. 234).

In the opening of section 10 several “images” (the soldier’s “memories,” “fears,” and so on) appear before the central narrative resumes. The exhausted soldier, seated in a doorway, seems unable to rise. With tones that are not indicated in the text—compassion? incredulity? mild surprise?—the child asks the soldier: “Did you lose your barracks again?” (p. 236). Perhaps now determined to tell the soldier the “something” already twice referred to (pp. 233, 234), the child mentions his father; the soldier asks:

“Where is your father?”

“I don’t know.” Then loudly, carefully articulating each word: “It’s not true that he deserted.”

The soldier looks up at the boy again: “Who says he did?”

In answer, the child takes a few steps with a limping gait, his legs stiff, one arm stretched alongside his body, grasping a crutch. He is now only a yard away from the door. He continues:

“But it’s not true. And he said you’re a spy. You’re not a real soldier: you’re a spy. There’s a bomb in your package.”

“Well, that’s not true either,” the soldier says. (pp. 236-37)

The child’s problem now has been articulated, and there no longer seems to be a barrier separating him from the soldier. With the sounds of the motorcycle again becoming noticeable, the child wishes to leave. He holds out his hand to help the soldier rise—a simple, moving gesture and therefore something very unusual in Robbe-Grillet’s fiction. When the child acts incautiously and draws the attention of the enemy patrol, the soldier, “before realizing what he was doing . . . was already following him . . .” (p. 239), following him, ironically, toward death, not safety. The wounded soldier and the boy are together

¹¹In this and other cases some details and nuances are not noted here (for instance, the dialogue on p. 224 suggests that the lame man has sent the child to spy on the soldier).

as section 10 concludes: "Then he heard the boy's low voice quite near him in the darkness, but he did not understand what it was saying. He felt he was losing consciousness" (p. 240).

The narrator seems to have several major goals in section 11: to fill in the "past" (to explain the soldier's possession of the box and particularly to create a scene which reflects the etching, a scene in which three soldiers appear), to account for "textual time" (the time needed to bring the soldier to the apartment), and to represent the confused state of the dying soldier. The child appears briefly in the apartment (p. 248) and figures in the wounded soldier's "dreams" (pp. 250-51). The final dialogue between the boy and the soldier occurs in section 12, and the child's final question—"Are you going to die here?"—is one which shocks the soldier. The question produces "anxiety," which is manifested in a now familiar image:

The soldier does not know the answer to this question either. Besides, he is amazed that it should even be asked. He tries to find explanations, but he has not even managed to formulate his anxiety when the boy has already turned away and is disappearing as fast as he can down the straight street, without even taking time to circle the cast-iron lampposts he passes, one after the other, without stopping. Soon only his footprints remain on the smooth surface of the fresh snow, their outline recognizable although deformed by his running, then becoming increasingly blurred as he runs faster and faster, finally growing quite vague, impossible to distinguish from the other footprints. (pp. 257-58)

In section 12 one also learns that the child informed the woman of the wounded soldier's whereabouts (p. 258) and carried the box, the fallen soldier's "burden," to the apartment (pp. 256, 259). In a series of half-formed "scenes" or notations, the narrator is finally able to incorporate the heretofore unused image from the etching into the narrative proper: during a violent argument between the lame man and the doctor, "the child is sitting on the floor near an overturned chair; his legs are lying flat forming a wide V; in his arms, against his chest, he is holding the box wrapped in brown paper" (p. 260).¹² The text drifts back to the etching, and twice the child is mentioned in his original position (p. 261), to which he seems to be returning permanently. The brief section 13 of course concludes with the death of the soldier. When the last reference to the child occurs in section 14 (p. 271), he is once again in the etching, his source or home.¹³

Though explicit explanations certainly are not presented in the text, one easily comes to understand the child's psychological problem and his reason for being drawn toward the soldier. The boy, it seems clear, would like to think of his father as a soldier-hero, but this father is missing and is called a deserter by the false or substitute father. After, on several occasions, showing his sensitivity and resentment when the unnamed soldier mistakenly identifies his father, the child formally acknowledges and defends his true father and in the process seems to bring a secondary motif of the novel to a conclusion. The soldier sides with

¹²See Ben F. Stoltzfus, *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the French New Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 98-100, and Stephen Heath's reply, p. 144.

¹³In section 14, immediately before and after the reference to the child's being "significant," the narrator registers some uncertainty, which, given the nature of the "fluid" text, is not at all surprising: ". . . if it is actually the same boy each time, as is likely despite slight contradictions . . . but his many appearances are not all decisive to the same degree" (p. 269). Perhaps this and the other similar passages (pp. 157, 223) serve as a kind of emphasis.

the child against the substitute father, and as readers pass on, they probably feel that the child's fears and uncertainties will subside. In addition, obviously a soldier who appears lost reminds the child of his own missing father; but if curiosity, spiced with a little fear, explains the child's original interest in the soldier, his attitudes become more complex, progressing toward familiarity, concern, and perhaps compassion (the growth in the relationship between the boy and the soldier helps to give a reader of the halting text a sense of progression). By no means, however, does the child adopt a soldier who is a heroic or ideal father-figure. The child, repeatedly called "alert" and "serious,"¹⁴ complains of the soldier's unsoldierly appearance and, more importantly, seems in his actions—in his role as guide—to be more "adult" than the soldier himself. At the same time one must emphasize that the boy is realistic and believable—something rare in fiction and unique in the novels of Robbe-Grillet. One remembers him for being "alert" and "serious," but one also remembers his swinging on the lamp-posts, his persistent questions about the marble, and his oscillating legs as he sits rigidly watching the sleeping, dying soldier. The narrator himself calls attention to this combination: ". . . although his voice still has its grave, almost adult timbre, he speaks with a childish simplicity, sometimes even with a naïve abandon" (p. 223).

The "anguish" or "anxiety" noted by many readers and surely an integral part of *Labyrinth*, results, of course, in part from the feverish soldier's preoccupation with his "burden" and his mission (as far as the text indicates, the delivery of the package is the single goal of his life), and perhaps also from suppressed emotions related to "the young woman with the low voice and the pale eyes" (p. 176). Moreover, as previous quotations have clearly suggested, the soldier grows dependent on his child-guide (expected roles are partially reversed, so that the soldier-child is led by the boy-adult) and fearful of being deserted by him. This fear, as intense as any other emotion embodied in the text, is made clear both by explicit statements and by the repeated image of the fleeing child, an image which is reminiscent of the more problematic central image in *Jealousy*, the crushing of the centipede. Perhaps because the narrator in *Labyrinth* wishes to avoid any hint of sentimentality, at times during his contacts with the child the soldier appears gruff, annoyed, or suspicious; but the evidence suggests that this nameless man with no personal past does have deep-seated fears about his ability to survive. The child, who leads him to the café, the apartment, the barracks, and even toward the mysterious Room, seems to be the clue through the labyrinth, but ironically, and indirectly, he becomes the cause of the soldier's death.

As different as *Labyrinth* may be from conventional novels, surely the effect of the non-allegorical book still depends to a very great degree on character and incident, on material, that is, which contains what might be called implicit psychological life. Admittedly, the characters in *Labyrinth*, at least by nineteenth-century standards or those of E. M. Forster, are merely sketches—pale, tentative, nameless beings, whose relationships with one another are brief and unexplored. But for a variety of converging reasons—the nature of Robbe-Grillet's prose, the landscape and situation in which the characters are placed,¹⁵ the imagination of the reader—these characters are very much *there*, if sketchy, at the same time memorable and moving. Or to put the matter in another way, in *Labyrinth*, as in

¹⁴See pp. 155, 157, 161, 201, 223, 232, 269. His voice, a "serious voice, which is not a child's voice at all" (p. 257), is mentioned frequently (pp. 153, 154, 157, 158, 163, 166, 223, 224, 226, 236). The child also does not seem bothered by the cold or snow (pp. 155, 156, 157, 233).

¹⁵See Bruce Morrissette, *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 167-68.

all Robbe-Grillet's novels commencing with *Jealousy*, it is engaging to watch what Stephen Heath calls "the play of the text";¹⁶ but in *Labyrinth* one is offered something more than intellectual or verbal games—namely, characters about whom one cares, such characters being quite absent in all of Robbe-Grillet's other texts. Finally, perhaps Robbe-Grillet could have created an engaging text if he had totally isolated an unnamed soldier wandering on a self-imposed, inconsequential mission; but such a hypothetical novel would have been thinner, or with less human interest, than the work which we actually read. Yes, the "anguish," the "pathos," and the "poignancy" mentioned by nearly all commentators on the novel are indeed present; and it seems impossible to account clearly for these without viewing both the boy and the soldier, fellow wanderers and companions in the Robbe-Grilletian labyrinth.

¹⁶See no. 4.