Lacan, Robbe-Grillet, and Autofiction

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In the postmodern era it is perhaps difficult to believe in the mimetic properties of language. The works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, and Stephen Heath, among others, point to its arbitrariness, to the gap between the signifier and the signified, and to the self-referential nature of the signifying chain. The world is no longer transparent and we apprehend it vaguely through an opaque veil. Instead of mirroring an a priori reality, the reality of language is now said to mirror itself. In this sense language is fantastic because we can never close the gap between the signifier and the signified. Indeed, the fantastic occupies that impossible realm between what we think we mean and the language we use to express this meaning. We are forever condemned to hesitate between meaning and nonmeaning, between reality and unreality, between knowing and not knowing. If language is fantasy because reality is elsewhere, and the signifier is not the signified, then language, whatever its mimetic properties, also signifies itself. Its representational value is, at best, approximate, and, at worst, suspect. If suspect, the reality of the world is an illusion because the signifying systems we use to apprehend it also determine our perceptions of it. Because our perception of the world is mediated through language, it is important to learn not only how language works, but what is being mediated. Insofar as the representational system for autobiography and fiction is the same, we need to address the problem of representation.

From a Lacanian point of view representation is fantasy (*méconnaissance*) because every conscious discourse veils an accompanying discourse that is unconscious. Jacques Lacan calls it "the discourse of the Other," saying that it manifests a residual desire that all of us harbor. This desire is left over from the so-called primal repression which asserts itself in disguised form as metaphor and metonymy whenever we use language, be it the language the subject uses in analysis, in art, in film, or in literature. If the manifest discourse is only the symptom of the reality hidden beneath it, then reality is that unverbalized dimension of every discourse that accompanies its overt expression. The visible and audible portion of discourse, in relation to its invisible and inaudible component, can only be a fanciful and, at best, an approximate excrescence of the ego. The ego, moreover, is constituted as a fiction (fantasy) of sliding surfaces composed of the Imaginary (self), the Symbolic (father), and the Real. Narration is thus the symptom of a self that has been displaced and decentered.[1]

For Lacan, the act of writing, and the repetition of writing, posit the enticement of textuality (and sexuality), thereby acknowledging, unconsciously, the child's "wound" and alienation. To produce a text, whatever its conscious

[1] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits I* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1966) 89-100, 249-89.

modes and operations, is also to relive the process by which an affective charge—a cathexis—is released from its generating poles. The writer, and eventually the reader, direct this charge, imbuing it with the Reality that both produces and attracts it. Fiction (fantasy) when coupled with autobiography has the power to link the conscious and unconscious systems.

Writing, like psychoanalysis, repeats the discontent of what never took place during that "time-event" referred to as the primal scene. The so-called fantasy of desire, incest, castration, death, and repression reenact not what took place, but what did not. Nonetheless, it is this scene that is replayed and reenacted on the stage of language as the metaphorical actors put on their masks and perform (repeat) their ritual. This discourse of the self, which is always a discourse of desire, seeks to retrieve the lost object, be it breast or mother, and because language manifests the presence of the mother tongue, writing, even as it recovers an absence, is incestuous. "We write with our desire," says Roland Barthes, "and I have never stopped desiring."[2]

Two of Alain Robbe-Grillet's recent works embodying fantasy and desire—*Le miroir qui revient* and *Angélique ou l'enchantement*—blend autobiography and fiction. Robbe-Grillet juxtaposes memory, myth, history, and commentary in order to define his *persona* by referring, among other things, to the quasi-fictitious life of a certain Baron (or Count) Henri de Corinthe—a mythical character who, although he is a friend of Robbe-Grillet's father, a soldier, spy, adventurer, German collaborator, and French cavalry officer, also has an identity connecting him to the legend of "la fiancée de Corinthe"—the legend that Jules Michelet describes in *La sorcière*. Both of these "autofictions" provide important information about Robbe-Grillet's life. However, each work develops the fictional story of Henri de Corinthe who, one night, by the full moon, recovers a magical mirror from the surf off the coast of Brittany. Instead of reflecting his own image, this mirror has the fantastic power to reflect the image of his dead fiancée, Angélique. All this has metaphorical value and is part of Robbe-Grillet's assertion that fantasy is a more accurate picture of a writer's psyche than the remembrance of real events, that mnemonic flaws parallel aporias in fiction; that a novel's tropes are a truer mirror of an author's identity than raw biographical facts.

This emphasis on autofiction is a new dimension in Robbe-Grillet's projected series of *Romanesques* (*Le miroir qui revient; Angélique ou l'enchantement;* and the ones to follow). He is now tracking the *analogons*, the tropes of psychic experience that seem to explain the persistence of certain metaphorical structures in his writings and in his films. Also, the moment we introduce desire as an element of language and of the creative process, we need to speak of death, the unconscious, and the Lacanian Other. Robbe-Grillet is not unaware of these complexities because in an interview with Jean-Pierre Salgas in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* entitled "Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi" ("I have never spoken of anything but myself"), he says that "*Le miroir qui revient* corresponds to Lacan's mirror stage: the child reglues the fragments on

[2] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 193.

the mirror and discovers that the image of itself is another."[3] Robbe-Grillet believes that because fiction relates fables it is a truer and more personal portrait of the writer than autobiography.[4] He calls these tropes *des opérateurs*—a thematics that he believes is a more accurate reflection of an author's self than a consciously projected, and therefore distorted portrayal could be: ". . . c'est encore dans une fiction que je me hasarde ici" (13), says he of *Le miroir qui revient*, and the same can be said of *Angélique* ("Once again it is within fiction that I venture forth").

The fables of desire in Robbe-Grillet's autofiction always focuses on women's bodies: flesh, blood, sex, torture, and death. However, if manifest content veils latent content, then the discourse of the Other, when unveiled, should help us to understand what the metaphorical and metonymical compressions and displacements are telling us. In *Le miroir qui revient* Robbe-Grillet remembers a pet bat that his mother kept inside her blouse and which, occasionally, when guests were present, would crawl into plain view on her neck. As a small boy he had long curls and his mother dressed him in girl's clothes. He also recounts the episode when he refused to drink his milk saying he wanted to drink mother milk (*lait Maman*).

Robbe-Grillet writes that as a child he had nightmares of the sea (14) and he stresses "the phonetic resemblance between wave (*la vague*) and vagina (*le vagin*): and also the etymology of the word 'nightmare' (*cauchemar*), whose root (*mare*) in Latin, signifies the sea (*la mer*), but which, in Dutch, designates the phantoms of the night" (15). In French *la mer* (the sea) is a homonym for *la mère* (the mother). Ironically, his mother would comfort him when he awoke screaming from his nightmares—nightmares that seem to have been generated at least in part by her (*la mer*) and by the "vagina" (the latent meaning of the manifest images of the sea and the waves). How is a boy child to cope with the ambivalent feelings elicited by the presence of the comforting yet threatening mother?

We should also note that Robbe-Grillet's father is not cast in the role of authoritarian figure. He manufactured cardboard boxes for dolls and, Robbe-Grillet tells us, his earliest erotic fantasies were with doll-like figurines. Catherine, his young bride is described as a doll-like woman whom strangers persisted in misidentifying as his daughter—a variant on the nymphet syndrome that Irina Ionesco's photographs illustrate in their collaborative volume *Temple aux miroirs*.[5] Despite this trail which, in theory, is an unconscious one, the ambiguous and repetitive imagery of Robbe-Grillet's adult fantasies confirms the traces we find in *Le miroir qui revient*. However, Robbe-Grillet is too sly an artist not to have inserted these clues into the book deliberately. Like Michelet, he is fascinated with blood, and, throughout his works, he strives to

[3] Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi." An interview with Jean-Pierre Salgas, *La Quinzaine Littéraire* 432 (16-31 Jan. 1985): 6. My translation; Subsequent references to this article will appear in the text.

[4] *Le miroir qui revient* (Paris: Minuit, 1984) 17. My translation; subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

[5] Alain Robbe-Grillet and Irina Ionesco, *Temple aux miroirs*. Text by Robbe-Grillet, photographs by Ionesco (Paris: Seghers, 1977).

give this liquid its appropriate mythical connotations: woman, nature, the tides, lunar cycles. For both men blood connotes the sea, but for Robbe-Grillet the seashore also connotes freedom and woman. The sea and the seashore are privileged if ambivalent places, on the one hand connoting nightmares and death and, on the other, purity and freedom. This ambivalence is dramatized on the sandy beach of the film *La belle captive*[6] as the free-spirited and ethereal woman dances in a gown of white lace and is then violated by the men in black.

Robbe-Grillet is fascinated by Michelet's description in *La sorcière* of the recurring episode of "la fiancée de Corinthe," first narrated by Phlégon, the freed slave of Hadrian (A. D. 78-138). The story surfaces again in the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries. Michelet describes a young Athenian, a pagan, who goes to Corinth to meet his fiancée, unaware of the fact that since his betrothal her family has become Christian and her mother has promised her virginity to God. Despite this vow, the young couple's passion overcomes the bride's reticence and she succumbs to the man's amorous advances. A fourth-century Roman variant of this encounter describes a young Corinth weakened and emasculated by the impure blood of his once pure and now deflowered fiancée.[7]

"La fiancée de Corinthe" is no doubt the backdrop for Robbe-Grillet's description, in *Angélique ou l'enchantement*, of precocious sexual games in an old barn by the Brittany seashore—games that rehearse the now familiar ritual and reversible roles of dominance/submission. A naked and vulnerable Angélique requests that she be bound hand and foot. She then asks the boy to stick a finger into her vagina, and when, after exploring the orifice, he withdraws his finger covered with menstrual blood, she says he has deflowered her. After the boy unties her hands and feet she threatens to denounce him. She coerces him into licking the blood off his fingers, saying that there is a curse on it and that he will be impotent forever.[8] In view of the striking similarities with the legend of "la fiancée de Corinthe," Corinthe as the projection of Robbe-Grillet's *persona*, and his allusions to blood, the sea, and lunar cycles, are we to believe this account of early sexuality? Is the trauma of this initiation to be taken seriously? Should we graft Angélique's threat of impotence onto the impotence of the primal repression? Are Robbe-Grillet's repeated scenes describing the abuse of women's bodies in an eroticized context designed to overcome this double trauma? Are the vampire/victim scenes of his adult fantasies the composite images of fear and lust, and of nightmare and desire? Did these juvenile games really occur, or is Robbe-Grillet fabricating an episode with a twelve-year-old girl in order to duplicate and foreground the mythical details that Michelet, Goethe, and others refer to? The details of his autofiction read more like desire than the "enchantment" of *Angélique's* subtitle.

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[6] (Paris: Argos Films, 1983).

[7] Jules Michelet, *La sorcière* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966) 49-51.

[8] *Angélique ou l'enchantement* (Paris: Minuit, 1987) 242-45.

Such speculations are both tantalizing and titillating, but there is more. Several days after the episode of the children's clandestine sex games in the ancient barn, Angélique is recovered from the sea, drowned and naked. Foul play, accident, suicide? Why naked? If it was murder, who did it? The parallels between Jacqueline/Violette, the thirteen-year-old girl of *Le voyeur* and the Angélique of Robbe-Grillet's autofiction are all too clear. Indeed, part one of *Le voyeur* recreates one possible hypothesis for Angélique's death: the murderer was a traveling watch salesman, a hypothesis obliterated in parts two and three as Mathias retraces the figure eight in the passage known as "le double circuit."[9] The reality of murder is short-circuited even as the blank, enigmatic white page at the end of part one leaves the space between fiction and reality unsolved. Whatever happened, Angélique's death, when combined with her erotic games, and Robbe-Grillet's childhood nightmares and remembrance, provides the leitmotif against which he generates his adult fantasies.

In *Le voyeur* "Jacqueline gisait entièrement nue sur un tapis d'algues brunes, parmi de grosses roches aux formes arrondies. . . . Elle portait en outre des blessures, à la tête et aux membres . . . De toute façon, il était difficile . . . de fixer avec certitude l'origine des différentes plaies et ecchymoses . . . d'autant plus que les ravages des crabes, ou de quelques gros poissons, avaient déjà commencé sur certains points particulièrement tendres" (175-76). ("Jacqueline was lying completely naked on a rug of brown seaweed, among the big rounded rocks. . . . There were wounds on her head and extremities . . . Moreover, it was difficult to determine the origin of the different injuries and bruises . . . because of the ravages of crabs or large fish that were already visible on certain particularly tender spots.") It is strange, perhaps, that the need to symbolically recover the "lost breast" (the mother) should elicit such violence. Still, the bicycle of desire, "la belle machine" of *Le voyeur* and *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*,[10] follows the circuitous traces of the Imaginary which, in *Le voyeur* gives us an exaggerated movie-poster of a colossus bending a submissive woman toward his desire (45). But the ambivalence remains, and the image of a seductive, dominant, and vampiric woman coexists with the image of her frailty. The reversals of desire—the fragmented image of the Other—are no less a theme of the fantastic than the formal reversal that transforms realism into metafiction.

The language and imagery of Robbe-Grillet's fiction connote both woman as vampire and woman as victim—Vanadé,victorious and vanquished. When language is foregrounded and when fiction becomes conscious of its own creative processes, that is, when it becomes reflexive, it develops characteristics that downgrade the traditional roles of character, conflict, psychology, story, and denouement. It is the generative themes, the proliferation of stories, the textual polysemy, and the paronomasia that, in subverting the coded conventions of fiction, push it toward fantasy. The writer no longer tells stories, rather, he explores the story of telling, and it is this reversal of the canon that engenders the fantastic. However, the story of telling goes hand in glove with the ex-

[9] (Paris: Minuit, 1955) 167-68. My translation; subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

[10] *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (Paris: Minuit, 1974) 30.

ploration of the creative process which, in turn, unveils the discourse of the Other. In Robbe-Grillet, this metaphorical discourse focuses obsessively and repetitively on woman, both as fictive body and as sexual object, and it is this reenactment of his preferred imagery, within the scene of writing, that displaces realism and replaces it with fantasy.

Fantasy as discourse—the ongoing, incessant stream of metaphorical veilings—reveals the latent content of desire, and desire is always subversive, discontinuous, reversed, and impossible.[11] Fantastic worlds, however, are not a prerequisite. Ordinary language reveals the presence of the Other. All that is required, in order to transform a "readerly" text into a "writerly" text (using Barthes's terminology) is that the reader transmute its manifest realism into its latent fantasy. The reader liberates the text from its realistic constraints and produces meaning by tapping into the text's veiled desire. The reader's desire and the text's desire, together, provide the orgasmic bliss which Barthes refers to in *Le plaisir du texte*.[12]

In conclusion, Robbe-Grillet's autobiographies call attention to the *analogons* in his fiction and to the metaphorical slippages of pleasure that are the same in both. Indeed, the discourse of the Other transforms all of his works into fantasy and autofiction.

[11] See W.R. Irwin, *(The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Urbana: U. of Illinois P, 1970) 4, 9; Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1981) 69; Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1976) 12, 28; Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970) 29-31, 46, 165.

[12] (Paris: Seuil, 1981) 105.