

Metaphor and *Mise en abyme* in the *Nouveau Roman*

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Few things have been taken for granted, in the last two decades, more readily than the link between structuralism and the *nouveau roman*. To a large extent, this could be explained by the simple fact that in its broad definitions and in the often confused or abusive interpretations of its claims, structuralism was long thought of as being closely tied to practically every kind of avant-garde activity. The 1960s and the 1970s were clearly periods of preoccupation with a radical reorientation of criticism and literary consciousness, reflecting the sensitivities and aspirations of the post-Proustian, post-Existentialist era. But even in its more specialized and thus more relevant versions, structuralism retains an unquestionable degree of attractiveness for students of literary culture, since it asserts itself basically as a "mode of analysis which originates in the methods of contemporary linguistics."¹ In turn, the experimental practices involved in the quest of the *nouveau roman*, as seen by most of its exegetes, are concerned with the novel as process and with the dialectics of form and signification. Indeed, the assertion that its formalist quest is promoted through subversion of the mimetic/representational functions of the narrative is by now rather commonplace in critical literature dealing with the subject. Disintegration of plot and character, reflexivity, play of recurrences, aleatory associations and "bricolages," have all been indentified as strategies of more or less coordinated attempts of subversion. To what extent are the practices of the *nouveau roman* consistent with the notion of literature as system in which, as in the Saussurian conception of language, everything is held together—*tout se tient*—and constitutive parts of a whole are "meaningful" by the networks of their interrelations but never in isolation and certainly never by reference to an order, or reality, extraneous to the system? If the decisive criterion for the structuralist outlook is the direct link with linguistics, how can it be reconciled with the later phases of the *nouveau roman* in which its formalism betrays rather a desire to escape from Western logocentrism and its metaphysics?

In discussing the practice of metaphor and *mise en abyme*, what I propose to address are some key aspects of the structuralist orientation discernible in some of the best-known examples of the *nouveau roman*. And in so doing, I hope to offer some new assessments of its impact in an area of cultural activity where claims of radical change and renewal continue to stir controversy.

It is by now well established that the structuralist revolution brought about, among other things, a gradual reinterpretation of the rhetoric and poetics of the Aristotelian heritage. Revitalized by structural linguistics, rhetoric understood as "a theory of figures of speech" is the object of intense preoccupation in the 1960s and 1970s, as the publication of the much acclaimed *Rhétorique générale* (Larousse, 1970) demonstrates. Characteristically, one of the most important developments in this area, in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, points to an extraordinary reclassification of the status of metaphor. The categories of the Aristotelian inspi-

¹Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 3-4. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, "L'Analyse structurale en linguistique et en anthropologie," in *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958); and Roland Barthes, "Science versus Literature," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 September 1967, pp. 897-98.

ration undergo an unprecedented revision. In a rather persistent trend, the predominant tendency is to subject the old taxonomy to new and relentless reductionist pressures, leaning decisively in favor of metaphor, often treating it as a generic term for all figures of speech, as a "figure of all figures," a "trope of all tropes."² But the question of metaphoricity considered as the essence of all figurativeness is a broader issue. As a practice of the *nouveau roman*, metaphor has been noticed as a crucial object of study for the specific reason that it was presumed radically modified to serve as a means of "subversion," in an intentional departure from established conventions of narrative discourse and, therefore, of the novel.

The phenomenon that drew attention first in that respect was in fact no less than a process of "controlled" figuration resulting in actual suspension of the metaphorical transfer of meaning and aimed at liberating the potential of metaphor as a structural/generative process, free of transcendental, or metaphysical, referential frameworks positing the existence of a preordained reality.³ It was Ricardou who construed its specificity in that light first. He was also the first to refer to it as "structural metaphor" in studies tracing its origins in precursors of the *nouveau roman* such as Poe and Proust,⁴ or analyzing its effects in Robbe-Grillet's seemingly unmotivated, unromantic descriptions of objects⁵ and Claude Simon's subtle exploitation of puns.⁶

The specificity of metaphor in the *nouveau roman* is also assessed in those terms in the studies of Pierre Caminade who shares many of Ricardou's views and often resorts to the latter's conceptual baggage and terminology. Typically, in his analysis of Claude Simon's *L'Herbe*, he sees the entire novel as dominated by a "metaphorical movement" and aptly illustrates the novelist's use of "structural metaphor" as a means of expanding "the connotative field of fiction."⁷ Likewise, metaphorical relations in word associations and narrative strategies of the type analyzed by Ricardou are studied in essentially the same terms by Stephen Heath who sees the *nouveau roman* as a product of the structuralist consciousness and its practitioners as struggling primarily with the problematics of language.⁸

But let us now turn to the *mise en abyme*, the device whose name, so rich in connotations through its association with André Gide, has by now earned an even more deserved place in history through the exceptionally varied and ambitious applications it identifies in the *nouveau roman*. In some respects, as has often been

²Cf. Jacques Sojcher, "La Métaphore généralisée," *Revue internationale de philosophie*, No. 87 (1969), pp. 58-68; Michel Deguy, "Vers une figure généralisée," *Critique*, No. 269 (Oct. 1969), pp. 841-61; J. Dupois et al. (Le Groupe μ), *Rhétorique Générale* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1970); Michel Le Guern, *Sémantique de la métaphore et de la métonymie* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1973).

³Cf. Robbe-Grillet's comments in *Nouveau Roman: Hiens, aujourd'hui*, ed. Jean Ricardou (Paris: Union Générale d'Édition, 1972), 1 281-82. One is reminded of Robbe-Grillet's blanket denunciation of not only metaphor but also analogical relations in general, in his "Nature, humanisme, tragédie," in 1958. From that extreme position he had to retreat considerably in 1961 (see "Procès à Robbe-Grillet," *Clarté*, No. 39, Dec. 1961, p. 9) and again during this discussion at Cerisy in 1971.

⁴Jean Ricardou, *Problèmes du nouveau roman* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 135-41.

⁵Jean Ricardou, pp. 149-54.

⁶Jean Ricardou, pp. 44-55. Also, Jean Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp. 133-37.

⁷Pierre Caminade, "Le Mouvement métaphorique dans *L'Herbe*," in *Claude Simon: Analyse, théorie*, ed. Jean Ricardou (Paris: Union Générale d'Édition, 1975), p. 352.

⁸Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), pp. 47-152, 153-78.

noted,⁹ the multiplicity of variations that some of the novelists derive from the “story within a story” model of the Gidean conception attests perhaps more eloquently than any other innovation to the inventiveness and ingenuity they displayed in the course of their quest. As in the case of metaphor, structuralist principles guide the narrative strategy served by the “adjusted” applications of the device. Engaged in a far-reaching process of transformation and reorientation, the *mise en abyme* aims at the same effects of non-transcendental analogical relations pursued through “structural metaphor.” In this case too, the obvious intent is to suspend the transfer of meaning in order to prevent identification of the comparing element by the compared. Though the similarity in these attempts to produce new models of metaphor and *mise en abyme*, respectively, appears to be an intriguing object of study, it has not been, to my knowledge, investigated thoroughly by anyone so far. But it has not gone unnoticed either. “What is happening to metaphor in the *nouveau roman* . . . is also happening to the *mise en abyme*,” observed Jean-Pierre Vidal during the Claude Simon colloquium at Cerisy in 1974.¹⁰ Inasmuch as they address the subject in that perspective, Lucien Dällenbach, Jean Ricardou, and Bruce Morissette concur with that view even if the conclusions they reach do not always coincide.

In the experimental practices of the *nouveau roman*, the function of elucidation and self-interpretation of the Gidean prototype—cf. Gide’s remark: Nothing illustrates a tale better than its interior duplication—is no longer the purpose. By the logic of the Gidean approach, inserting a reduced model of the “story” within the wider perimeter of the novel is simply a mechanism intended to enhance a given paradigm of fiction.

In keeping with the “doctrine of expression,” to use Ricardou’s favorite cliché, this mode of figuration is based on the assumption that the semantic field of a narrative sequence can be either “compressed” or “dilated” allowing duplication through conversion to another scale. Production of fiction is thus understood to result from the integrated effects of a “story” and its doubles.¹¹ In this perspective, no relation between the “enclaves” or between an enclave and the wider frame in which it is embedded is intended as antagonistic. But in the device most typically found in the *nouveau roman*, the relation between models is balanced in the opposite sense. Used in competitive or conflictual concatenations, its primary role is to suspend the performance of referential functions, to contest the mimetic/representational aspects of the device. Accordingly, in this latter perspective, the production of fiction is understood to be the effect of the irreducible presence of multiple models displaying points of analogy in a manner that stresses rather than masks an inescapable sense of separateness and disjunction. In this “structural revolt of a fragment against the overall narrative which contains it,”¹² fiction asserts itself merely as a design of combinations, as a display of an indefinite number of possibilities.

It was not long before attentive readers of the *nouveau roman* became aware of the perplexing subtlety of purpose in the repeated applications of the device. The frequency with which it was used was characteristically high. And the vehicles invented for its use reveal a variety of structural concepts: micro-history (reduced

⁹Cf. Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire: Essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 151-211, and Ann Jefferson, *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 193-206.

¹⁰Claude Simon: *Analyse, théorie*, p. 172.

¹¹Cf. Lucien Dällenbach, pp. 76-98.

¹²Jean Ricardou, *Problèmes du nouveau roman*, p. 181.

models of the story), paintings, blazons, engravings, bas-relief, sculpture, figurines. In Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, announcing the rape scene and the nature of Mathias's guilt, a movie poster depicts a scene of violence—a man strangling a young girl, the latter kneeling beside a doll that was ripped. The novel that A began to read, in *La Jalousie*, and which is about a jealous husband and an unfaithful wife, sketches a situation which parallels that of the story central to Robbe-Grillet's book, involving A herself and alluded to by the book's title. Also in Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le Labyrinthe*, an engraving is described as depicting a place and a situation identical or analogous to those of the scene in the café, the latter becoming the point where all the "threads of Ariadne" lead. In Claude Simon's *La Route des Flandres*, the "fissured" portrait of Captain Reixach's ancestor tells a story that seems to duplicate that of Reixach himself; in his *L'Herbe*, the lid of the cookie tin—so important as a whole and as a "structural metaphor"—is decorated by a woman dressed in white who holds an identical box in her hand and is lying in the grass, thus metaphorizing a major aspect of the novel, through a sort of continuous fission of the focal repetition pattern.

In Butor's *Passage de Milan*, the canvas being painted by De Vere, during the fateful party on the fourth floor, is presaging coming events, and as such stands as a metaphor for "passage," the process that the entire book is all about; in his *L'Emploi du temps*, a detective novel being read by Revel (*The Murder of Bleston*), tapestries in the museum, stained-glass windows in the cathedral can all be perceived as vehicles for the device, since they are reflections of one another and at the same time reflections of the major aspects of the story. Similarly, in Claude Ollier's *La Mise en scène*, the intriguing representations in rupestral engravings become allusions to aggressive gestures and to the murder story which is another major component of this novel.

Now let us consider the implications of this poetic logic in the process of "production by analogy" seen in the later phases of the *nouveau roman*. The desire to use *mise en abyme* "structurally" gradually led to an expansion of its field and to a generalization of its application. The rule of duplication became a rule of multiple mirror reflection. Pursued through an ever-increasing degree of reflexivity, the process surrendered to the will to valorize immanence at the expense of all else. In texts like Simon's *Corps conducteurs* and *Triptique*, Butor's *Où*, Pinget's *Fable*, Ricardou's *Les Lieux-dits*, the proliferation of the *mise en abyme* is so pervasive that the device is "diffused even on the level of the phrase."¹³ In fact, in highly reflexive texts like Ricardou's *Les Lieux-dits*, the *mise en abyme* as a possible narrative strategy is "evicted," as the author himself so painstakingly demonstrated. In the tightening grip of this insular, hermetic formalism, the *language of fiction* is replaced by "écriture," a self-generating system, concerned with the exhibition of the *fiction of language* instead. As such, the written text becomes self-reflective, narcissistic. At long last, heralded some critics, the novel is daring enough to deal with its own myth! In 1971, it was already obvious that a *nouveau nouveau roman* was emerging. More and more, it relied on "the double constraint of the word for word and the general" as well as the "systematic bringing into play of abstract figures, whether geometric, arithmetical or grammatical." At this stage, the *nouveau roman* breaks with every kind of realism in dealing with psychological motivation and thus appears as an exercise in "production of pure text."¹⁴ Several new books, already on the scene, offered incontestable evidence of this radicalization: Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de Rendez-vous*, Simon's *La Bataille de Pharsale*, Pinget's *Le Libéra*, Jean-Louis Baudry's *Personnes*, Sollers's *Nombres*. What these books reveal most emphatically is the depth

¹³Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, in *Nouveau roman: Hier, aujourd'hui*, I, 403.

¹⁴Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, p. 404.

of the irreconcilable differences in ideology and philosophy that divided the authors of the *nouveau roman*. At Cerisy, it was acknowledged that novelists who accommodated themselves with the militant positions of *Tel Quel* could no longer be thought of as practising the same genre as writers like Sarraute and Butor. As it was understood at the time, Sarraute was still entrenched in the belief of a psychological anteriority being the origin of either language or "text," and Butor engaged in the practice of a provocatively innovative formalism, but of a kind that failed to challenge the "doctrine of representation." At the time of this polarization, the *nouveau roman* of an earlier day looked almost reactionary. Characteristically, by 1968, Philippe Sollers could take an openly adversary position and actually *denounce* what he called "l'idéologie positiviste du Nouveau Roman qui oscille entre une survivance psychologiste—courant de conscience—et un 'descriptionisme' décativement structural."¹⁵

It would be unnecessary perhaps to review here all the implications of the revolutionary orientation of the *Tel Quel* group, the theories and practices of its proselytes. But even a cursory look into the positions it articulated in the late 1960s is sufficient to remind us that despite the antagonisms and schisms it provoked within its own ranks, it reflected above all a logical evolution of the anti-bourgeois intellectual avant-garde of the 1950s with which the *nouveau roman* was first identified. In fact, what could appear as rigorous radicalization in 1970 was merely a phase of the dialectics that grew out of the "Era of Suspicion," expanding on, and systematizing some of the anti-humanist arguments put forward as early as 1958 by Robbe-Grillet in his "Nature, humanisme, tragédie." Inescapably, the quest of the *nouveau roman* was identified very closely with the latter's comprehensive indictment of humanism in literature, with his critique of the metaphysics of figurativeness and the process of "recuperation" that keeps literature subservient to an ideology, its system of values and its self-preservation. Exploring the possibilities of a new rhetoric of fiction to be derived from a language free of the threat of recuperation is an essential part of that quest. It is precisely that part of the quest that the strategies of the *nouveau roman* promoted to an almost paroxysmal extreme. And it is at that point that the applicability of structuralist concepts reaches its limits. The effect of "structural metaphor," as shown by Ricardou, illustrates how immensely the structuralist orientation widens the range of possibilities for redistribution and control of the figural space. By showing that the "reformed" models of *mise en abyme* belong to the vast domain of "textual similitudes"¹⁶ and therefore are types of "structural metaphors," he also demonstrates to what extent reflexivity—of the Mallarmean and Rousselian types—can function as a generative mechanism. But when this mechanism is geared for production of "pure text," and the function of representation is replaced by "auto-representation," and ultimately nonrepresentation, then the novel, as a category of narrative, and literature itself are no longer possible. The "text" that comes into being as the product of the "scriptural activity" carries the anti-humanist offensive to its logical limit. Through a special treatment of the personal pronoun, the purpose of the narrative project is now to "evacuate" the subject in order to replace the ideologically invested "reality" of the human subject with a grammatical entity. To put it another way, the structuralist science reaches its limits when the "scriptural activity" consumes itself in the liquidation of epistemological and referential literature and sets out to construct the "literary object" as a model of intelligibility of a presumably "pure" semiotic practice.

¹⁵Philippe Sollers, "Le Réflexe de réduction," in *Théorie d'ensemble*, ed. Collective Tel Quel (Paris: Seuil, 1968), p. 392.

¹⁶Jean Ricardou, *Le Nouveau roman* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 75, 109, 111.

But what manner of purity can emerge from the axiological desert begotten by such a practice? Can there be a signifying practice—"pratique signifiante"—in the aporistic quagmire of a linguistic Eden without origin? What the *nouveau nouveau roman* demonstrates most clearly is that the fortunes of the novel and ultimately those of literature itself were gambled primarily on the assumptions made on the nature of analogy. In terms of the initial challenge which questions the "theology" of the analogical relation, the structuralist light is not adequate. By driving the dialectics of form to the level of language articulations, the challenge is simply restated, only more dramatically. The radicalism that evolved from Robbe-Grillet's rhetoric of the 1950s ultimately challenges the very foundation of all systems of metaphysics in the West, the Greco-Christian logos. In the dizzying perspectives which this challenge suggests, any kind of radical action must focus its aims on the systematic destruction of a cultural endowment whose life has been undisturbed for thousands of years. And daring action in response to that challenge is by no means lacking. In the exploratory ventures attempted by thinkers like Derrida, Deleuze, or Blanchot or by Derrida's disciples on this side of the Atlantic—P. de Man and J.H. Miller, among others—any and all associations between literature as a value and the concept of meaning in the "presence of the word" are precluded. If this new trend of thought, chimerical as it may seem, succeeds in making a convincing case for a reasoned, secular "deconstructionism," the Saussurian premises of structural linguistics and the fixity of binary determinations that dominated the epistemology of language for so long may well suffer a severe erosion, indeed they may even have to be abandoned. Against this kind of challenge, the *force* or importance of literature will have to be faced as a totally new, basic philosophical question.