

BRIEF MENTIONS

ILONA LEKI

Alain Robbe-Grillet

Boston: Twayne,

1983. Pp. 187. \$16.95.

It is encouraging to learn that there is at least one woman in the Western World who does not believe that Robbe-Grillet is an anti-feminist sex fiend. In fact, Ilona Leki eschews all facile recourse to enumerating his rhetorical stances in terms of Freudian or personal obsessions, and has given us, as a result, a reasoned and balanced view of an author whose *Projet pour une révolution à New York* and *Le Jeu avec le feu*, from time to time, have been denounced as offensive to good taste and public sensibility.

As an "introduction" to Robbe-Grillet's fiction, Ms. Leki's eleven chapters certainly fulfill their promise. Chapter one gives us the beginnings of the "nouveau roman," while each succeeding chapter, with the exception of *La Belle captive* and *Djinn*, is devoted to one of his novels. Chapter eleven is a rapid bird's-eye view of Robbe-Grillet as cinematographer. A brief conclusion wraps up the presentation of yet another volume in the Twayne Series—No. 682.

In reviewing a book with the Twayne format, I suppose one has to keep in mind the nature of an enterprise that encourages summaries of novels and discourages intelligent critical inquiry. Indeed, given the format, it would be difficult to write a book that is not a repetition of the twenty or so odd volumes on Robbe-Grillet that have already been published. Thus, in chapters one through five, there is little new material that is not available in Barthes, Genette, Goldmann, Heath, Leenhardt, Morrisette, Ricardou, Sturrock, and many others. However, chapters seven, eight, and nine—chapters that discuss the "nouveau nouveau roman"—*Projet pour une révolution à New York*, *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*, and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*—were a pleasant surprise, in spite of the tedious and annoying plot summaries. Précis may be useful for works of classical realism, but innovative fiction defies any such attempt, and the space could be used more profitably for the endeavors of critical practice. Instead of summary, I would have preferred lengthier analyses of some of Robbe-Grillet's recurring themes such as the labyrinth, ludic structures, erot-

icism, order and disorder, discontinuity, and so forth. I wish Twayne would revise its plot résumé policy for all innovative fiction on both sides of the Atlantic, from the northern to the southern hemispheres.

In discussing *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, Ms. Leki provides a good explanation of generative themes such as words, sounds, colors, and objects—themes that relate to the act of writing and to creativity in general. There is also a good section on the reader as a character within the text reading his or her novel, i.e., on the reader producing the text instead of consuming it (pp. 112-13). There is a good analysis of the letter V and other such generative cells in the discussion of *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (pp. 125-27), on the collage/text in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (pp. 131-33), and on the adventures of objects as linking elements within the text (p. 143). However, chapter ten, "*Un Régicide*," and chapter eleven, "The Films," are short and superficial.

Missing from all of this is the thread of an argument, a unifying idea to give a critical figure to the metaphorical carpet. Leki makes a stab at this in the chapter on *Un Régicide*, but it is too little and too late. The plot summaries have enveloped us in a labyrinth of contradictions that are neither resolved nor explained. Although such a systematic devaluation of realism and reality on the part of the New Novel could have been used as a pretext to discuss the adventures of writing rather than the adventures in writing, this alternative is not pursued. Ms. Leki is not unaware of the controversy boiling around the concepts of literariness and recuperability, and, in some instances, she even seems to opt for the non-referential stance of a Stephen Heath or a Jean Ricardou, only to succumb, pages later, to résumés that recuperate what was implicitly non-recuperable. Missing also, in discussing critical concepts such as intertextuality, is a frame of reference that would situate the topic within the context of "mise en abyme" (no mention of Dällenbach's *Le Récit spéculaire* or of Foucault's intertext).

Finally, the distance between *Projet* and *Topologie* is probably not as great as Ms. Leki implies. In *Projet*, the generative devices are internal, as she, Ricardou, O'Donnell, and others have pointed out, i.e., the color red generates arson, murder, rape, and revolution. In *Topologie*, the major generative

themes, although external, function the same way, insofar as they invite the reader to make the necessary imaginative link engendered by five visual artists (Delvaux, Magritte, Rauschenberg, Hamilton—the photographer—and Robbe-Grillet himself—now that he too has begun to paint) and the text's internal linguistic interplay. The five external generators of the text link up with the number five within the text (five bars on the prison window, five solid walls to the prison cell, the five fingers of the woman holding the stylet, etc.).

Since Ms. Leki devotes space to Robbe-Grillet's critical reception in France, it would have been informative also to review his reception in America where books about the author of *La Jalousie* began appearing as early as 1964. Nevertheless, in spite of sins of omission and of commission, her study is a competent and frequently interesting overview of Robbe-Grillet's novels.

Ben Stoltzfus

LOIS GORDON

Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983. Pp. 182. \$15.95.

All those convinced of Robert Coover's considerable literary talents will welcome the appearance of Lois Gordon's monograph. Gordon, the author of early monographs on Pinter (1969) and Barthelme (1981), offers here one of the first book-length studies of Coover. On the whole, Gordon has contended well with a very complex and mostly neglected corpus of vignettes, short stories, novellas, novels, and plays. Given the originality of Coover's "fictions," exegesis is no easy task. The difficulty is compounded by the lack of substantial biographical and critical material. In the opening chapter Gordon provides her readers with a much-needed biographical sketch of Coover. Working from interviews with the author's friends and former colleagues, Gordon manages a cursory, yet helpful reconstruction of the author's life. In this same chapter Gordon attempts a characterization of the relativism of twentieth-century thought and

the representativeness of Coover's aesthetic and philosophical values thereof. Gordon does not narrow her interpretive focus to matters of simple formal interest, a recurrent temptation in the reading of technically innovative writers like Coover. Gordon realizes that a balanced discussion of Coover cannot fail to emphasize the often subtle, but unmistakable moralizing of *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), *The Public Burning* (1977) or "A Theological Position" (1972), each intent on unmasking the immorality of dictatorial ideologies, political, religious, or otherwise.

Gordon's readings of the major fiction capably highlight Coover's preoccupation with pattern and structure. Pattern and structure play a mostly negative role in Coover's novels. Religion in *The Origin of the Brunists*, baseball in *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), and uninformed patriotism in *The Public Burning* afford means for the individual to deny the processual nature of life. But, as Gordon's reading of Coover points out, belief systems and personal mythologies can play a positive role; they can construct as well as constrict (p. 47). Structures become disabling when they are static. Where belief systems remain sensitive to the changing circumstances of life, they work as useful heuristic devices in the understanding of life for, in Gordon's paraphrase of Coover, "nothing is final but process" (p. 46).

Gordon's discussion of *The Public Burning* is perhaps the most insightful of her interpretations. It carefully establishes the moral implications of that secular religion that has found such a receptive host in the American public—patriotism. Gordon correctly identifies the protagonist, Richard Nixon, as an American Everyman, a living realization of the American dream, who rides to the highest offices of the land on the shirtilails of his ethical tractability. A simplistic reading would see the text as either a satire or character assassination (as you please) of particular historical figures, notably Nixon. Indeed, as Gordon informs us, some initial reviews saw *The Public Burning* as a "cowardly lie" (Norman Podhoretz) and a "misuse" of history (Pearl Bell); (p. 55). Gordon, to her credit, clearly shows how thoroughly the novel implicates not merely a few public officials but in fact the American people in the sociojuridical process that convicts and executes Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.

The remaining three chapters are devoted to *Pricksons and Descants* (1969), *A Theological Position* (a collection of four one-