

From the Comic to the Ludic: Postmodern Fiction

EMMA KAFALENOS, *Washington University*

The French edition of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Project for a Revolution in New York* (1970) contains a short insert by the author in which he calls for the replacement of chronology, as the organizing force in fiction, with ludic organization. The term "ludic"—less common in English than it has recently become in French—is derived from the Latin word *ludus*, meaning "game" or "play." In the seminal work *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*,¹ published in German in 1944, the Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga sees a strong relationship between the process of creation in the arts and the process of play. Not only is improvisation a form of play (p. 126), "all poetry," he tells us, "is born of play" (p. 129). And in his view, as civilizations grow and become more serious, they lose touch with play, so that "finally only poetry remains as the stronghold of living and noble play" (p. 134).

The game, according to Huizinga, "has no contact with any reality outside itself, and its performance is its own end" (p. 203). Following Plato, he sees ritual—sacred play—as "accomplishing itself outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life" (p. 26). It is this separation of the game from life—its non-referential nature—that Robbe-Grillet is calling for when he speaks, in the insert mentioned above, of the events, objects, and words of the novel itself as "engendering the entire architecture of the narration . . . it becomes a 'game' in the strongest sense of the term."

Robbe-Grillet's self-reflexive novel, like play for Huizinga—and I quote the latter—does not exist as a part of "'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own" (p. 8). "A closed space is marked out for it, hedged off from everyday surroundings" (p. 19). Like "the tennis-court, the chess-board and pavement-hopsotch" (p. 20), Robbe-Grillet's novel lies in what is almost a consecrated space, comparable, as is the game, to a religious rite, or to the drama which is often thought to have grown out of it.

This space apart, this locus of creativity, is traditionally the place of comedy, whose inherent imaginative energy is apparent even in the etymology of the word. The Greek *komos*, from which "comedy" is derived, refers to the procession that accompanied rites to Dionysus, notable for its unrestrained merriment, singing, and jest. In Latin, *Comus* is a fertility god, the son of Bacchus (the Roman Dionysus). Describing the "comic rhythm" as an expression of "human vitality," Suzanne Langer draws the parallel between fertility rites, in honor of perpetual rebirth and eternal life, and comedy, "an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings, or initiations."²

Like Langer, Edith Kern, in *The Absolute Comic*, also relates the creative forces of life to the origins of comedy.³ She speaks of *seasonal* fertility rites in which the

¹ Boston: Beacon Press, 1950. Page numbers are placed within parentheses in the text.

² Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form; A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner's, 1953), p. 331.

³ New York: Columbia University Press, 1980. All references are to this edition.

fool is killed and then *resurrected* (p. 11), and later of the comic scapegoat (in the drama of a more advanced culture) who is *playfully* killed by laughter—rather than mimetically by the sword—and whose resurrection is instantaneous (p. 115). For the fool saved at the last moment by his wit (p. 36), a stock situation in comedy that she discusses, creative imagination regularly triumphs over the brute forces of reality. Drawing the title of her recent book from the distinction Charles Baudelaire makes in his 1855 article on the essence of laughter, a distinction between the “absolute comic” and “significative comic,” Kern agrees with Baudelaire in defining the significative comic as mimetic and realistic; and the absolute comic, which both prefer and which is the subject of both their studies, as grotesque, carnivalesque, and imaginative—in a word, creative (pp. 3, 7). Just as Baudelaire had spoken of the multiple imaginative possibilities of the grotesque, Northrop Frye points out, much later, the large number of possible distortions of and variations upon the “real,” found in comedy—as opposed to the much less productive method of mimesis found in other arts.⁴ Comedy is known, in fact—think of the *commedia dell’arte*—for the infinite variation of its plots.

Like play, then, a certain aspect of comedy with which we are concerned—what Baudelaire and Kern call the absolute comic—takes place in a consecrated space, avoids mimesis, and is characterized by a vital, multi-faceted creativity. These are all aspects of the ludic order and ludic generation for which Robbe-Grillet calls. Recognizing, as we said above, that chronology not only provided structure for traditional fiction but also was a primary method of generating these texts, Robbe-Grillet offers a new method—which he terms the ludic—of engendering texts from their events, objects and words. In an article on Robbe-Grillet’s *Project for a Revolution in New York* (and in other writings), Jean Ricardou outlines two methods by which a word can generate another word.⁵ Using the terminology of linguistics, the *signifier* is the word as sign, its visual and aural aspects; the *signified* is its semantic referent, the thing to which the word refers. In the first method of generating a word from a word—and it is the process used in translation, as Ricardou points out—it is a given word’s *signified* which generates a *signifier* in the new language. In the complementary process, first outlined by Raymond Rousset and used today by Ricardou and others even more than by Robbe-Grillet, a given word’s *signifier* generates a new *signifier* to which it is related by sound (as in rhyme, or homonymy) or by appearance (a rearrangement of the same letters); the goal is the *signified* of the newly produced *signifier*. Ricardou’s first procedure, hinging as it does upon the given word’s *signified*, is referential, because the two signifiers are semantically related. The second procedure, however, in which the given word’s *signified* plays no role in the production of the new word, is nonreferential, since there is no semantic relationship between the two signifiers. Thus the second procedure offers a totally nonmimetic method of generating text.

In practice, Robbe-Grillet himself most often makes use of the first, referential procedure, in which words generate semantically related words. The iron grill at the beginning of *Project* leads to a cage and to a rat within it, and also to an iron fire escape and from there to indoor stairs and from both to various zigzag shapes, spirals, and cross-hatchings; from the skeleton of intersecting iron of the fire escape to the skeleton of a young girl, and again from the fire escape to a possible burglar upon it, and from the possible burglar to the criminal who is in the process of breaking and entering. A number of similar chains of semantically related words

⁴ Northrop Frye, “The Argument of Comedy” (1948); rpt. in *Comedy: Plays, Theory, and Criticism*, ed. Marvin Felheim (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 238.

⁵ Jean Ricardou, “La Fiction flamboyante” in *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp. 211-33.

can be traced throughout the novel. And occasionally Robbe-Grillet also uses the nonreferential second procedure, in which words bear no semantic relationship to the ones they generate. The grill we have just discussed, *la grille* in French, is derived according to Ricardou from the first six letters of Grillet, the second half of Robbe-Grillet's surname. And the dress that JR scorches with an iron in the novel, her burned dress or *robe grillée*, is a homonym of the author's name, Robbe-Grillet. Both methods of generation, the referential and the nonreferential, offer the writer a wonderfully creative and playful source, within the text itself, of generating its continuity.

In particular the nonreferential method, in which the generated word is not semantically related to the given word, offers a way of incorporating chance into the creation of the art work—something that artists and composers as well as writers have often attempted to do, at least since Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*, published in 1897—in order further to increase the multiple possibilities, the polyvalence, offered by the art work. Comedy is the earliest of our art forms to incorporate chance—as opposed to fate, the province of tragedy. The plot, in traditional comedy, reacts to unplanned coincidence, according to Langer, with “heightened vitality, challenged wit and will, engaged in the great game with Chance” (p. 349). Similarly, in the process of generating words from words in contemporary fiction, the chance of nonreferential relationships offers an equivalent explosion of creative possibilities.

Word play is itself a hallmark of comedy, which is known for its intuitive leaps and verbal free association. According to Huizinga, poetry grows out of the riddles associated with many religions, and in avoiding clarity retains an aspect of its origins. Shakespeare's puns are based on sound, their double meanings growing out of the several semantic referents of similar-sounding homonyms, a procedure comparable to Ricardou's nonreferential generation. Metaphor, the traditional method of generating words from words that is based on a similarity if not an identity between their referents, can be seen as related to Ricardou's referential generation. Long before Ricardou, Freud, in his study on wit or jokes and the unconscious, already distinguished between the “sound” of a word and its “meaning”⁶—a distinction approaching that between the “signifier” and the “signified.”

Robbe-Grillet's novels share with comedy, and sometimes with play, a content that is often cruel, destructive, and anarchic, but because they take place in their own space, separated from the “real” world, an element of distancing is always in effect. In comedy, Kern points out, the spectator is always aware that the death of the scapegoat is only simulated (p. 28)—that this is play, set apart from daily life, and as if framed. The frame, she continues, serves as a metacommunication, aiding in the interpretation of what is perceived (p. 30). It is to avoid emotional involvement and to facilitate an objective intellectual approach that comedy has tended to be concerned with types, whose names are invented—rather than well-known and recognizable figures. Robbe-Grillet's characters, similarly, are often referred to by initials, or by names that are altered as the narration progresses. All comedy and much play are based on impersonation and acting, often emphasized by masks and the grotesque facial exaggerations produced by makeup, such as that worn by clowns. Robbe-Grillet too uses masks, and identical costumes for several personages, among other reasons to avert any possible emotional identification with a character. What Robbe-Grillet in his fiction hopes to achieve in his reader is an absence of feeling, a purely intellectual response—exactly what Henri Bergson saw as the customary symptom accompanying laughter. Bergson's famous correlation between

⁶Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), p. 119.

rigidity and the production of laughter, in the exact proportion that the body is made to resemble a machine,⁷ also has its parallel in Robbe-Grillet's texts, where scenes in motion are frozen as, for example, the illustration on the cover of a book. Yet equally, Robbe-Grillet's scenes may begin as the static lines painted on a surface to resemble wood, and in a process resembling surrealist *frottage* be brought into action like the perpetual rebirth of recurring fertility rites.

An element of freedom that is closely allied both to comedy and to play is perhaps at the heart of Robbe-Grillet's concept of the ludic. Speaking of the Carnival spirit, Mikhael Bakhtin sees it as the opposite of rigidity, as the true "feast of becoming, change, and renewal"; and points out that what it celebrates is a "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order."⁸ In comedy, the scapegoat is traditionally outside the social hierarchy, and as a result is free to speak and act without constraint. For Huizinga, "all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play" (p. 7). Because it takes place in a "locality and duration [that is] distinct from 'ordinary' life," it contains its own meaning (p. 9) and can rise above the restrictions imposed by reference to the "real" world. Although play proceeds according to rules, the rules are "freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility" (p. 132).

For Robbe-Grillet—and again I quote from the insert to *Project for a Revolution in New York*—"a living discourse . . . remains the sole space of [his] liberty." Within the text, set apart as it is from the "real" world, he is free to create a world according to his own rules, rather than according to those under which all of us must live much of our lives. In his world, chronology—and causality which is always its close ally—are no longer immutable; chance can always produce a creative (and thus a positive) result; and immortality can be demonstrated on every page in the alternation between death and resurrection, obeying only the author's whim.

For the reader too, the ludic text—like comedy and like play—offers a consecrated space in which he also can enjoy a freedom that can be experienced nowhere else. Like the sense of the comic—which as Baudelaire recognized lies in the one who laughs, the spectator; and as Langer realized requires a conceptual element from the laughter—the ludic text, with the nearly infinite possibilities it offers, requires more than passive *perception* from its reader. And the active *conception* of the work that it demands, offers the reader the chance to experience the only real freedom any of us can know.

⁷ Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), pp. 3, 28-30.

⁸ Quoted by Kern, p. 11.