

The Aesthetics of *Nouveau Roman* and Innovative Fiction

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In France there are New Novelists and New New Novelists. Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, and Robert Pinget belong to both groups, whereas Michel Butor and Nathalie Sarraute are referred to only as New Novelists. The differences between the two do not concern us here, although it might be interesting to note that the New New Novel appeared approximately fifteen years after the New Novel, i.e., around 1965. In the United States the term "innovative novelists," as it applies to John Barth, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, and others, is preferred to the term "experimental novelists." In my essay I use innovative novelists and New (New) Novelists interchangeably. In Italy, Italo Calvino's work has, for some time, placed him in the forefront of experimental writers.

For the past three decades, since approximately 1950, innovative novelists, both here and abroad, have been accused of killing the novel; and commentators have said, that in trying to change the genre, the innovators have thrown the baby out with the bath. It is also said that the new artificers write only boring works that nobody reads; that they have dehumanized the novel, that they delight in obscurity for its own sake, that they have no message, and that they could not communicate one even if they wanted to.

Innovative novelists, however, insist that the only trappings that have been discarded are old, shop-worn conventions that emphasized the adventures in writing rather than the adventure of writing. They stress writing as a process instead of an activity through which to tell a story. Writing, for them, has become a generative enterprise that uses language as the material substance with which to construct a new reality. They insist, moreover, that if this new fiction seems strange, unfamiliar, disorienting, and alien, it is because it has abandoned the old sawhorses of chronology, character, and plot in favor of something else that, for them, is more important. The new reader—since the New (New) Novel, necessarily, implies a new reader—now reads in circles, going nowhere fast. Although he may long for characters with a patronymic, a face, and for people living in places he can recognize and label, these characters change names, gender, occupation, and color before his very eyes. Nothing is stable. Good guys become bad guys, murderers become victims, tender flesh is mutilated and constantly regenerated; a prison cell inside becomes a city labyrinth outside; the pronoun "he" or "she," within the same sentence or paragraph, shifts to become the pronoun "I." Reality is pulverized, and in its place, we have, not a novel, but an antinovel.

However, to call the new forms antinovels is perhaps to misname them, because such novels, if they speak of anything, speak primarily of themselves. As with Barth's *Letters*, it is the process, it is the adventure of writing, it is the search for an as-yet-undisclosed meaning for which they strive. They do not pursue a priori answers. Answers, if they exist at all, emerge from the figure in the carpet, from the pattern that the author laboriously weaves. Although novels like Claude Simon's *Triptych*, or Calvino's *When on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, or Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* do allude to a reality beyond the internal patterns, the figure calls attention, first, to itself, to its form, to its shape, to its contours. The metaphors used to describe this inner system may change, but the

processes do not. Roland Barthes, appropriately, speaks of textual bliss and the sexuality of writing. Philippe Sollers, on the covernote to *Drame*, compares writing to the theatre, where language, like so many props and actors, is assembled, and where a certain reality, like Coover's fantasy baseball game, is played out. Robbe-Grillet compares language to a door playing on its hinges, moving back and forth and in and out. Coover also uses the door as a metaphor and title of a short story ("The Door: A Prologue of Sorts") in order to open new artistic possibilities.

The New (New) Novel has also been compared to an architectural system within which the novelist is the architect, the contractor, and the workman—a craftsman who, according to Claude Simon, slowly, laboriously, and painfully constructs an edifice of words. Innovative novelists, like the new architects, no longer conceal the scaffolding, the elevators, and pipes—rather, they expose them. Instead of hiding the machinery of the text, as the old novelists used to, the New (New) Novelists today display the devices that hold the construction in place. The obvious architectural example that comes to mind, although others would do, is the Pompidou Art Center in Paris, whose escalators, segments, and structural supports are not walled in, as they once were in older buildings, but are now laid bare, outside, for everyone to see. And the public's reaction to Beaubourg, at least at the beginning, has been similar to the public's reaction to reflexive novels that minimize plot, chronology, and characters in favor of linguistic interplay. This "foregrounding" of language, what Jakobson and others call "literariness," is a poetics in which content is devalued in favor of the text's self-consciousness. Such works favor textual autonomy emphasizing writing, both as a process and a search for meaning. This devaluation of message has, in turn, led to hostility and incomprehension—an antagonism born partly out of habit and resistance to change, but, it seems to me, the aversion also runs deeper. In hiding its structural devices, the novel implies a hidden purpose and the presence of secrets communicable only to true believers. Even Flaubert, like God, wished to be present in his novels everywhere, but visible nowhere. Indeed, nineteenth-century novelists, like most of their twentieth-century descendants, went, and even now, go to great lengths to hide the architecture of their works, to make them seem "natural," i.e., true to life.

What has happened since then, and why are so many readers now interested in writers who, instead of engaging in the elaborate disappearing acts of classical realism, now parade their presence? What are the metaphysical and ontological implications of this new fiction which, as with Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*, is no longer interested only in telling stories, but in talking about itself as a fictional process? And why should this dramatization of the creative process be more satisfying than good old-fashioned suspense?

Today's reflexive fiction, which opposes the conventions of classical realism, seems to indicate a profound change in the aesthetic attitudes of contemporary authors. As a result of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, and science in general, innovative writers no longer believe in their power to transmit a "higher truth" or a knowledge beyond their own. Instead, they are trying to cope with the consequences of a desacralized twentieth century where values, if they exist at all, are man-centered and therefore subject to all the reactivity and all the distortion that accompanies perception. This limitation in perception, this acknowledgment that any given system limits the parameters of observation, which can be expanded only by stepping out of one system into another, has generated postmodern works that are characterized by discontinuity, fragmentation, and achronology. Typically, in his story "Entropy," Pynchon suggests that no one functions in an environment without interacting with it while simultaneously affecting its course toward greater or lesser entropy.¹

¹Thomas Pynchon, *Kenyon Review*, 22 (1960), 277-92.

Innovative novels, as self-contained, limited systems, no longer mirror epic adventures, or any adventures for that matter. Instead, they reflect the bias of perception, i.e., the limitations of the mind. These new texts, in their incoherence and hesitancy, in their starts and stops, in their cuts, retakes, repetitions, errors, and blank spaces, define a necessarily arbitrary, invented, and incomplete reality. Calvino's novel, *When on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, is composed of ten beginnings (never to be finished) into which he weaves himself as author, two imaginary readers—one male and one female—and the real reader, whoever (s)he may be. In *Project for a Revolution in New York*, Robbe-Grillet, disguised as the narrator, intrudes into the narrative to discuss the novel's plot with the reader as well as the direction or non-direction certain events may be taking. Coover's story, "The Baby Sitter," like Calvino's novel, also explores simultaneous, contradictory narratives. In the sketches collected under the title "The Sentient Lens," and "Seven Exemplary Fictions," Coover expands the narrative possibilities of fiction as a process, while exploring alternatives to already existing forms of narration. In the story, "Beginnings," he begins with the end and ends with the beginning, thus achieving a constant middle in which anything can, and does, happen. Such "open texts," as Umberto Eco calls them, invite reader participation, collaboration, and recreation.

But, the skeptic might ask, hasn't reader participation always been the *sine qua non* of a literary text? Of course, but the difference is that in conventional novels, the reader worked through a narrative within a coherent system, whereas, in today's reflexive novels, all events are suspect, and the names of people, like reality, are in a state of constant flux. For example, *La Maison de rendez-vous* is a work in which Robbe-Grillet systematically disperses the identity of his characters. Edouard Manneret, the resurrected victim of innumerable "murders," is subject to constant and implausible metamorphoses: he is a writer, then an actor in a play entitled *The Assassination of Edouard Manneret*, then the painter of *La Maïa*, a famous masterpiece, then a usurer, doctor, chemist, fetishist, and secret agent. As though these roles were not enough to nullify the realism of so outrageous a character, the similarities between Manet, Man Ray, and Manneret should dispel any remaining illusions about Robbe-Grillet's comic treatment or the doubts he casts on conventional fiction.

Similarly, in Pynchon's *V.*, *V.* is not only the person who was born Victoria Wren in 1880 and died the Bad Priest in 1943; she is also Venus, Vheissu, Queen Victoria, the Holy Virgin, Valletta, Venezuela, Vesuvius, a sewer rat named Veronica, the V formed by a woman's open thighs, the formations of migrating birds. The letter *V.*, like the figure 8 in Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur*, is everywhere. As an "analogic detonator" it structures the entire novel, generating its multiplicity and contradictions. *V.*, the Bad Priest, is injured in an air raid in Valletta, Malta, during World War II, and is disassembled by a band of children. They remove her glass eye, her false teeth, her artificial foot, her navel sapphire. Fausto Majjstral, who narrates the event says: "Surely her arms and breasts could be detached; the skin of her legs peeled away to reveal some intricate understructure of silver openwork. Perhaps the trunk itself contained other wonders: intestines of parti-colored silk, gay balloon-lungs, a rococo heart."² For Pynchon, as for Robbe-Grillet and Coover, reality and fantasy are so blended that it is impossible to distinguish between them. Characters disintegrate, losing their sense of depth and psychology. They become flat, comic book constructions exposing the artificiality and the artifice of art.

Within such texts, people, things, and events devalue the realism we have all been conditioned to expect. The stability of conventional relationships disappears, characters are eroded, and plausibility is denied. Halfway through *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop stops caring about where he is going, or who is controlling him. Like a

²Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1963), p. 322.

rocket plummeting toward earth, he submits to gravity. His coherence as a character begins to fragment, he becomes a vague presence represented by incoherent memories and fantasies, and finally, he disappears altogether. He has succumbed to gravity. But there is more: crucial meetings between people do not take place, important resolutions fail, and would-be climaxes dissolve. This ultimate unwinding of innovative novels has a higher mimetic value (as opposed to ordinary mimesis): it duplicates the entropy of the physical world where, as with radioactivity, everything eventually unwinds and decays.

The proliferation of objects, or people as things, in today's New (New) Novels, already strongly manifest in Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), points not only to the socio-political reification Lucien Goldmann analyzes in *Pour une sociologie du roman*, but is a symptom also of a profound human displacement. Nineteenth-century novelists, like Balzac or Dickens, created flesh-and-blood characters with whom the reader could identify. Today's protagonists, when they have not been replaced by objects, as in Robbe-Grillet's story, "The Coffee Pot is on the Table," or pronouns, as in the fiction of Philippe Sollers (in which proper nouns no longer exist), are cardboard figures without essence and without depth. Instead of "living" heroes, there is frequently only one protagonist in today's reflexive fiction, and that protagonist is language, or also, sometimes, an author-hero, as in Robbe-Grillet's *Project for a Revolution in New York*, concocting outrageous plots from behind the masks of his protagonists.

Language frequently becomes the anonymous hero or heroine of these new art forms in which objects, people, and events commingle in a reality that denies them. Language is the only reality left, or, to put it another way, language constructs the only possible reality. New (New) Novels thus draw attention to themselves as constructs. They draw our attention to the body of a text that mimes the limitations of the human mind and the inchoate world around it. In recent years, linguists and structuralists have focused on the systems that determine man: language, myth, the subconscious, and ideology are the forces that limit and determine human behavior. Since artists have always been in the avant-garde, it is natural that their fictions should give results that dovetail with the theories of Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Foucault. The form and the content of today's innovative fiction is, in fact, comparable to the secular thinking of many structuralists whose background has, so often, been in linguistics.

New (New) Novels are profane, because, like the structuralists' theories, they mirror cosmic chaos, Joyce's "chaosmos," his "whorled without aimed." In a chaotic universe without aim or end, history and events have meaning only within a particular system, such as, for example, the Judeo-Christian tradition or Marxism, both of which have given history linear, chronological momentum. However, relativity teaches us that time may be circular, or bent, or simultaneous, or without direction. Lévi-Strauss points out that myths repeat themselves with variations, endlessly, emphasizing simultaneity and circularity. "History," says West Condon miner Vince Bonali, in Coover's novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, "is like a big goddam sea . . . and here we are, bobbing around on it, a buncha poor bastards who can't swim, seasick, lost, unable to see past the next goddam wave, not knowing where the hell it's taking us if it takes us anywhere at all."³ Innovative novels, insofar as their forms are circular, repetitive, and achronological, mime these mythical and physical patterns, confounding conventional notions of time that are allegedly moving inexorably toward predetermined goals. Thus, innovative fiction devalues the ideology of both East and West, and heavenly rewards for virtue and goodness have become as suspect as the triumph of a liberated proletariat in some Historical and now dystopian future.

³Robert Coover, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 330.

For the New (New) Novelist there is one essential reality, and that reality is the text. Within the text, there is language, and outside the text, there is the reader, who also uses language. Every text, therefore, posits a relationship that is both symbiotic and subversive. It is symbiotic to the extent that there is a common ground of interest to justify the relationship. It is subversive in that, given the kind of innovative fiction we have been describing, the author's *parole* (his individual, artistic utterance) always parodies the *langue* of the cultural establishment and the values of its ideology. Given this context, Pynchon's *V.* is one enormous demythification of religion, woman, and the virgin, and Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* pokes fun at all great epic narratives. Coover's novels and stories spoof religion, politics, and fairy tales, simultaneously rewriting, devaluing, and commenting on them. Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers* parodies the conventions of the detective story. Wallas, the would-be detective, turns out, instead, to be the murderer, and the crime takes place at the end and not at the beginning, as the genre would require. Calvino's *When on a Winter's Night a Traveler* mocks the arbitrariness of all fictions, even as Claude Simon's *La Bataille de Pharsale* concerns itself more with the battle of words and the textual/sexual relationship between language and the reader, than with some epic battle in Greece.

Insofar as readers, generally, have been conditioned to believe that fiction should be true to life, that stories should be real, all the above examples contradict the conventions of classical realism. How many times have we heard seasoned writers advise young aspirants to write only about what they know? From Aristotle's *The Art of Poetry* to the present, aestheticians have insisted that art should imitate life, that artists should paint from nature. Today's innovative novelists, seemingly in rebellion against this advice, no longer strive to imitate life but to rival it. They now write against nature, and they mock the right way of doing things by breaking the rules that once defined "good" taste or "good" writing. They behave like a horde of *enfants terribles* defying the values of the establishment. Their defiance turns on an absolute relativity emphasizing the arbitrary and the man-made. Instead of trying to be "natural," New (New) Novels exhibit their artifice. Instead of continuity, they strive for discontinuity. Instead of imitation, they emphasize autonomous creation. Why? Why have nature's "correspondences," as Baudelaire called them, become suspect, and why has society's ideology lost its luster? "All of us today," says Coover, "are keenly aware that we are undergoing a radical shift in sensibilities. We are no longer convinced of the *nature* of things, of design as justification. Everything seems itself random. (The early existentialists were leading us this way; since then, we have seen the breakdown of religious structures and of many of the principles of the Enlightenment which have supported our institutions.) Under these conditions of arbitrariness, the artistic impulse is directed toward putting the random parts together in any order which provides a pattern for living."⁴

Every ideology claims to be true, natural, and God-given. Accordingly, in the sociopolitical arena, where ideology is controlled and manipulated, essence still precedes existence, and the Platonic Ideals of History—History with a capital H—and human nature—Man with a capital M—still dominate the thinking of virtually everybody. Only in literature, art, and the cognitive sciences have the consequences of twentieth-century desacralization been laid bare. The traditional and conventional concept of man, the sacrosanct humanism of man, has been eroded in favor of the structures that determine him. On the one hand, researchers believe that man's thinking is determined by genetic factors, and that the structures of the "savage mind" are no different from the structures of a modern, "enlightened" mind. On the other hand, language determines the way these structures relate to

⁴As quoted by Frank Gado, *First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing* (Schenectady, N.Y.: Union College Press, 1973), p. 153. Parenthetical references to this interview will appear within the text as *Gado*.

the world, i.e., how a person thinks. The net result is that reality is a human construct (not a ready-made, given entity), a network of signs—a language that both fashions and is fashioned by the brain. For instance, the signifier for the animal “cat” is the word *cat*. Together, word and object, form the sign. All language and all communication derive from this one simple paradigm: sign = $\frac{\text{cat}}{\text{cat}} = \frac{\text{signifier.}}{\text{signified}}$

Reality is neither in this animal, nor in the man who perceives, but in the relationship between the two. This reality, which is perception oriented and is constructed by man, excludes Platonic Ideals and Divine essences, and, as Derrida would say, eliminates the “transcendental signifier,” i.e., God. Besides, Saussure had already pointed out that language, which is man-made and arbitrary, determines reality in all its complex relationships. It is precisely this “arbitrariness” of the sign that fascinates the New (New) Novelists.

There is a serialism at work, comparable in some ways to Schoenberg’s twelve tone system. Words, colors, images, numbers, and letters (Pynchon’s *V*, for example or Barth’s *Letters*) are used as generative themes that, once set in motion, determine the direction the work of art will take. Pinget’s *Passacaille* begins with the sentences: “So calm, So gray. Not a ripple in view.” From this triple sequence, the author constructs a series of variations on the basic theme that relate to the eighteenth-century musical form from which he derives his title. The next time we encounter the sequence it is: “So calm. So gray. Crows fly up, or is it magpies.” This beginning, with many variations, occurs in repetitive and incantatory fashion as Pinget’s prose, which is really poetry, constructs an ambiguous and contradictory reality that goes around in circles, rhythmically, like a dance.

Coover’s *Pricksongs and Descants* has a similar musical motif. “Pricksong” derives from the physical manner in which a song was printed—the notes were “pricked” out—whereas “descant” refers to the variations of different voices played against the music’s basic line. Coover himself stresses the sexual connotations of such musical interaction: “I thought of descants as feminine decoration around the pricking of the basic line. Thus: the masculine thrust of narrative and the lyrical play around it” (*Gado*, p. 150). The sexual connotations of writing in Pinget’s *Passacaille* are even more obvious, since the rolled-up manuscript is pulled from the bloodied fly of the corpse lying on the ubiquitous dung heap.

This new writing emphasizes the sexuality of the text, the creative process, the autonomy of language, and art as a reflexive genre. Such art, like Coover’s story, “The Magic Poker,” builds a reality out of nothing, and, as Coover states it so nicely, it exists because “I put it there.”⁵ “I wander the island, inventing it. I make a sun for it, and trees—pines and birch and dogwood and firs—and cause the water to lap the pebbles of its abandoned shores. This, and more: I deposit shadows and dampness, spin webs, and scatter ruins. Yes: ruins. A mansion and guest cabins and boat houses and docks. Terraces, too, and bath houses and even an observation tower. All gutted and window-busted and autographed and shat upon. I impose a hot midday silence, a profound and heavy stillness. But anything can happen” (*PD*, p. 20).

Seventeenth-century French aesthetics postulated an inevitable and generally non-substitutable sequence of signs: i.e., words, sentences, images, metaphors, rhythms, rhymes, acts, passions, and human psychology, all codified, regulated, and prescribed according to strict rules, allegedly derived from natural law and Divine order. Racine’s *Phaedra* is one such masterpiece in which to change one word or one sentence is to alter the perfection and harmony of the whole. Love

⁵Robert Coover, *Pricksongs and Descants* (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 21. Parenthetical references will appear within the text as *PD*.

and hate may regulate the psychological machinery of Racine's play, and the passions that explode may destroy the stability of human relationships, but they never alter the play's necessary symmetry. In contrast, the formal arrangements of the New New Novel, by dramatizing the polysemy and paronomasia of language, escape from the rigidity of absolute codification. Racine's artistic "necessity," as prescribed by Boileau, gives way in Robbe-Grillet and Pinget to authorial whimsy: In *La Maison de rendez-vous* and *Passacaille* events are contradicted, even as reality is devalued in favor of ludic structures emphasizing puns, neologisms, and the play of sounds, colors, rhythms, and images. Generative themes, like the throw of the dice in Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*, push the text forward, generating combinations, permutations, and variations. The writer and the narrator no longer, necessarily, have a clear vision of where they are going. Language, with its rich sensory and sensual possibilities, in concert with the author's imagination, generates its own direction. This is why innovative writers play with language, and the text, and the bodies in the text. Roland Barthes suggests that all such creation is incestuous, since the author plays with his "mother tongue." In Robbe-Grillet's fictions, symbolic "tongues of blood" flow from beneath closed doors—doors that soon will begin to play on their hinges, back and forth, like the pulsing rhythms of Pinget's images in *Passacaille*.

The recent emphasis on generative themes devalues conventional literary norms (plot, suspense, character) in favor of achronology, discontinuity, and reflexivity. The ordering elements or cells may be objects, events, words, colors, numbers, and images that engender internal rhythms and patterns. It is these rhythms and patterns that give cohesion to the apparent dispersion of the anecdotal material. Says Robbe-Grillet, "the anecdote begins to multiply; discontinuous, multiple, mobile, aleatory, and by stressing its own fictive nature, it becomes a 'game' in the strongest sense of the word."⁶

Paronomasia and polysemy have now become a game of construction designed to facilitate the semantic slippage through which a work derives its meaning: it proliferates. Language, by displaying a system of differences, allows the responsive imagination to play with ambiguity, thereby generating new meaning. Each color or image, instead of connecting with reality outside, links itself with other colors or images inside the text. This kind of generative writing in, for example, Claude Simon's *Triptych*, multiplies the internal reflexive allusions, moving us back and forth on a discontinuous horizontal axis. Signifiers, instead of signifying, refer to other signifiers whose mimetic role is undermined by mirrors, pictures, posters, postcards, and film clips to which they refer or from which they emerge. The simultaneous narration of three sexual encounters at a beach city, in a valley, and in a northern suburb, using words, images, and connotations that overlap from one setting to another, sets up resonances that come into focus whenever the spotlight, the projector, the lens, or the eye (i.e., any of these circles) illuminates the events of the novel's triadic structure.

If reality is determined by language, biology, and ideology, then free will is an illusion, and choice, as the title of Barthes's book suggests, is a "chimera." However, to play with language, with the images of ideology and of the subconscious, is to open gaps in the prison walls that determine and oppress man. Barthes "plays" with words and letters, arranging them so that the title, *Letters*, spells out the parodic subtitle, "an old time epistolary novel." This is only the beginning of a vast network of interlocking letters, anagrams, and signs. Each section title contains a series of alphabet letters so arranged on a calendar that, when all are strung together, they

⁶Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Après l'Eden et après," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, No. 294 (26 June—5 July 1970), p. 34. My translation.

outline the word LETTERS and, when they are read as words, they describe what the novel is about. Since *Letters* is Barth's seventh novel, it manifests the author's preoccupation with the number seven: seven characters, seven sections, the action is limited to seven months, etc. Moreover, the important characters are all writers: Germaine Necker Pitt, "doctor of letters," a descendant of Madame de Staël; Ambrose Mensch, Barth's alter ego, reappears from *Lost in the Funhouse*; A. B. Cook, poet laureate of Maryland, is from the *Sot-Weed Factor*. These intertextual nods undermine mimesis, stressing the autonomy of the text, and the author's playful independence. Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, creates a female lead, Oedipa Maas, whose very name devalues the Oedipus myth while downgrading plot, character, names, and reader expectations. Nabokov slyly derides the seriousness of literary criticism in *Pale Fire*. Calvino, by aborting each one of the separate narratives, mocks the continuity of storytelling in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Jean Ricardou plays with the text by transforming *La Prise de Constantinople* into *La Prose de Constantinople* while also punning on the sexuality within the textuality of language. In *Remembrances of the Golden Triangle*, Robbe-Grillet uses geometric, alchemical, numerical, verbal, and carnal forms to generate his text, the violation of Temple (i.e., the girl, the text, the edifice), the penetration of her sex, etc. This manhandling of language or the sacred codes of the establishment, i.e., the parodying of taboos and social values, represents a dimension of play that has enormous appeal to innovative writers. Says Coover: "I arrange the guest cabin. I rot the porch and tatter the screen door and infest the walls. I tear out the light switches, gut the mattresses, smash the windows, and shit on the bathroom floor. I rust the pipes, kick in the papered walls, unhinge doors. Really, there's nothing to it. In fact it's a pleasure" (*PD*, p. 22).

Such fiction draws attention to the play of language and invention even as it vilifies convention. Play, as in *The Universal Baseball Association*, stresses the randomness rather than the necessity of events. Coover, like God, creates Henry, whose job it is to give names to all the other ball players. Their lives, however, are not determined by Coover or Henry, but by 216 numerical combinations derived from the rolls of three dice. Henry draws charts containing the actions that correspond to the numbers on the dice, which, when rolled, determine the behavior of each player, etc. This is a game of art that mimes universal chance. Nevertheless, everybody in the UBA (Universal Baseball Association) plays, as everybody in the USA plays, as everybody in the Universe plays at living.

All New (New) Novelists indulge their ludic tendencies, believing that art creates a reality that rivals the reality of the natural world. Ludic, self-reflexive art, say its proponents, does not transmit a ready-made message. It is itself a message, i.e., an exercise in artistic freedom. How is this possible? If we grant, as do the linguists and the structuralists, that language creates our perception of reality, then we are all trapped in a linguistic system that determines the dimensions of everything we experience. If we also grant that cultural values are encoded in language, then we are shaped by these forces which, willy-nilly, govern our lives. In order to escape from these prisons, contemporary novelists write fictions that pulverize language and exaggerate ideology. Robbe-Grillet's formula is to take ideology and turn it inside out, like a glove. For example, in *Project for a Revolution in New York*, he uses the color red as a generative theme for arson, murder, and rape. Red is the color of blood, fire, and, by extension, violence. Different episodes of the novel, each one more implausible than the next, are structured around these generative themes. The body of the text, as well as the bodies in the text, are violated, tortured, punished, and imprisoned so that the heroine, i.e., language, will reveal her innermost secrets. In French, "la langue" is indeed feminine. But this violation of the text is also a violation of aesthetic and social codes, because to violate them, is

also to affirm the author's independence from them. In fact, this attack on code and language is more than the simple desire for independence—it is a rage to be free.

Although the breaking of codes and rules may shock conformists, it does seem to legitimize the artist's creative acts while simultaneously exposing the arbitrariness of his choices. It is precisely because society's values are so securely fixed that a radical departure from them is possible. If art, like our perception of the world, is limited by the system that defines it, then an art that tries to break that system apart establishes new modes of perception. By playing with snippets of establishment ideology, i.e., by parodying, exaggerating, and projecting distortions of sex and violence against the horizon of the normative, the artist, as Coover and Robbe-Grillet both observe, structures new relationships, new ways of ordering reality.

New Novel—New Man has become a slogan for innovative art, stressing artistic play as the paradigm from which free, creative forms can emerge: free of the past and free of ideology, yet aware of the determinism of language, history, and the subconscious. The alleged formalism of innovative art belies its revolutionary potential, although not in any overt political sense. Innovative art does not speak of the revolution; it is itself revolutionary. It does not speak of desire; it is desire. Innovative art teaches us to perceive the world differently, and, in doing so, to order our lives in accordance with these new modes of perception. Innovative art is thus profoundly existential, in that it places the burden of choice and responsibility on man's shoulders. Innovative art tells us that man, before being anything else, is simply *there*, in the Heideggerian sense, cast onto a world stage, free to invent a role and give his life direction. New (New) Novelists strive for a metaphysics of freedom, thus opposing the prisons of language and the straitjackets of ideology.

Reflexive fiction dramatizes play while foregrounding language. Language has now become the manhandled heroine who is tortured and who suffers and is constantly reborn from the generative cell of the artist's imagination. Innovative artists may play with their mother tongue, as Pynchon does with Oedipa Maas, but from these scandalous family plots, the reader emerges, if he emerges at all, purged, ready, if indeed man is ever ready, to confront, once again, the gaping void, the "being and nothingness" that Sartre writes about. However, Roquentin's sense of superfluity and "nausea," along with the randomness of quantum physics, has been transformed by the New Novelists from angst into irony, parody, and a sense of the theatrical. Says Coover, "tragedy is a kind of adolescent response to the universe—the higher truth is a comic response."⁷ This attitude defines a new existential freedom incorporating wit, knowledge, and play. Ludic structures are the artist's stock-in-trade, while humor, more than anything else, defines the aesthetics of today's innovative art.

⁷As quoted by Leo Hertzell, *Critique*, 2-3 (1969), 28.