

# Autobiographical Fictions: Duras, Sarraute, Simon, Robbe-Grillet: Re-writing History, Story, Self

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The experimental autobiographical fictions that have marked or dominated the work of the "nouveaux romanciers" since the early seventies<sup>1</sup> are contributing to a rethinking and a rereading of autobiographical writing. The new genre<sup>2</sup> is characterized by a telescoping of personal story and history, of inside and outside, in a revolutionary "complementary" movement of the writing that redefines story and history and rewrites a self.

The transformed self of the new autobiographical fictions is neither the centering Cartesian subject present to itself in thought, nor is it the postmodern, decentered, overdetermined play of linguistic signifiers in which the person is endlessly deferred. It is neither wholly phantasmatical, nor wholly socially constructed or historically referential. Rather, in a new logically contradictory structure I call "complementarity" by analogy with Heisenberg's theory of the "complementary" nature of matter (at once wave and particle, continuity and discontinuity), it walks an emotional and a logical tightrope between these pairs, shifting boundaries and seeking third terms.

While the writing of the new "autobiography" is language based and, as such, has connections with rationality, with historical moment, and with preexisting texts (that is, with the collective), as textual creation, texture, interweaving of linguistic elements, images and forms, this discourse is "writing" in the most recent Barthesian sense. It is a sensuous and semiotic exploration, a passionate, individuated enterprise whose truth is finally affect identified. In *La Chambre claire*<sup>3</sup> love alone, for Barthes, can decide whether the photo of an object reveals its truth. Increasingly, these postmodern texts point to their origins as a bodily production of desire, and of desire's concomitant pleasure/pain.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the autobiographical fictions in the corpus I examined for this study are: Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974); Michel Butor, *Frontières* (Marseille: Le Temps Parallèle, 1985); Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984), *La Douleur* (Paris: P.O.L., 1985), *Emily L* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1987); Claude Ollier, *Déconnections* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988); Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984), *Angélique ou l'enchantement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988); Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), *Tu ne t'aimes pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); Claude Simon, *L'Invitation* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1989). Given the constraints of space, not all of these works are examined in the present article.

<sup>2</sup> I outline the general differences between traditional autobiography and these new autobiographical fictions in an earlier paper; Raylene O'Callaghan, "The Art of the (Im)possible: The Autobiography of the French New Novelists" *The Australian Journal of French Studies*, 25.1 (1988): 71-91.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la Photographie* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

There are, then, complexities and paradoxes in the ready-made discourse of the self (autobiography) become, in the new genre, an individuated practice of writing from the body. And in their suspicion of the "illusion of the real" (that is, the illusion that the text adheres naturally to the world), in their questioning of common knowledge object or prefabricated event, the new autobiographies, like the earlier new novels, appear resistant to history.

Yet all these writers have spoken of their autofictional writing as open, mobile, linguistic recreation in the present moment of the multiple perceptions and imaginings of past events. Robbe-Grillet's *Le Miroir qui revient* and Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance* probe the very questions of the way the past is limited by the frames of the present that recaptures it or is altered by the uncertain processes of choice and recollection. As in the New Histories concerned with the trivia and the minutia of the past or with those groups and persons traditionally without voice, theirs is a new focus on the organic and the microscopic. Time and history, then, may be transformed. They have not been eliminated.

Time/history has always been what is unwritten by capital "H" History in the work of Claude Simon—the wind blowing, the grass growing and the old lady in black, a bundle of firewood on her back, passing. In the 1983 autobiography of Nathalie Sarraute, time/history is constituted as in her earliest work *Tropismes* (1937) by tiny protoplasmic, contradictory movements of the psyche seeking security and pleasure, immobilizing or fleeing to avoid destruction or pain, dominating, submitting in intrasubjective and intersubjective drama. Or, it is again the submerging seas (the homophonic *mer/mère*) of the fierceness and annihilating power of the violence of desire, the spontaneous fusion of the nonsocialized child with the natural world (the Lacanian pre-symbolic), set against the flat grey expanse of socialized ennui (the symbolic) in Marguerite Duras. For Robbe-Grillet, time is the precise, meticulously ordered wave, breaking and repeating at regular intervals yet slipping imperceptibly by the tiniest imperfection into monstrous disorder, sado-sexual holocaust, and back again. Recursive patterns of violence concealed/revealed in Robbe-Grillet's selection and organization of its disparate debris mark both the strata of Western culture (Greco-Romano/Judaic/Christian/Germanic) and the topologies of the phantom cities of Robbe-Grillet's own *imaginaire*. Time, here, in the new autobiographies as in the earliest novels, is at once the vertigo of libidinal obsession and new statistical scientific orders such as those emerging from the unpredictability of the turbulence and the fractured shapes that Chaos theory models.

The past, then, is the past present in the confused multiplicity of the moment, a past which, if no longer unproblematically and simply an origin or immediate apprehension of the real, is at the least a material "re-membered" from the past, reworked in the present of the time/experience of the writing.

*L'Amant* is exemplary in this respect. It can be read as a somewhat fragmented account, most often narrated in the present, of Duras's childhood played out against the historical scene of French Indochina in the twenties and

thirties. The grandiose tragedy of the widowed teacher-mother's purchase of a land grant, which turns out to be regularly flooded by the sea, constitutes both a central event in the emotional family saga which was the young Marguerite (and indeed also the older writer) taking form and a criticism of a corrupt French colonial administration. The adolescent heroine's defiance of familial, social, and colonial taboos and racial discrimination in her passionate relationship with a wealthy Chinese is the projection of an individuated subjectivity and psychic life into a colonial history, a social situation, and an ideology that derive from the domain of collective experience and inherited text. At first sight, there seems nothing particularly new in this apparently dialectical functioning of private and public spheres, of history and self. But the collective and the individual have in fact become two "complementary" faces (contradictory but not mutually exclusive) of the same phenomenon, much as the narrator slips between a first person/personal "Je" and an only apparently more distanced third person "Elle."

The Second World War, the central event of the historical period these writers share, is re-presented in Duras's *L'Amant* as a lived familial or sexual power struggle. It takes the form of a primitive scene of "masculine" domination and "feminine" submission, introjected and experienced in the material body, that is physically and emotionally. The War assumes the metaphorical face of the hated bigger, stronger brother, "invading," "occupying," "destroying," the body (the territory) of the weaker, beloved "little" brother for his own pleasure and for the affirmation of his power.

For Duras, what can be "known" of the immediacy of history, war, or holocaust comes not so much from classification of the past or from the power that access to or control of ready-made historical discourses brings, as from a power-renouncing slipping between self and language, between the present of the writing and the past, between self and other in intersubjectivity. This is a "complementary" relation (contradictory but not mutually exclusive) between passion and the linguistic play that must double passion to bring it to consciousness, between the wild territories of the pre-symbolic and the symbolic linguistic order that constitutes the social self, and between the individual and the collective, the psychical character of an "I" and the social nature of a "she/he." Such a relation arises in the writing of/on/with the powerless "feminine" body at the level of disordered personal experience of the senses close to the unconscious or the Kristevan Kora in fusion with the mother. This writing is also a linguistic cutting up and conscious "re-membering" (and thus loss) of these events. Sharon Willis's<sup>4</sup> subtle study of the obsessive theme of desire and lack (loss or lack inherent in the act of representation) and its relation to violence in Duras gives voice to the reader's dual sense of familiarity and loss in a world of deeply private fantasies that appear also to be the anonymous displacements and metaphorizations of collective sexuality. Violence inheres in individuated psyche, in writing, and in the "real."

Madeleine Cottenet-Hage recalls that in the second of the *Aurélia Steiner* films (1979), the character, spoken by Duras and identified only at the end of

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<sup>4</sup> Sharon Willis, *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

the film as Aurélia speaking from Vancouver, enacts at once a personal, a historical, and a universal story. This archetypal Durassian story of pain is the story of the loss of Aurélia Steiner's parents in a concentration camp, "the story of the Jews," "the story of humankind,"<sup>5</sup> and Duras's history/story.

In Duras's pseudo-diary *La Douleur*, the global, objective, or outside events that constitute Resistance and Holocaust are refracted through the textual mirrors of the local inner experiences of feminine waiting and emotional pain: the pain of the loss of her unborn child or, later, more problematically for the reader, the pain of childbirth. Knowledge of history here also emerges through the other; from Marguerite's waiting for Robert L. (Robert Antelme, "L/il/elle"), her husband, imprisoned in 1944 for his activities in the Resistance and deported from the French prison of Fresne. It is the intensity of this emotionally physically experienced waiting rather than the events of Robert's dramatic rescue, orchestrated by Francois Morland (alias François Mitterrand) from the barracks for the dying in Dachau that holds center stage. Marguerite's own timeless, care-full, nursing vigil over the pain of Robert's slow return to the living is given precedence over any account of heroic sequential external events of war or rescue.

Pain as the other and chosen face of pleasure in the scenes of the French actress-protagonist's encounter with a fictional Japanese lover in the film-text *Hiroshima mon amour* returns in the affair with the "autobiographical" Chinese lover of *L'Amant*. These "feminized" minority lovers themselves weep and suffer. They experience passively both complicity with, and victimization by, forces of historical injustice, racism and nuclear holocaust and the pleasure/pain of both as self-affirming desire and a self-loss in the other that they do not resist. The ballet of bodily linguistic experience of pleasure and pain and of abstract collective forces—that is, of the drive for domination that is history and of the master-servant structure of the psyche—in Duras's work derive, then, from monsters encountered in her history. The humiliations and wild freedoms of her childhood in Indochina, like her experiences of the War, or of the sufferings and joys of human bonding, reflect both a sociohistorical situation and an individuated psyche characterized by a fascination with, fear of, and movement between, domination and self-loss.

The elder brother as strong hunter of the tiger in the forests of Siam, envied object of the mother's adoration, free and predatory, played a major role in Duras's early traditional novel set in French Indochina, *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950). The relationship with this brother who, in this first writing of childhood experience, is merged with the beloved "little" brother of *L'Amant*, is one of strong fascination. A later short work, *Agatha* (1981), is an intense drama of the re-meeting and subsequent separation of a brother and sister who recall together the power of their early and overwhelming incestuous love. Even in *L'Amant*, where the beloved "little" brother is identified with the lover in his fear of the elder brother, the passionate hatred expressed for the older

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted (page 95) in Madeleine Cottenet-Hage and Kolker Robert, "The Cinema of Duras in Search of an Ideal Image," *The French Review* 63.1 (October 1989): 88-98. The quotation is taken from the catalogue for the film p. 59.

brother/the War thus seems ambivalent, troubled by the erotic attraction of, and fear of complicity with, the simultaneously destroyed and revived fascinating, brutal order of "masculine" power.

In Duras's "Albert des Capitales," a short fragment in *La Douleur*, the exploration of the pull between inner poles of "masculine" power and control or "feminine" powerlessness and passivity takes the dramatic form of a historical event. During the liberation of France, the female narrator, Thérèse, orchestrates a ritualistic interrogation in which a middle-class collaborator-traitor is humiliated and beaten to extract a confession. Although her leadership in the sadistic "trial" is justified by her desire for solidarity with the proletarian Resistance, nonetheless, at the end of the story, Thérèse weeps. The implication is that her actions are an unacceptable exclusive identification with the active and oppressive "masculine" pole.

There is once again both historical and self-reference in Duras's most recent autobiographical fiction, *Emily L*, in the evocation of the ruins of the German factory beyond the sunless forest, history and personal story abstracted in the appearance in the white spaces of the square of a group of self-similar "Koreans" who recall the unselfaware cruelty of the Asian youths of Duras's childhood, killing the starving dogs on the Kampot plain for their sport. Emily L's inarticulate cries of fear and pain, that elide the boundaries between the inner and the outer world, between self and text, like the Durassian text itself, are a paradoxical literary articulation of a space of movement between pre-verbal experience and conscious historical text.

Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance* is played out against historical backdrops which change from the absolutist prerevolutionary Czarist Russia of her earliest childhood at the beginning of the century to the middle-class France of her mother's remarriage and her father and stepmother's later political exile. Natasha's story/history, like Marguerite's, is again generated out of the child's difficult relations with figures of familial authority and affective power within a specific historical frame.<sup>6</sup> Its innovative use of dialogic and "complementary" voices, a voice gendered "masculine" of Cartesian rationality and critical distance, seeking fairness and control in its portrait of the Mother ('s lack), and a voice gendered "feminine" which evokes the welling up and irruption of tropistic psychological movement suggesting desire for the mother, the power of her words, attempts at separation, and fear of rejection, suggests the tensions in Sarraute's personal life. Pulled in opposite directions by loyalties to divorced parents (the charming, silken, demanding and perhaps less than devoted mother, the responsible, reserved, more cerebral father), seeking to understand the sentiments of those close to her both by feeling and by analysis, the writer, like the child, appears to be searching both for knowledge and for love. Explicitly knowing that words are flattening and inadequate and single judgments simplifying, consciously orchestrating the choices and order of the fragments spoken or remembered by both voices, the adult writer is, at the

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<sup>6</sup> Ways of reading the relationship with the mother are discussed in an earlier article; Raylene O'Callaghan, "Reading Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*: Reflections on Critical Validity," *Romanic Review* 80.3 (May 1989): 445-61.

same time, close to the child's trembling, listening still for the complex emotional movements that might lie beneath the *lieux communs* of parental phrase.

Sarraute does not discuss the historical events of her father's exile under the Czar, or the Russian Revolution, or the later Stalinist era that she experienced on a visit to terrorized relatives. Forced to live under an assumed name and to go into hiding during the Occupation, narrowly escaping arrest by fleeing from the village of Janvry after being denounced as a Jew, she makes no mention of the War and the Holocaust. In all her texts, however, underlying the orderings of feelings and experience by cliché and dialogic social interactions, as yet dimly perceived and preceding dialogue, lurk "subconversations" which, I would argue, are a reemergence of these violent, suppressed historical events.

The commonplaces of the language do seem to attach in some way to common psychological movements and Sarraute's relationship with her mother is a saga of the movement between the child's early adoring loyalty to that parent's injunctions and a fierce resistance to the hidden control exerted by her words. Cliché confronts cliché: the mother's edict "un enfant qui aime sa mère trouve que personne n'est plus beau qu'elle" (93) is resisted by the child's "Elle est plus belle que Maman" (92) and "Maman a la peau d'un singe" (96). Perhaps all of Sarraute's works can be characterized by the piercing of the silken skin of the mother ('s language), the movement between the safety and belonging of her soft order and the impulse to resist appearances, to question ready-made authority and control.

"Subconversations," then, consist of disordered but precise, contradictory affective movements (tropisms) centered on the desire to master and control and the instinct to submit, flee, or build defenses. The need of the baker of Janvry to denounce her, claimed Sarraute in a rare interview,<sup>7</sup> derived from just such movements, from the baker's fear of disorder, his desire to be "right," to impose the security of the law, and protect himself from the hidden threat. These tropistic movements of aggression, the fear of disorder, and the attempt to impose an absolute and infallible order, at once collective and individually experienced, are both at the heart of the history that she lived and the hidden source of her own stories.

However, Sarraute is as categorical at the beginning of *Enfance* as our other writers. Language, for her, is not life. It does not translate a plenitude of origins. It is a paper copy, a cardboard cutout of experience, incapable of representing the confused tropistic "real" of infra-psychological movement and at best a re-modelling through rhythm and metaphor of networks of signs in order to better bring hidden aspects of life to consciousness. History, too, is a language and just such a doubling of the real.

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<sup>7</sup> Marc Saporta and Nathalie Sarraute, "Portrait d'une inconnue: conversation biographique," *L'Arc* 95 (Paris: Editions Le Jas, 1984): 5-23.

The admission of the relative powerlessness of the new language, which creates linguistically mediated worlds but cannot clearly reflect the non-linguistic world or the unconscious mind and the monsters of our being (drive to domination/desire for submission), is echoed by Robbe-Grillet. For the latter, in *Le Miroir qui revient*, all reality is "indescribable" as, for the later Barthes, the real is the "uncoded." In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, the autobiographical "I" can be only a "character in a novel." The figure of the War in Robbe-Grillet seems to echo, if more faintly, Marguerite Duras's insistence on any knowledge of history being grounded in the non-ordered experience of the body, in the felt reality of power and humiliation. In *Le Miroir qui revient*, this takes the form of a dissolution of clear boundaries between the external event and the unconscious impulse in the phantasmatic figure of Lord Corinthe—Resistance hero and Nazi collaborator, sexual sadist and victim of the (female) vampire—literary, mythical, and real "father." The shock of the fall of the Third Reich and the discovery of the Holocaust in the light of a right-wing, anti-Semitic Robbe-Grillet family ideology is overlaid by the narrator's revelation of his own sadistic sexual fantasies. In the sequel to *Le Miroir qui revient*, *Angélique et l'enchantement*, the historico-cultural myths of the Don Juan adventurer/cavalry officer in the forests on the Franco-German frontier and his encounters with the dangerous siren-spy, or of the knight-errant in thrall to only seemingly fair maidens, become inextricably interwoven with phantasmatic scenes of "feminine" bondage and sado-erotic "masculine" power. This suppression of the woman's body seems to derive from a barely conscious anxiety (the anguish and fascination of death and disintegration) provoked by the attraction of the seductive and vulnerable "enchanted" feminine other in the self. Such an active sadistic suppression of the fear of the "feminine" might be the other face of the "ravishing" by the "masculine" in Duras.

For Claude Simon, the linearity of traditional linguistic organization betrays the complexity of the simultaneously sensory, intellectual, and phantasmatic associations and memories of the writer. This is a misrepresentation of the discontinuity both of experience and of history. Yet, as Joan Brandt points out,<sup>8</sup> he too is aware that "all words cut up, set in concrete, and annihilate by replacing," what they re-present. Simon, says Brandt, calls upon the formal orders of art, the frame, the techniques and images of overlapping and superimposition, to seek out "that ideal perspective which would make an all-encompassing vision possible."<sup>9</sup> But, as the writer himself admits, his new text is "aussi dépourvu d'épaisseur et d'existence qu'une feuille de papier" (67). For Brandt, the "effect to enclose the discontinuity of experience fails either because it leads to an annihilation of the real by substituting its own flattened image or [because it] is undermined by the temporality and the expansiveness of what it seeks to enclose" (383).

Perhaps that is why the central event concealed behind Claude Simon's "impossible" ideal perspective is also inevitably absent. Already in the novel *La*

<sup>8</sup> Joan Brandt, "History and Art in Claude Simon's *Histoire*." *Romanic Review* 73.3 (May 1982): 373-384.

<sup>9</sup> Claude Simon, *Histoire* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967) 380. Trans. Joan Brandt.

*Route des Flandres* (1960), prefaced by the phrase borrowed from Mallarmé: "Two dangers threaten the world: order and disorder," Claude Simon's cavalry officer fictional protagonist-father-self circles obstinately around an absent center: a disintegrating dead horse seeking orders in the chaos of the 1940 *debacle*. Like the "lack" in his own "signifying unity" that Robbe-Grillet pursues in *Le Miroir qui revient*, the hole at the center of the golden ring which gives the ring its form in the sequel *Angélique ou l'enchantement*, this void is not only absence, or *degré zero*, or disorder, but also the central principle of postmodern linguistic re-generation and emergence of new orders. In fact, the void or absent center is a recurring figure in all these works. In Duras's *L'Amant* (which was to have been called "Absolute Photography"), this degree zero takes the form of the imaginatively powerful photo that "had never been taken" of the adolescent self. In her *Emily L.*, it is the missing unfinished poem, the "minimal internal difference" sensed but imperfectly detected, that lies at the heart of the poet's life and death.

The void of self, as Keren Smith defines it in an article which compares the voyeur-criminal protagonists in Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*,<sup>10</sup> is the lack of any unifying or transcendental principle (God, History, Man) that can give meaning to the self and to the world. This void of self distinguishes traditional fiction (in which the void exists only in a binary organization of void or redemptive meaning, or purity or criminality) from the postmodern. In the former, a mediation can be effected and a metaphysical or moral solution is possible. Dostoevsky's protagonist, Raskolnikov, lost in the void ("If God were dead then everything would be possible"), is redeemed from his crime by punishment and perhaps by female (self) sacrifice. The nondialectical, chaotic, postmodern void of self does not permit mediation. It is, however, a site at which what is repressed by language and the social order—the monsters of will to power and will to self dissolution, of the narcissistic (somasochistic) psyche—can take form. A site at which authenticity might be sought.

The polysemous title of Claude Simon's 1967 novel *Histoire* had already suggested the public history and private story telescoped in the latter's work. The early novels had moved between chaos and formal orders, in the new reversible topological space of the Moëbius strip where inside and outside become indeterminate. In *Les Géorgiques* (1981), a text which is itself constructed, in a now familiar postmodern strategy, from other texts of Western tradition (from Virgil and from Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution*, for example), the chaotic yet strangely patterned and recursive overlapping circles of military defeats and victories around a hollow sexualized matrix of birth and death, constitutes a collective male experience of Western history, the personal text of military father and ancestor, and the historical text of Simon's own participation in the French debacle. In the more recent "autobiographical" evocation of an invitation to Soviet Russia, history is the personal assemblage of the fragments of the disparate official and private discourses overheard.

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<sup>10</sup> Keren Smith, "Voyeurism and the Void of Self: The Problem of Human Identity in Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*," *New Zealand Journal of French Studies* 9.2 (1988): 34-41.

Meaning, like the text itself, is produced in the infinitely branching interactions of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of the working of the language which create effects of the mind and of the emotions, and yet the War, like the visit to Russia, is grounded in Simon's own lived past/presently re-called experience, generated by perception, memory and desire and by the ready-made texts of history including those of great men (the father, the great general). The encounter with Gorbachev described in *L'Invitation* is overlaid by these pre-texts. The new textual/physical body in Simon also models fields of complex interaction between biology and history, language and the self.

The new autobiographical fictions lead not to classical self-knowledge, or to modern self-consciousness, but rather to a postmodern sense of reflexivity among linguistic mirrors. Yet these autobiographical fictions do involve a shift. As Lois Oppenheim argues,<sup>11</sup> they slip from the focus on the anonymity of collective forms to a form of individuation. The theoretical "death" of the author as origin and finality is replaced by a concern with what might constitute the specificity of an individual (style). As in the New Historicism, history is indeed story but it is also, as Veeseer has shown,<sup>12</sup> the social, political, and personal contexts out of which the story arises.

The experiences of twentieth-century French history serve as a pre-text for the fictions of a returning if altered and constantly splitting self in these new, individuated and ground-breaking texts. Yet in an interesting slippage, it is the texts emerging at other collective cultural sites, new sciences such as Quantum Physics (the principle of complementarity) and Chaos theory, postmodernisms of various kinds, that appear to influence the reconstruction of this self around a subversion of the boundaries of order and chaos, of inner and outer, feminine and masculine, power and powerlessness, and the binary oppositions and categories that these poles subsume. The telescoping of these opposites creates complementary forms that intimate the revolutionary promise of this new genre.

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<sup>11</sup> Lois Oppenheim, "From Anonymity to Individuation in the Nouveau Roman." Paper read at a special session "The French Nouveau Roman Thirty Years On" at M.L.A. Convention, New York, 29 Dec. 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Aram Veeseer, ed., *The New Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989).