

# Robbe-Grillet's Dialectical Topology

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Topology is a branch of geometry which studies the qualitative rather than the quantitative properties of space. Topology investigates the kind of spatial continuity and reversibility that we find in a Möbius strip or a Klein bottle, recording the interchangeability of one surface with another. Bruce Morrisette, in applying topology to Robbe-Grillet's works, defines it as one of the "primary intellectual operations capable of revealing the modalities of surfaces, volumes, boundaries, contiguities, holes, and above all of the notions of *inside* and *outside*."<sup>1</sup> Vicki Mistacco gives topology an additional metaphorical dimension in which the "production" of contemporary texts depends on the continuity and contiguity of both reader and writer.<sup>2</sup> Topology, therefore, may refer to the spaces within a text as well as to the implied spatial relationship between the intrinsic text and the extrinsic reader—relationships which have ontological and perceptual implications.

Within the text, topology can signify the topography of a room, a house, a city, or a place. It elucidates structural relationships and configurations which may be stretched, twisted, and distorted. "In topology [says Robbe-Grillet] there are volumes whose inside is outside. There are surfaces where one side is on the other . . . in *Projet pour une révolution* . . . the house, the street, and the keyhole . . . function as topological spaces. At times one has the impression that the whole house empties itself and that it passes entirely through the keyhole, that the whole inside of the house becomes the outside."<sup>3</sup>

Topology is therefore more than a branch of geometry, or geography, or medicine. It deals with art, language, and perception. It is a dialectical space in which ontology and topography meet. Following Derrida's dictum that "We have to unite or reconcile the two presentations (*Darstellung*) of the inside and the outside,"<sup>4</sup> *Dans le labyrinthe* (1959), *La Jalousie* (1957), *L'Immortelle* (1963), *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970), and *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (1975), synthesize the inside and the outside. These works, and others like them, structure a reversible and interchangeable continuity between the inside and the outside, i.e., between the subjective and the objective, the reader and the text.

While soliciting our collaboration, Robbe-Grillet's works draw our attention to those "openings" within the text which emphasize the work's reflexive characteristics: its polysemy, paronomasia, and generative metaphors. Robbe-Grillet's novels and films, while seemingly closed, labyrinthine structures, are, in fact, "open" works, since open works, by their very nature, as Eco has pointed out,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Morrisette, "Topology and the French *Nouveau Roman*," *Boundary 2* (1972), 47.

<sup>2</sup>Vicki Mistacco, "The Theory and Practice of Reading *Nouveaux Romans*: Robbe-Grillet's *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*," in *The Reader in the Text*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 371-400.

<sup>3</sup>"Interview" with Vicki Mistacco, *Diacritics*, 6 (1976), 37.

<sup>4</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1974), p. 283.

<sup>5</sup>Umberto Eco, *L'Oeuvre ouverte*, trans. Chantal Roux de Bézieux (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).

invite the reader/audience to play an active role. Within this dialectical context Lucien Dällenbach speaks of *Les Faux-monnayeurs* as one of the early examples of reflexive interplay generating meaning: “. . . in this case the role of the spying mirror consists less in integrating an ‘exterior’ reality within the novel, as in abolishing the antithesis of the inside and the outside, or rather, in introducing an oscillation between the two. This is particularly evident whenever Gide’s novel, by naming it, evokes Edouard’s, an exercise in reversibility that sometimes takes advantage of the play of mirrors in order to obtain an even more effective short-circuit.”<sup>6</sup> Whether short circuit or exchange, Robbe-Grillet’s topological synthesis is an inherent dimension of his art. It is a dialectic of movement, a state of perpetual transcendence, the *Aufhebung* to which he, Hegel, and Derrida refer.<sup>7</sup>

On the narrative level, topological displacement may affect people, things, or places, so that characters, like rooms, experience a kind of “time warp.” In *Les Gammes* (1953), there is a missing murder, in *Le Voyeur* (1955), a missing crime, and in *La Jalousie* a missing character. In *Le Voyeur*, at the end of Part I, Jacqueline disappears through the white hole of the blank page. In *Topologie d’une cité fantôme* characters fall into holes and come out on the other side completely transformed, having lost their original features and character. In *Souvenirs du triangle d’or* (1978), there are narrative displacements which defy plausibility and verisimilitude. While such shifts continue the nouveau roman’s devaluation of conventional literature, they also emphasize the role of keyholes, windows, doors, tunnels, etc. as mediating agents between two or more spaces.

To analyze any of Robbe-Grillet’s texts is, immediately, to lay bare the structure of the topological dialogue. Morrisette and Rahv have done this nicely for *Dans le labyrinthe*, while Leenhardt, though not with topology in mind, has done it for *La Jalousie*.<sup>8</sup> Both novels conceal the “holes,” i.e., the transition points through which the inner-outer dialectic manifests itself. Its rarefaction is an implicit if “hidden” aspect of Robbe-Grillet’s early oeuvre.

In *Dans le labyrinthe* the narrator’s imagination flows freely and effortlessly between the street outside and the room inside: “outside it is raining”; “outside the sun is shining”; “The sun does not get in here”; are the second, third, and fourth sentences of the novel. At the end of the book, after the soldier’s real or imaginary death, “dehors” and “ici,” once more, as they did throughout the work from the very beginning, affirm the narrator’s dialectic, as he, the doctor, imagines, dreams, and identifies with the soldier. The doctor’s “outside” narrative moves “inside” where his consciousness merges with the soldier’s quest, even as the author weaves his deceptive topological patterns in and out of rooms, streets, corridors, and stairways. The window opens on two simultaneous seasons (summer and winter), abolishing time and annihilating space. The incandescent light bulb filament inside the room “connects” with its counterpart on a lamppost in the street. The narrator’s eye, with the help of the magnified shadow of a fly walking around the rim of the lampshade “hole,” is projected onto the ceiling, moves across this surface, down the red curtains, and out the closed window. This description, as Morrisette has pointed out, bends consciousness around the

<sup>6</sup>Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Glas*: “The movement described is thus the lifting of a release, the *Aufhebung* of an *Aufhebung* with which I rediscover in the other whatever I lose from myself” (p. 25).

<sup>8</sup>Bruce Morrisette, “Topology and the French *Nouveau Roman*,” and “Robbe-Grillet No. 1, 2 . . . x,” *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd’hui*, Publications du Centre Culturel de Cerisy-la-Salle, ed. Jean Ricardou and Françoise van Rossum-Guyon (Paris: Union Générale d’Editions, 1972), II, p. 127; Jacques Leenhardt, *Lecture Politique du roman: “La Jalousie” d’Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1973); Betty T. Rahv, *From Sartre to the New Novel* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974), p. 108.

gravitational field of a little black hole (the fly). The pattern on the ceiling traps the imagination, sucks it in, and expels it into another time-space zone. This is an example of the way Robbe-Grillet uses windows as lenses and passageways, not only to explore the self-conscious process of writing, but also to get at different levels of the phenomenological self. Glass, as Jean Rousset also points out, is "a closure and an opening, a hindrance and a freedom, a fence in the room as well as an expansion toward the outside, the unlimited within the circumscribed."<sup>9</sup>

As for the structure of *La Jalousie*, Leenhardt and Robbe-Grillet both stress the fact that it is based on a system of binary oppositions, using the house as a focal point for the *duel* (dual: "quelle différence?") that language is dramatizing.<sup>10</sup> The struggle for ascendancy between the antagonistic forces can be diagrammed summarily as follows:

Binary Oppositions

*Jealousy*

<b>inside</b> .....	<b>outside</b>
house .....	nature
straight lines .....	arabesques
reason .....	instinct
order .....	disorder
husband .....	wife
colonial power .....	native subservience

Other oppositions could be added, but the above seven define the novel's essential topology and structure. If the inside of the house is a bastion of order, reason, and colonial power (which the husband seems to wish it were), then the vegetation outside signifies not only the random disorder of natural phenomena, but also the threatening potential of native anticolonial attitudes. However, this neat opposition between the straight line of male Cartesian dominance and the arabesques of female instinct and disobedience are undermined on all levels. The curved line of the centipede is inside the house, even as the geometrical banana groves order the landscape of the jungle.

It is the window blind that makes this exchange possible. The novel's title, *Jealousy*, "reconciles" the antitheses. *La Jalousie*, meaning both window blind and jealousy, is simultaneously objective and subjective. It is the point of contact for feeling and perception, for what is experienced and what is seen. The mind, inseparable from the emotions, is the house, the place, the battlefield for conflicting value systems represented by people, things, animals, colors, and actions. The husband's sense of order is in conflict with A... 's propensity toward disorder. Her actions (implied liaison with Franck, familiarity with the servants, non-judgmental attitude concerning sex between blacks and whites) menace the husband's equilibrium as well as colonial stability. A dark, suspect, and in fact chaotic nature from outside the house has already invaded the rooms inside. The curved lines of the centipede are visible on walls, in the contours of native pottery, even in the sensuous flowing waves of A... 's black hair. A... is a source of disorder and is perhaps even in collusion with the enemy. The north side of the house, having been invaded by a profusion of arabesques, has already fallen. This is the drama with which the jealous husband is struggling—a drama fed by fear and desire: fear of losing A... , desire to retain a colonialist status quo.

<sup>9</sup>Jean Rousset, *Forme et signification* (Paris: Corti, 1962), p. 123.

<sup>10</sup>Jacques Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman*; Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Order and Disorder in Film and Fiction," trans. Bruce Morrisette, *Critical Inquiry*, 4 (1977), 1-20.

This battle for dominion over the house has a special topography. Bachelard believes that a house used in a poetic context is a symbol of man's soul.<sup>11</sup> Houses, says Eliade, "are held to be at the Center of the World and, on the microcosmic scale, to reproduce the universe."<sup>12</sup> The house, says Bachelard, is an instrument with which to confront the cosmos. Accordingly, we sense an implied urgency in the jealous husband's gaze with which he tries to impose a linear geometry on a house which is slowly but surely giving way to the dark and untamed presence of the circle.<sup>13</sup> A threat to the house is a threat to the husband's colonial identity. Robbe-Grillet has thus painted the portrait of a doomed political enclave. His work is a brilliant psychological, aesthetic, and sociopolitical study of a disintegrating world. *Topoanalysis* (Bachelard's term) thus reveals the "soul" of the house. It is a *dual* image of fear and jealousy governed by the opening and closing of the venetian blind.

This house, signifying consciousness (a jealous consciousness full of "intentionality"), is the place where outside and inside meet, where feeling and perception, subjective and objective are one and the same. The centipede, signifying both the animal and the husband's emotion, represents the synthesis of two worlds which were once held in opposition, but which are now perceived as identical. Robbe-Grillet's novel demonstrates, aesthetically, the union of two opposites as the novel's dialectical topology weaves an intricate pattern exteriorizing the inside and interiorizing the outside. The husband spies on his wife (inside), imposes arithmetic patterns on the banana grove (outside), "sees" a clandestine encounter in town (outside) which is perhaps only imagined (inside his mind's eye), wanders through the empty house of his imagination as the dialectic pursues its inexorable synthesizing pattern. The centipede becomes the objective correlative, the symptom of repressed (hence unconscious) fear and desire.

The venetian blind of *La Jalousie* is used again in *L'Immortelle* to announce transitions between the inside of a room and the city outside. It also acts as an achronological time-space mediator. The blind appears in the opening scenes and reappears at appropriate intervals ordering the film's diegesis.

The dialectic is structured around Professor N., inside the room, and Leila, whose domain is the city of Istanbul, outside. The following sequence from the film's "prelude" will establish the significance of its topology. Opening scenes of Istanbul's ancient walls, shot from a moving car, are accompanied by the oriental melody of a woman singing a Turkish song. We hear the sound of a car crash, then see the face of Leila, the heroine, fill the screen. The female vocalist (not Leila) resumes her song which was interrupted by the crash. Shot of a man standing in a corner of a room. The sound of a chugging engine is heard inside the room (the ferryboats plying up and down the Bosphorus will become an important motif in the film). This initial sound effect, through synecdoche, brings the city inside the room. Similar sound effects will reinforce the film's developing dialectic. In due course we learn that the man standing in the corner of the room is Professor N., on assignment in Istanbul. He falls in love with Leila, one of the city's beautiful prostitutes. The film establishes the fact that Leila is not

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<sup>11</sup>Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Univ. de France, 1967) pp. 18-19.

<sup>12</sup>Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), p. 43.

<sup>13</sup>Jacques Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman*, p. 66.

free, that she is in bondage to her pimp, that she is afraid to be seen with N. in the daytime, that she is like a trained dog on a long leash who must obey her master's whistle. After meeting with N. several times, she disappears and N., who, by now is hopelessly in love with her, spends his time (when he is not in his room) searching for her throughout the city.

This search for Leila determines the film's structure and meaning. Diegesis is achronological and reality is suspect. N. rides the ferryboats, wanders through a maze of narrow streets, knocks on doors, scrutinizes closed windows, questions mosque attendants, merchants, and the police, stands pondering the tall cylindrical shapes of Moslem tombstones or the old city walls—the labyrinth in which he proceeds to lose himself. N. in search of Leila (who is the incarnate "body of the text"), when combined with the restoration of the walls of the labyrinth, provide an effective metaphor for the director (Robbe-Grillet) working on his film. But this fact, though in itself interesting, is not immediately relevant. What is relevant is the paradox of a real city, Istanbul, becoming a fantasy city in the mind of a love-smitten, jealous, and, in due course, fearful N. The film's diegesis evolves inside N.'s mind. The external labyrinth of Istanbul is interiorized, thus becoming an internal affective labyrinth. This interiorization explains the film's achronology which, in turn, corresponds to the protagonist's disorientation. N., in his attempt to find Leila and explain her disappearance, relives and imagines certain scenes over and over again in a vain and desperate attempt to locate the woman of his dreams. The outer reality of the city is objective while the inner imaginative reality is subjective. The dialectical structure of the film moves alternately between these two poles synthesizing them along the way. Istanbul is a real city, but the events of the film are fictitious.

Once we understand this process, the topological dialectic comes into clear focus, explaining exaggeration, repetitions, distortions, a deliberate photographic "flatness," and clichéd sound effects. Inside N.'s memory and imagination, reality is altered and deformed by his emotions, thereby demonstrating the oneness of the object (the city) and the self (perception). The decor is not any arbitrary objective correlative, but corresponds exactly to N.'s feelings and "intentionality." He traps himself inside the room of his obsessions, and, like Leila, "dies" in a car accident outside the city walls. This is the crash we heard but did not see at the beginning of the film.

We are now ready to understand the seemingly disconnected shots with which the film opened: successive shots of Leila at the walls, on a ferryboat, in a cemetery, on a beach—serial shots that adumbrate the thematic content of the film and which are accompanied by the sound of a romantic violin—images and music together forming a clichéd picture of a tourist's dream of love in an exotic land. All this is followed by a full screen shot of Leila's face outside the venetian blind, as though looking in at the audience. We hear the sound of an engine, a ship's horn, and dogs barking. Where are the sounds coming from and are we, the audience, outside or inside? The ambiguity is deliberate—the dialectic is now in full swing. The venetian blind closes, followed by a shot of a man in a room who is looking out through the slats. We see a heavy-set Turk sitting on a chair on the jetty, followed by a close-up of the water and its movements. A boy from the outside looks up at the closed window. The man sitting on the jetty is also looking at the closed window. Another shot of Leila inside the room is followed by shots of the jetty, her pimp, the white Buick, the Bosphorus, trees, water, and traffic. The "prelude" is over and the narrative has begun. The conversation with Leila on the jetty carries over into the room inside. A romantic violin theme pursues N. who is once again in the corner of the room looking out through the blinds. Suddenly, he retreats from the window into the corner as though in fear, as though he does not want to be seen from the outside, etc.

The rest of the film elaborates the motifs of love and fear as the city labyrinth is interiorized, progressively, inside the room (signifying "mind") of the professor's alienation. At night, the headlights of passing cars project black shadows—the venetian blinds—on the white walls of the room—a room which has become the man's prison: "The events and oneiric landscapes are only a means with which to penetrate the opacity of more urgent phenomena pressing in on us from all sides—phenomena whose very urgency leads us astray."<sup>14</sup> Professor N., like the husband in *La Jalousie*, has become the prisoner of his affective labyrinth. In *La Jalousie*, the sun, shining through the blinds, casts similar shadows into the room whose alternating light and dark lines simulate the bars of a prison: "The four walls, like those of the whole house, are covered with vertical laths two inches wide separated by a double groove. . . . This striped effect is reproduced on all four sides of the square bedroom . . . . The ceiling, moreover, is also covered by the same gray laths. As for the floor, it too is similarly constructed, as is evidenced by the clearly marked longitudinal interstices . . . . Thus the six interior surfaces of the cube are distinctly outlined by thin laths of constant dimensions, vertical on the four vertical surfaces, running east and west on the two horizontal surfaces."<sup>15</sup> In *L'Immortelle*, the prison theme is reinforced with shots of closed and barred windows, Leila behind a metal enclosure, Leila chained to dungeon walls, Leila, like a trained animal, responding to the whistle of her master.

The venetian blind is a double metaphor. It signifies the subjective bias of perception that is conditioned by *langue*, experience, and desire, while also representing a topological cue that alerts the reader to the author's intentions. It is as though Robbe-Grillet were saying: beware the "trap of language" and desire.<sup>16</sup>

Within Robbe-Grillet's dialectical topology signifiers like the venetian blind form interesting intertextual patterns. Doors, windows, mirrors, and corridors (not to mention the bicycle, the white Buick, the metal bed, proper names) bring one work into another. In *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, the description of the heavy wooden door with its curved metal design conveys as much information to the "initiated" reader as Charles Bovary's hat. Beside alluding to and extending the linear-curvilinear dialectic of *La Jalousie* and *L'Immortelle*, it enables the reader to connect with other similar doors in *Les Gommies*, *Le Voyeur*, *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, *L'Eden et après*, etc. Robbe-Grillet's doors have in fact become symbols for transitions of all kinds between reality and the imagination, between *langue* and *parole*, between social code and individual freedom, between convention and spontaneity. One could, as with *La Jalousie*, compose a list of binary oppositions applicable to all his works. If the jealous husband and Professor N. succumb to curves and circles, the heroine of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) loses herself in the linear Cartesian logic (inside the chateau and in the formal gardens outside, composed of straight lines and right angles) fabricated by the man who pursues her. The list of binary oppositions would consist of a geometry of law and order (the superego) whose role it is to resist the continuous "subversion" and disorder of curves and circles (the id). If we think of consciousness (the ego) as a stage separating the superego from the id, then willpower, imagination, and creativity (play) sometimes mediate between the two extremes. Only the intellect can reconcile the rigidity (straight lines) of the superego with the latent chaos (arabesques) of the id. Order and disorder are thus frequently contrasted on a purely formal level.

<sup>14</sup>Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963), p. 88.

<sup>15</sup>Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957), pp. 159-60. My translation.

<sup>16</sup>See Robbe-Grillet, "Piège à fourrure (Début d'un projet de film)," *Minuit*, 18 (1976), 2-15. Parenthetical references to "Piège" will appear within the text.

*Projet pour une révolution à New York* continues exploring the topological aesthetic along mythical sociopolitical lines. The white establishment, which has law and order on its side, feels menaced by disorder, the Blacks, the mafia. The wooden door with which the novel "opens," a door with metal arabesques, adumbrates the fears of the power elite. The novel cultivates disorder, magnifies it, and plays with it, in order to demonstrate that the author's *parole* can oppose the *langue* of the establishment. Doors, windows, fire escapes, and keyholes provide the necessary contact between the forbidden and the sanctioned, between the inside and the outside. They open into or lead to rooms where women's bodies (*langue*) are injected with strange fluids, where their pubic hair is set on fire, while Black revolutionaries ritualize erotic plays (*parole*) on improvised platforms at strategic downtown intersections.

There is a gradual, though systematic, progression in Robbe-Grillet's works between a conservative, nonsexual imagery and an imagery which many readers and spectators now find shocking. Compare the incipient Oedipal theme in *Les Gommages* with the actual incest scenes at the opera in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*; or the stiff, well-dressed, puppet-like actors in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* with the women in *Le Jeu avec le feu* (1975) whose nude bodies grace a banquet table, an implied cross, or a coffin. Robbe-Grillet, like Sade, is aggressively parodying public mores, values, and religion.

Even though Robbe-Grillet insists that his art says nothing or that it has no content, the snippets of public myth with which he composes his narrative discourse do speak the ideology of the establishment. The exaggeration of this imagery, however, introduces a parodic quality which effectively undermines a clearly recognizable stereotype. Robbe-Grillet's *parole* may be formalist, but its content is revolutionary. Robbe-Grillet's works expose society's coded clichés, thereby challenging the repression of play, desire, spontaneity, and violence. His art devalues Nature, convention, stasis, and the status quo. Like Gide, Robbe-Grillet is a creature of dialogue, an elusive protean figure whose art is forever slipping from one extreme to the other. In one article or interview he will stress the purely formal interplay of language and imagery, and in another he will emphasize the hopelessly old-fashioned ideology from whose fragments he derives his discourse.

The informed reader is therefore not far off the mark when he/she connects the spirals, curves, and arabesques in Robbe-Grillet's works with women, freedom, imagination, while straight lines, mathematical games, and rectilinear geometry tend to connote men, prison, constraint. *L'Immortelle*, for example, contains a dramatic shot of Leila's face framed by the spiral configurations of a metal gate. There is a shot of Alice's face in *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (1974) behind the iron spiral of a bed. In *L'Eden et après* (1971), rectangular cages imprison naked women. There is also the celebrated sequence in *L'Eden* of a nude descending a spiral staircase. This picture appears again, with extraordinary emphasis, on the front cover of a special Robbe-Grillet issue of *Obliques* (Nos 16-17). It is not by chance, therefore, that we find metal arabesques on the door, in the opening scene of *Projet*. The spiral on the door is no more "innocent" than Charles Bovary's hat. Robbe-Grillet's art is perhaps as meticulous as Flaubert's and his premonitory devices no less carefully wrought. For example, the opening paragraphs of *Dans le labyrinthe*, moving back and forth between the falling snow outside and the accumulating dust inside the room, adumbrate the topology of curves and lines: "Across the dark asphalt of the sidewalk the wind is driving the fine dry crystals which after each gust form white parallel lines, forks, spirals that are immediately broken up, seized by the eddies driven along the ground, then immobilized again, recomposing new spirals, scrolls, forked undulations, shifting arabesques immediately broken up."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>A. Robbe-Grillet, *Dans le labyrinthe* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1959), p. 11.

This binary opposition between curves and straight lines is a constant element in Robbe-Grillet's dialectic. In Part I of the "Premier Espace," of *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*, entitled "Dans la cellule génératrice," a naked woman lies tied on a rectangular table. The prison cell is rectangular. Another naked girl is painting a rectangular picture. There is a rectangular trap door on the floor. Several naked girls are playing cards at a square table. The tarot cards are rectangular. The rules of the game are written on a piece of rectangular paper. I am not gratuitously singling out rectilinear objects; the adjective "rectangular" appears in each of the above descriptions. The only curves with which to break the grip of straight line geometry belong to the bodies of the women. It is no doubt significant that their game takes place inside a prison cell with five straight iron bars on the windows, or that the five external generators of the text are men: Robbe-Grillet, Delvaux, Magritte, Rauschenberg, and David Hamilton, four artists (now that Robbe-Grillet has become a painter) and one photographer—all of them dealing in images.

The descriptions of women, nymphets, rooms, temples, and landscapes in the five "spaces" of the novel are identifiable and derivative. Delvaux's wide-eyed, bare-breasted, sleepwalkers can be seen evolving on a landscape of ruined temples dominated by a volcano. If we piece together the linguistic pun of Jean de Berg and the smoking, "murmuring" volcano ("rauchen," "rauschen" and "Berg" in German) we derive the name of the American artist.<sup>18</sup> Magritte's bowler-hatted men and his gravity-defying boulder suspended over a seascape are as unmistakable as David Hamilton's nymphets posing in front of mirrors and windows in varying stages of dishabille.<sup>19</sup>

The artistic code provided by the five *external* generators of the text meshes with the polysemy of the text's internal *generators*—images and objects which are identical to the nine serial signs Robbe-Grillet describes in "Piège à fourrure": steps, fur, opening, knife, cry, penetration, fall, flow, and stain. These nine signs structure an arbitrary serial imagery generating the text's ongoing and repetitive metonymy. The author's *parole* proceeds to excavate the *langue* which is in ruins. The author's text, the raped virgin, demythifies Jupiter's rape of Danaë, and focuses the reader's attention on the body of the text and the nude bodies within the text on which Robbe-Grillet and his narrators perform their "experiments." Language is no longer "innocent." Like man's original "fall," language and nature have been separated. Hence perhaps the signs for "falling," which, like the white pebble, or the meteorite with the V on it, may, if we "recuperate" the novel, give it referential overtones, thus connoting this fall from "innocence." Robbe-Grillet's annihilation of time ("It is morning, it is evening"; "I am here. I was there." *T*, pp. 10-11) shifts the narrative into a mythical present in which the rape of the virgin is now the defloration of language—a language which was presumed to be innocent because it was supposed to reflect mother nature and her natural processes, but which now is no longer perceived as mimetic. Hence the penetration inside from without, hence the emphasis on openings, all kinds of consciously manipulated Freudian openings, designed to capture meaning for the unus-

<sup>18</sup>A. Robbe-Grillet, *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1976), pp. 95-96. Parenthetical references to this edition will appear within the text after the abbreviation *T*.

<sup>19</sup>Robbe-Grillet's collaboration with these four artists is as follows: *Rêves de jeunes filles*, text by Robbe-Grillet, photos by David Hamilton (Paris: Laffont, 1971). *Les Demoiselles d'Hamilton*, text by Robbe-Grillet, photos by David Hamilton (Paris: Laffont, 1972). *Construction d'un temple en ruine à la déesse Vanadé*, prints by Paul Delvaux, text by Robbe-Grillet (Paris: Le Bateau-Lavoir, 1975), reprinted in *Topologie d'une cité fantôme. La Belle captive*, text by Robbe-Grillet, illustrations by René Magritte (Paris: Bibliothèque des Arts, 1976). *Traces suspectes en surfaces*, text by Robbe-Grillet, original lithographs by Robert Rauschenberg, limited signed edition, 1978; Robbe-Grillet's text corresponds to four chapters in *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*. Some of Rauschenberg's lithographs are printed over Robbe-Grillet's handwritten text.



pecting reader: "I am alone, quiet, untouched. They call me Vanadis but I don't care, my real name is Suzanne. I am naked but intact. Kneeling on my prayer stool, I feel innocent and hard. My gaze is empty. It is only you examining my body with that uneasy look" (*T*, p. 126).

A similar text, with the same blank eyes, reminiscent of Magritte's painting "Les Fleurs du mal," appears at the end of *La Maison de rendez-vous*. The "open" text (inside) solicits its reader (outside). The author sets the arrested images in motion ("Maison d'arrêt," *T*, p. 25), but the reader must decode the progressive slippage between prison cell, fantom city, engraving, tarot card, enemy assailants. The cry from the dungeon frees the bound woman lying on the rectangular table, and, as the trapdoor closes, the "fur trap" of latent eroticism takes over. The novel's myths, as Rossum-Guyon notes, are no more than "snares" whose falseness is denounced by the work's total structure.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, to reduce the meaning of the novel to the content of its fables is to ignore the artist's *parole*—the dialogue between determinism (rectilinear geometry) and imagination (the curves of a woman's body)—on which these myths keep rolling. The cry can be heard inside and outside the dungeon, as Robbe-Grillet's art structures the dialectic into more and more complex metonymic forms.

If windows, blinds, and doors open into the recesses of the self and also connect with the world outside, then art, which passes through both, exteriorizes one and interiorizes the other. Ricardou sees the door as a perfect example of this ambiguity which the Latins called "janua," from Janus, their two-headed god looking simultaneously in opposite directions.<sup>21</sup> Such movement back and forth within the text, such ludification of reality, is an essential dimension of the ontological dialectic: "When we speak of play, we think also of a certain amount of play within construction components. I even said once, apropos of the writer, that he is like a door: as soon as it works, it plays back and forth. This double meaning of the word play, ludic organization on the one hand, and on the other, a deliberate built-in distance, does not displease us."<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the all-important rectangular door, with its wood grain and its ornate metal arabesques, *Projet pour une révolution à New York* contains a narrative "I" that changes voices and identities, shifting from one character to another. A character who, at the beginning of a sentence was "he," suddenly becomes an "I," who, in turn, refers to someone else as "he," who, before you know it, has become another "I." "It is like a mobile narrative voice which sparkles throughout the play of the 'I'" ("à travers le jeu du 'je'").<sup>23</sup>

This play with the body of the text and the bodies in the text, this movement back and forth between opposing realities, enables Robbe-Grillet to resolve the apparent contradictions between the inside and the outside. However, to penetrate "the body," to "deflower" it, to provoke a flow of blood, a reader, in order to enter the text, must first pass through the door (Freud maintained that rooms signified female sexual organs and doors symbolized the genital opening.<sup>24</sup>). In

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<sup>20</sup>Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, "Conclusion et Perspectives," *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui*, ed. Jean Ricardou and Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, Colloquium Cerisy-la-Salle (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), I, p. 407.

<sup>21</sup>Jean Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971), p. 214. My translation.

<sup>22</sup>A. Robbe-Grillet, "Discussion," *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui*, II, p. 236. My translation.

<sup>23</sup>A. Robbe-Grillet, "Discussion," p. 165.

<sup>24</sup>Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Liveright, 1935), p. 141.

Robbe-Grillet's fictions, blood flows frequently from beneath his doors: "And the blood flows in a vermilion rivulet that will soon pass through the dark interstice beneath the ill-fitting door, etc." (*T*, p. 201). While Foucault may stress the absolute dominance of "la pensée du dehors," by eliminating all notion of selfhood ("language as being appears in its own right only with the disappearance of the subject"<sup>25</sup>), Robbe-Grillet's synthesizing dialectic transcends the linguistic prolepsis prefigured by the outside or the inside, thus forcing the reader to explore the living gap between the two.

While a work of art can be viewed as an independent entity in its own right, a novel can also act as a mediating agent between the reader and the writer or the scriptor. Thus the bodies in the text, as well as the body of the text itself, are metaphors that require "penetration" by the reader in order to elicit "the pleasure" first experienced by the scriptor. The "holes" within such "open" texts generate a sexual topology in which the contiguity and continuity of spaces synthesize the apparently irreconcilable topological duality. Magritte's painting, "The Human Condition," like Robbe-Grillet's fiction, resolves this contradiction: inside a room there is an easel with a canvas on it that reproduces exactly, in its minutest detail, the portion of the landscape outside the room which is hidden by the painting. The edges of the painting blend perfectly with the trees and shrubbery. The picture is simultaneously inside and outside the room as the landscape itself is simultaneously outside the room and inside. The ambiguity, as with perception of "natural" objects, is total. When we look at a tree through a closed window, is its image outside the house or inside the mind? Magritte's rooms, like Robbe-Grillet's, are metaphors for the mind, the generative cell where imagination and creativity originate.

Robbe-Grillet's fiction, like Magritte's painting, communicates the duality and simultaneity of creative perception. My eyes are the mediating surface between the outside and the inside, while consciousness itself records the phenomenon in all its complexity (early Robbe-Grillet criticism was not wrong to label his novels as belonging to "l'école du regard"). Art, as a mediating agent, can be viewed as an extension of our sensory organs. And the distortions of our senses, though we may not be aware of them, as Magritte's painting of an eye entitled "The False Mirror" implies, are perhaps as acute as those of Robbe-Grillet's fiction. His rooms empty themselves through keyholes, while the insides of houses become the outside. His topology, his human condition, like Magritte's, is indeed the dialectical space where ontology and topography meet. Doors, windows, and blinds, like the human eye, are the mediating agents between two seemingly opposed and irreconcilable spaces. Robbe-Grillet's art unites them both in one transcendental leap.

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<sup>25</sup>Michel Foucault, "La Pensée du dehors," *Critique* 229 (June 1966), p. 525.