

The reviewers are already queuing up in their efforts to diminish *This Quiet Dust*. Thus the reviewer in *The New York Times Book Review* (November 21, 1982) suggests that novelists who have frequently turned to nonfiction, like Mailer, Vidal, and Didion, “needn’t feel threatened” by Styron’s collection. He goes on to say: “One also sees that his [Styron’s] powers are largely rhetorical, that he often calls on eloquence and passion to do the work of thought.” It seems, once again, that Styron may have to wait for the French translation before he is properly appreciated.

This least parochial of contemporary American writers, then, appears fated to have each of his books underestimated and misunderstood at home and then warmly accepted abroad, especially in France. *This Quiet Dust* will surely one day have a place next to Mann’s *Essays of Three Decades*, Valéry’s *History and Politics*, and Camus’s *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*—where it belongs.

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Robbe-Grillet’s *Projet pour une révolution à New York*: Hegelian Dialectics as Generator of Revolution

In the pages inserted in the French edition of *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, Alain Robbe-Grillet announces a possible new organizing force for fiction, originating in the experiments of the *nouveau roman* and its descendants. Calling his method the theory of “generative themes,” he explains that the themes of a novel—its objects, events, and words—can engender both the architecture of a narration and the events that take place within it.¹ If we look at the initial scene of *Projet* we see, following the gaze of a first-person narrator, a surface painted to resemble wood, the nearly parallel lines that are traced upon it surrounding knots that are “round or oval and sometimes even triangular” (p. 8; p. 2).² Like a surrealist frottage, the network of painted lines generates in the eyes of the narrator first a nude young woman, bound and unconscious, and then the objects and other persons involved in what becomes the first event of the novel.

In our attempt to follow the development of characters and events from a painted network of lines, it is easy to ignore the description of the painted knots on the surface of the false wood. Yet it is the shape of these knots, I propose, and the order in which these shapes are listed that generate many of the characters and events of this novel, and also distinguish the structure of this novel from that of Robbe-Grillet’s earlier fiction. The knots are first described as “round or oval”; the circular form of several of Robbe-Grillet’s earlier novels has often been noted. In

¹Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (Paris: Minuit, 1970); translated by Richard Howard as *Project for a Revolution in New York* (New York: Grove, 1972). The *prêtre d’insérer* is not included in the published English translation.

²Page numbers within parentheses in the text are given first for the French edition and then for the English translation. I am responsible for the translated quotations, but have relied heavily on Richard Howard’s published translation.

La Maison de rendez-vous (1965), the novel that immediately precedes *Projet*, for example, the police are searching at the beginning of the novel for the murderer of Edouard Manneret, who is later repeatedly murdered in the course of the novel. Circles and repetitions continue to be apparent in *Projet*. But just as the knots at the beginning of the novel are not only "round or oval" but "sometimes even triangular," there is a further complexity in the structure of *Projet* that is not found in Robbe-Grillet's earlier works. In *Projet* the three sides of the triangle seem to have generated a number of triads of characters, objects, and events. Robbe-Grillet's triangles, moreover, tend to be connected to each other, to share a common point. They seem to take their form from an initial object, character, or event, which generates its opposite, the juxtaposition of the two then forming the third member of the triad—which often becomes in turn the first element from which a further triad is engendered. It is my theory that Robbe-Grillet has borrowed the form of Hegelian dialectics as a generative structure for this novel whose title proclaims it as a "projet" (project or plan) for a revolution.

Triangular shapes and groups of three proliferate throughout *Projet*. The "narrator,"³ for example, travels on three levels (the ground, an underground area, and a still lower sub-basement [p. 30; p. 21]) to hear an ideological discussion by three actors (pp. 37-38; pp. 26-27). He imagines a struggle with three hoodlums as a possible excuse for the loss of a key (p. 86; p. 68). A broken piece of glass is triangular in shape (p. 24; p. 15). The triangle of the pubic area, with its curly hair, recurs throughout the novel; it is described as "perfectly equilateral" (p. 79; p. 63) just before its pattern is repeated on the dress which its owner is ironing, when the hot iron in falling burns a triangular hole in the corresponding area of the material (p. 82; p. 65).

The generation of characters in groups of three is perhaps even more obvious. The woman who appears out of the network of painted lines at the beginning of the novel is immediately followed by three men—one with white hair, one whose face and head are covered by a soot-colored leather mask, and one who is bald—the three are later identified as the main male characters of the novel, Dr. Morgan, the narrator, and Ben Saïd. We learn later that the woman, who has very black hair and copper-colored skin, is named Sara. Laura, who is blond and pale, appears next, and the triad of women is completed by JR, whose hair is red. Generation by three's does not end here, however. JR, who is also known as Joan Robeson or Robertson, or Jean Robertson (J/Joan/Jean; R/Robeson/Robertson), dies for "her triple adherence to the Irish race, the Catholic religion, and the New York police" (p. 201; p. 170). Sara has three terrible secrets, one of which is known to the reader, the second to the narrator, and the third to the author (p. 92; p. 75). Later, described as Sara but identified as "not Sara but Laura," she is given truth serum to discover who she is, where she comes from, and why she is hiding (pp. 190-91; pp. 161-62). The original Laura, some sixteen or seventeen years old (p. 27; p. 18), is doubled by young Laura, who is thirteen and a half (p. 57; p. 44), and tripled by adolescent Laura, who dresses in black leather and appears to be about fifteen (p. 106; p. 87). Finally this last Laura, the adolescent in leather, generates two similarly clad (but male) companions, forming a triad resembling an earlier one seen in Central Park, and apparently composed of JR, the "narrator," and Ben Saïd. Of the rapes that occur on an even more "aesthetic" plane of reality than that of the narration, the first is seen on the cover of a book (and explained only later; pp. 87-90; pp. 70-72); the second is heard on a tape recorder (p. 59ff.; p. 45ff.), and the third is both seen and heard on television (p. 79; p. 63).

³The character who is referred to in the novel as the "narrator," who does in fact narrate much of *Projet*. However, this novel repeats the technique introduced in *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965): a first-person narration in which the "I" who speaks is sometimes one character and sometimes others—a technique that Bruce Morrissette has termed the "floating I" (*The Novels of Robbe-Grillet* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1957], p. 250).

If we consider this series of triads, we note that the first two elements of each are essentially opposites: seeing the book cover and hearing the tape recorder; the first Laura who is sexually mature and the second Laura who is pre-adolescent; black-haired Sara and blond Laura; Dr. Morgan with his white hair and the "narrator" whose hair is covered by a dark mask. With a similar emphasis on opposition, the novel's first three paragraphs alternate between a scene (that is not described) and an absence of scene, an empty space. The office to which the "narrator" reports (as well as Ben Saïd, JR, and others), in fact a front for a spy ring, appears to be a placement bureau sponsored by the United Manichaeian Church (p. 56; p. 43). Manichaeism is based on an essential dichotomy between light (goodness, the spirit) and darkness (evil, the body).⁴ A doubling of scenes, characters, and events has been common in Robbe-Grillet's earlier fiction; in this novel the technique seems to be carefully controlled to form pairs of oppositions. One of the purposes of juxtaposing opposites is explained within the text:

Supposons que vous affirmiez d'abord une chose, puis son contraire; l'ensemble des deux réponses comporte alors, à coup sûr, l'expression de la vérité dans la moitié des cas. (p. 102)

Let us suppose that you were to affirm first one thing, then its opposite; the two responses together thus surely comprise the expression of the truth in half of the cases. (p. 83)

Truth, then, according to the novel, is to be found within the pairing of opposites. The tendency of the human mind when faced with contradiction, however, is to search for a valid resolution. The pattern of Hegelian dialectics is a case in point; a thesis and its antithesis (a thing and its opposite) lead to a synthesis—which may then form the first element of another triad, a new thesis that engenders its own antithesis, the pairing of opposites producing a further synthesis. The form of dialectical thought is well known; one can assume that an author with Robbe-Grillet's broad knowledge is cognisant of it,⁵ particularly when he follows its pattern so closely in the construction of his novel. We note that each pairing of a thing and its opposite in *Projet* has tended to generate a third member that is in some fashion a synthesis of the original pair. The rapes that are seen (on the cover of a book) and heard (on a tape recorder) have as their synthesis a third that is both seen and heard (on television). The Laura who is fully developed and the one who is pre-adolescent are followed by a third Laura whose age is between that of the other two. The three Lauras are a further generation from the earlier triad: blond Laura and her opposite, dark-haired and dark-skinned Sara, who are completed by the redheaded JR.

The central triad of the novel—the pattern from which many of the other triads are generated and the one which seems to unify and give meaning to the novel as a whole—structures the ideological discussion which the "narrator" descends deep into the earth to hear, "the color red," seen as a radical solution to the irreducible antagonism between black and white" (p. 38; p. 27). The immediate reference is to a political revolution; the "red" that is the synthesis of "black" and "white" generates a further triad of rape (preferably of a virgin, accompanied by bleeding), arson (gasoline is recommended as producing flames of the best color), and murder (by any method that causes sufficiently abundant external bleeding) (pp. 38-40; pp. 28-29). The historical link between dialectics and revolution, a

⁴The oppositions underlying Manichaeism, and their similarity to other pairs of opposites in the novel have been pointed out by Thomas D. O'Donnell, "Thematic Generation in Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York*," in *Twentieth Century French Fiction: Essays for Germaine Brée*, ed. George Stambolian (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 184-85.

⁵Bruce Morrissette, who describes the triad of rape, arson, and murder (to be discussed below) as a "burlesque Hegelian trinity" in his study of *Projet (Novels)*, p. 266, has mentioned in a conversation having heard Robbe-Grillet speak knowledgeably, and at some length, about Hegel.

relationship of which Robbe-Grillet is clearly aware, may be one of the themes with which he is intentionally "playing" in this novel: he quotes, in the *prière d'insérer*, "revolution itself is a game." In *Projet*, at least at times, the revolution that is being planned is a race war which is to include, "in order to avoid a general massacre of Whites, a reasonable number of particularly spectacular human sacrifices: collective rapes" (p. 202; p. 172). Rape, arson, and murder, according to the program discussed in the novel, are indispensable to the revolution that will free the Blacks (p. 153; p. 128). The imposition of "black" on "white" in order to produce the "red" that symbolizes revolution is reflected in the repeated acts of rape or torture that are carried out by black or black-clad or black-gloved males, on females who are white and often blond; the result throughout the novel is a more than sufficient quantity of visible blood.

But the political revolution is not the only revolution of the novel. The imposition of black ink on a white page has been a terrifying action at least since the time of Mallarmé, who described in detail his horror at the thought of defacing a virginal sheet of paper.⁶ Writing, for the authors of the *nouveau roman* and its descendants, has become a revolutionary act, an act that is accompanied by an increasing awareness of the creative role of the reader in the construction of the novel. A novel, for each individual reader, is not the printed text, but the version of it that remains in his mind after he reads it; thus each reader's novel differs from the novel anyone else has read, depending on the preparation and the attentiveness as well as the unique elements of his personality that he has brought to the reading. Bruce Morrissette has already pointed out that certain passages near the end of *Projet* are addressed directly to the critic or the reader of the novel,⁷ which suggests that Robbe-Grillet is extending the dialectical method beyond the construction of the novel to include the reading of it as well. If one considers the process of writing as the first element of the triad, the thesis; then reading, which is its opposite, is the antithesis. The relationship between writing and reading can be seen as comparable to the antagonism between the "white" and the "black"—reading as a rape, or destruction, of the original text. The third term in the dialectical process is the novel the reader retains as a result of the twin acts of writing and reading. We remember that a thing and its opposite contain the truth in at least half of the cases (p. 102; p. 83). Each reader makes his own selection to form his personal synthesis of the novel he has read—one that the author realizes will in every case be a uniquely individual synthesis of the writing and the reading of *Projet pour une révolution à New York*.

In this novel in which Robbe-Grillet announces the theory of "generative themes" as a new organizing force for fiction, the triangle generates the dialectical method, which provides both the form and the content of the work. The dialectical method, for which the triangle is the obvious illustration, offers a pattern in every situation for the continued generation of the text; each object or character or event can serve as a thesis, from which an antithesis and then a synthesis can be engendered. At the same time the dialectical method, with its historical ties to revolution, bears within it the germ of the novel's theme of revolution. Form and content are the twin products of a single source of generation, a revolutionary method that demanded a revolutionary theme. The novel is a revolutionary project for a revolution.

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⁶Thomas O'Donnell has previously noted the "conflict . . . between the printed word and the virginal page" in this novel (p. 195).

⁷*Novels*, pp. 283-84. Professor Morrissette adds that one of these passages in the novel quotes an objection that he himself had made to Robbe-Grillet, after reading a section of the manuscript, and is followed by Robbe-Grillet's response.