

Suspicion and Novelty: The *Nouveau Roman*

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One seldom encounters the phrase *nouveau roman* (new novel) in a title anymore. Although individual authors allied with this movement may still provoke lively discussion, the *nouveau roman* is no longer new. Yet in 1958, when critic Émile Henriot coined the phrase in a negative review of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* and Nathalie Sarraute's *Tropismes*, the *nouveau roman* was new – and strikingly so.¹ The novel by definition has always been experimental, but the *nouveau roman* stands out as the only explicitly avant-garde novelistic movement in the history of French literature. It engaged in a systematic deconstruction of novel form, testing what happens when the architectural pillars of the realist text are removed. Marginalising character and plot, and banishing narrative omniscience, the *nouveau roman* sought to disorient its readers even as it enlisted their participation in the production of meaning. In its anti-humanism, its love of objects, surfaces and structures, and its antipathy towards omniscient narration, the *nouveau roman* scrambled the conventions of the genre, turning it inside out and upside down.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first part discusses the history of the *nouveau roman* in relation to the publishing house with which it is famously allied: Les Éditions de Minuit. A second section considers the shared formal qualities and differences that characterise the novels grouped under this banner. A final section examines the *nouveau roman*'s vexed relation to its historical moment.

¹ Like many avant-garde phenomena, the *nouveau roman* was named by a detractor. Émile Henriot, 'Le nouveau roman: *La Jalousie* d'Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Tropismes* de Nathalie Sarraute', *Le Monde*, 22 May 1957, quoted in Anne Simonin, 'La littérature saisie par l'histoire: nouveau roman et guerre d'Algérie aux Éditions de Minuit', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 111–12 (1996), 59–75 (p. 59). The *nouveau roman* was more appreciatively consecrated that same year in the July issue of *Esprit*. Nelly Wolf, *Une littérature sans histoire: essai sur le nouveau roman* (Paris: Droz, 1995), p. 15.

L'École de Minuit

The *nouveau roman* was not, in fact, a cohesive movement. Its 'members' never penned a manifesto and could not be considered a collective in any official sense. Instead, the *nouveau roman* might be most accurately described as a loosely knit group of writers – novelists who also wrote essays, plays and films – who were all published by Les Éditions de Minuit during the 1950s and 1960s. These included Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Claude Simon, Robert Pinget and Marguerite Duras (although Duras's unique celebrity status keeps her at something of a distance from the rest).² These authors shared an allergy to a realism they saw as Balzacian and bourgeois, and a preference for unembellished syntax and theoretical, self-reflexive fiction. More cynically, we might note that although the phrase *nouveau roman* was first applied in a critical register, laying claim to this label proved to be a savvy marketing strategy in a post-war era eager to break with the past. Indeed, the *nouveau roman* would soon be followed by the *nouvelle vague* ('new wave') in cinema and the *nouveau réalisme* in painting.

The new novelists themselves sometimes contested the category of the *nouveau roman* and the idea that they belonged to some sort of collectivity – although these contestations only served to further group them together in the view of the public.³ In a 1961 interview, Roland Barthes argued that the idea of the *nouveau roman* was a 'literary myth' produced by 'a community of friendships, of publishers, and of panel discussions', rather than a 'genuine synthesis of works'.⁴ As evidence of this lack of synthesis, Barthes had argued in an earlier essay that Michel Butor's work is in fact opposed to that of Robbe-Grillet: Butor's *La Modification* (1957) is laden with precisely the sort of 'signification' (the symbolism of the journey, the analogical quality of objects)

² While Robbe-Grillet, Pinget and Simon published exclusively with Minuit, Butor, Sarraute and Duras moved between this publisher and others (mainly Gallimard). Sarraute, for example, published only one text with Minuit (her 1957 re-edition of *Tropismes*, originally put out in shorter form by Denoël). However, all the authors that came to be viewed as 'new novelists' published at least one book with Minuit in the 1950s.

³ Wolf, *Une littérature sans histoire*, p. 9.

⁴ Roland Barthes, 'La littérature, aujourd'hui', in *Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), pp. 155–66 (p. 165). Another way to put this would be to say that the *nouveau roman* cannot be thought of outside its voluminous metadiscourse – the many interviews, debates, essays, etc., that produced and legitimised the 'movement' as such. On the *nouveau roman* as a sociological, discursive phenomenon, see Galia Yanoshevsky, *Les discours du nouveau roman: essais, entretiens, débats* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Septentrion, 2006).

that Robbe-Grillet seeks to destroy.⁵ Robbe-Grillet is a radical formalist, Barthes contends, while Butor is ultimately a humanist.

In order to understand how the *nouveau roman* came into being at all – even if we accept that it is more a ‘literary myth’ or metadiscursive phenomenon than a unified aesthetic movement – it is necessary to consider the history and reputation of the publisher with which it is so closely bound.

Minuit was born in 1941 as a clandestine press, in defiance of German censorship, and has capitalised on its association with a tradition of intellectual and political resistance, cultivating a reputation as ‘the publishing house of the Resistance’.⁶ In the 1950s, notes historian Anne Simonin, Minuit broke decisively with the Sartrean mode of ‘committed’ literature. Yet it was hardly an apolitical press. Under the direction of Jérôme Lindon, with Robbe-Grillet as official secretary and unofficial editorial arbiter, Minuit refused any ‘didactic’ function for the novel, separating fiction (formalist, experimental, present-tense oriented) from activism.⁷ Thus the press produced seemingly apolitical novels (or obliquely political, as the case may be) but stridently activist ‘documentary’ texts.⁸ As Simonin points out, the text that incarnates the spirit of critical and intellectual resistance to the Algerian War is a documentary work, not a fictional one: Henri Alleg’s essay *La Question*, which Minuit published in 1958 (and which was subsequently censored by the French government).⁹ Simonin notes that the major new novelists signed the ‘manifeste des 121’ (‘Déclaration sur le droit à l’insoumission dans la Guerre d’Algérie’) in September 1960 (the ‘Manifesto of the 121: declaration on the right of insubordination in the Algerian War’).¹⁰ Yet they never explicitly reference this war, or the ethics of torture, in their fiction.

Robbe-Grillet played an important role at Minuit, and was thus central to the genesis of the *nouveau roman* from an institutional perspective as well as

⁵ Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p. 93.

⁶ Anne Simonin, *Les Éditions de Minuit, 1942–1955: le devoir d’insoumission* (Paris: IMEC Éditions, 1994), p. 244.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25. Robbe-Grillet explicitly dismisses the Sartrean ideal of ‘committed literature’ (*littérature engagée*), arguing that didactic art is unconvincing and reductive. See *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 39. Simonin notes the irony of Robbe-Grillet – who had supported Pétain and had done a stint of voluntary labour in Germany during the war – becoming the porte-parole of a publishing house born of the French Resistance.

⁸ In the Minuit collection ‘Documents’, the denunciation of torture is the topic of eleven (out of twenty-three) publications. Simonin, *Les Éditions de Minuit*, p. 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Anne Simonin, ‘La Mise à l’épreuve du nouveau roman: six cent cinquante fiches de lecture d’Alain Robbe-Grillet (1955–1959)’, *Annales HSS*, 2 (2000), 415–37 (p. 433).

an aesthetic one. He worked alongside Lindon from 1955 to 1985, serving as 'literary director' of Minit, in practice if not in title.¹¹ Under Robbe-Grillet's direction, Minit was exceptionally selective: between 1955 and 1959, the press rejected about 90 per cent of the manuscripts submitted (a proportion that rose to 95 per cent in 1959).¹² Simonin notes that Robbe-Grillet especially detested 'first-person psychological novels', but that he also dismissed what he termed the *roman romanesque* (the novel which tells a story with no concern for style), and the 'naturalist novel'.¹³ Most of the authors whose works were accepted by Minit did not send unsolicited manuscripts to the publishing house. Rather, they were invited to submit by Robbe-Grillet himself (as was the case for Sarraute and Duras), or their work was transmitted by an influential intermediary (Claude Simon by Jean-Edern Hallier, Pinget by Samuel Beckett).¹⁴

Throughout its history, but especially during this early period, Minit demonstrated a preference for *l'écriture blanche* – simplicity or even flatness of style, purged of tropes and allegories. Jean-Michel Rabaté describes *écriture blanche* as a 'simple vernacular spoken in the streets, and which therefore rejects the high modernist idea of mastery over an array of ancient styles that will have to be recombined, parodied, ironized, and transcended'.¹⁵ In other words, we could say that Robbe-Grillet's own pared-down, apathetic mode of writing became the dominant style of the publishing house, and one of the formal features most characteristic of the *nouveau roman*.¹⁶ Yet, as Rabaté notes, this is not the whole story, since Robbe-Grillet, whose first novel, *Les Gommés (Erasers)*, published in 1953, did not invent *écriture blanche*. Instead, he repurposed it. Barthes, inspired

¹¹ In 1955, the editorial committee consisted only of these two men. Simonin, 'La Mise à l'épreuve du nouveau roman', p. 417.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 420. ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion of Beckett's relation to the *nouveau roman*, see Marie Smart, 'New Novel, Old Tune: Beckett and Pinget in Postwar France', *Modernism/modernity*, 21.2 (2014), 524–46. Noting that Beckett encouraged the association of his name with the *nouveau roman* out of support for his long-time editor, Lindon, Smart examines the relation between the playwright and the novelist Pinget, whom Beckett first recommended to Lindon. Pinget translated Beckett's radio plays; Beckett directed Pinget's play *L'Hypothèse*. Smart sees these two as 'uncanny doubles' (pp. 532, 538).

¹⁵ Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'Excuse my French: Samuel Beckett's Style of No Style', *The New Centennial Review*, 16.3 (2016), 133–50 (p. 146).

¹⁶ Simonin notes that *écriture blanche* also characterised the documentary works published by Minit, including Eli Wiesel's and Micheline Maurel's accounts of concentration camp life. See Simonin, 'La Mise à l'épreuve du nouveau roman', pp. 435–6.

by Camus's *L'Étranger*, had championed flat or neutral writing – what he called ‘writing degree zero’ – six years earlier.¹⁷

One might identify yet another source for the banal style and affectless tonality that would come to characterise the *nouveau roman*. Samuel Beckett, *Minuit*'s most celebrated author, was famously drawn to French precisely because it enabled him to write ‘without style’.¹⁸ In perceiving French this way, notes Rabaté, Beckett was responding not only to the classical heritage of the language, its logical bent, but to the way it registered historical trauma in the post-war moment: literary French of the 1940s was flatter than ever – affectively inscrutable and broken, paratactic. From this point of view, we could say that the *nouveau roman* draws on Beckett and Camus in elaborating its anti-style, but that this aesthetic choice registers the broader post-Occupation, post-Auschwitz moment, when the modernist ideal of virtuosic individual style could no longer be upheld.¹⁹

Convergences/Divergences

Although the writers who came to be associated with the *nouveau roman* were grouped more by the circumstances of publication than by any collective aesthetic ethos, they did share certain formal traits. In addition to the flat, apathetic *écriture blanche* discussed above, the movement had a penchant for self-reflexivity or *mise en abyme*. The *mirror* is the *nouveau roman*'s central trope, as critics from Barthes and Jean Ricardou to Ann Jefferson have suggested. But in place of Stendhal's realist ideal of a mirror that is walked

¹⁷ Rabaté notes that Barthes reviewed Camus's *L'Étranger* in 1944. This review was republished in Barthes's *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 1, p. 163. Anticipating his 1953 book of the same title, Barthes then published an essay titled ‘Le Degré zéro de l'écriture’ in 1947, ‘slyly invert[ing] the Sartrean valorisation of writing as socially responsible communication and setting the terms for the non-transitive/non-communicative style that the *nouveau roman* would epitomise. See Rabaté, ‘Excuse my French’, pp. 145–6.

¹⁸ Rabaté, ‘Excuse my French’, pp. 150, 133. According to Rabaté, the *nouveau roman* ‘loosely included Beckett’ (p. 146). Beckett welcomed his affiliation with the movement, according to one of his biographers, Anthony Cronin (quoted in Smart, ‘New Novel, Old Tune’, p. 532). Smart notes that by the late 1950s, Beckett found himself in an appropriately strange position: he was regarded as the ‘predecessor to a “new” wave of artists while at the height of his own career’. He thus acted as a sort of ‘grandfather’ to the *nouveau roman* even as he was its contemporary. Smart, ‘New Novel, Old Tune’, pp. 531, 532, 533.

¹⁹ On the notion that modernism could be characterised by ‘inimitable’ personal style, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 16.

along a road, the *nouveau roman* embraces the ‘effect of mirrors everywhere acting on themselves’.²⁰

The mirror figure can be understood in at least three ways. First, it indicates an embrace of surface. This was not merely a stylistic preference, but a philosophical orientation – a refusal of metaphysical depth, history and even signification itself. Hence Barthes suggests, in his essay on ‘objective literature’, that Robbe-Grillet’s excessively precise, non-lyrical descriptive practice ‘apprehends the object as in a mirror’, as the ‘rapture of a surface’.²¹ Similarly, David Ellison notes that Sarraute’s *L’Ère du soupçon* (*The Age of Suspicion*) broaches the ‘possibility of fiction as *relationless* phenomenon, as creation or construction of a universe that stands in no relation to our human world, at a point of apparent zero-degree reference to reality’.²² The *nouveau roman* is thus often written in the present tense, and tends to highlight its own refusal of temporal depth. Indeed, Robbe-Grillet’s present-tense novel *La Jalousie* (*Jealousy*) begins with the indexical ‘now’ (‘maintenant’), which echoes like a refrain throughout the text. As Robbe-Grillet puts it, in modern narrative, ‘time finds itself cut from its temporality. It no longer flows’ (‘Le temps se trouve coupé de sa temporalité. Il ne coule plus’).²³ This author in particular aims not only to shut out history, but to transform the novel into an art form that might refute meaning altogether. Robbe-Grillet’s writing is ‘cinematic’, not ‘poetic’, according to Barthes: stripped of ‘alibi’, ‘density’ and ‘depth’, it remains on the surface of the object and inspects it impartially, without favouring any particular quality.²⁴ Yet the *nouveau roman* is akin to poetry in a certain sense: it inherits Stéphane Mallarmé’s experiments with non-referentiality – his attempt to transform poetic language into a composition of words that shimmer and echo, criss-cross and refract, without *saying* anything (or without saying anything that could be summarised, translated, or relayed).

²⁰ ‘Le roman, ce n’est plus un miroir qu’on promène le long d’une route; c’est l’effet de miroirs partout agissant en lui-même.’ Jean Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 262.

²¹ Barthes, ‘Littérature objective’, in *Essais critiques*, pp. 13, 14. Lucien Dällenbach also underscores the mirror figure in *Le Récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise-en-abyme* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), which argues that this self-reflecting device keeps the text (seemingly) focused only on itself; it cuts out the ‘real’ world of war, social change and historical trauma, transforming the text into a labyrinth.

²² David Ellison, *Of Words and the World: Referential Anxiety in Contemporary French Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 14.

²³ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 168.

²⁴ Barthes, ‘Littérature objective’, pp. 14, 19.

Second, self-reflexivity in the *nouveau roman* is the method by which the text presents itself as autonomous, liberated from realist encumbrance. The *nouveau roman* seeks to set itself adrift from the control of any Author-God. Self-referentiality frees the work from the masterful gaze of an all-knowing narrator: there can be no God's eye view in a house of mirrors. From this perspective, as Dorrit Cohn has suggested, new novelists tended to position themselves against Honoré de Balzac less out of particular antipathy to realist detail, but simply because they viewed him as the ultimate representative of narrative omniscience.²⁵

A third interpretation of the mirror figure would emphasise not anti-authoritarianism but textual narcissism, a tendency to close off the 'real' in favour of a 'monologic self-sufficiency'.²⁶ The *nouveau roman* may dissolve the bourgeois strictures of character – as monadic individual, complete with first and last name – but it does not do away with subjectivity. Instead, it manifests an intense self-absorption: the novel gazes in on itself just as its characters do. Indeed, a feature that allies writers as different as Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon and Nathalie Sarraute is the saturation of clock time by lived, subjective time. It is often impossible to tell in works like Beckett's *Unnamable* (1953), Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* (1957), Simon's *La Route des Flandres* (*The Flanders Road*, 1960) and Sarraute's *Vous les entendez?* (*Do you hear them?*, 1972) if what is being narrated is taking place inside or outside the characters' minds. Each of the new novelists experiments with the line between subjective and objective reality, drawing the reader through the looking glass into a world of obsession and fantasy.

One cannot understand the *nouveau roman*'s preoccupation with form and distrust of omniscience without considering it in the context of the reigning intellectual movement of its time. Structuralism swept France in the post-war period, infiltrating and reshaping literary criticism just as it did the social sciences. In his posthumously published lectures on structuralist linguistics, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), Ferdinand de Saussure explained that language is not the natural expression of human meaning, but a matter of structure, difference and exchange: linguistic structures, Saussure argued, are made of *signifiant* (signifier) and *signifié* (signified concept), without inherent link between them. The relation between word and thing is arbitrary, and particular utterances, far from expressing the speaking subject's originality or agency, simply activate the possibilities of an impersonal system that

²⁵ Dorrit Cohn, 'Castles and Anti-Castles', *NOVEL*, 5.1 (Autumn, 1971), 19–31 (p. 24).

²⁶ Ellison, *Of Words and the World*, p. 158.

precedes and exceeds any individual speaker. The sign, as Saussure puts it, 'always eludes the individual or social will'.²⁷ The structuralist linguistic model is an organising force for the *nouveau roman*, which decentres the agentic individual, enshrining the rule-bound and yet arbitrary structures of language in its place.

The declaration that there was nothing outside language became a mantra of the age. And yet if structuralist linguistics is central to the *nouveau roman*, the movement also reached beyond language to explore the novel's relations to performance, and to the aesthetic energies of cinema and theatre in particular. The *nouveau roman* may not have been attuned to the stuff of the 'real world', but it was oriented towards a variety of other media and literary genres. Thus, notably, Sarraute and Pinget worked as playwrights as well as novelists, Robbe-Grillet and Duras were film-makers, and Butor, fascinated by the relation between word and image, extensively wrote about and collaborated with visual artists.²⁸

It is also not entirely the case that the *nouveau roman* banishes plot and enshrines language in its place. Rather, it exposes the workings of narrative, compelling its readers to become aware of their part in the production and maintenance of fictional illusion. Consider, in this regard, the centrality of the detective novel to the *nouveau roman*. Authors like Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras and Michel Butor were drawn to the way this genre solicits the reader's involvement. In the detective novel or *polar*, the reader is placed in the detective's position – we are put to work, made to hunt for clues and signs.²⁹ Robbe-Grillet's debut novel, *Les Gommages* (1953), for instance, is a detective story that rewrites the Oedipus myth: as in Sophocles' tragedy, here detective and murderer are revealed to be the same person. Unlike in Sophocles, however, in Robbe-Grillet, 'the riddle is never properly formulated'. Instead of being organised around a hidden truth, this novel is structured by a void.³⁰ *Les Gommages* actively calls upon the reader to solve

²⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* [1916], trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 17.

²⁸ Butor discusses his desire to 'build bridges' between distinct domains, especially writing and painting, in 'Bricolage: An Interview with Michel Butor', *Yale French Studies*, 84 (1994), 17–26.

²⁹ Ann Jefferson, *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 32.

³⁰ According to Jefferson, Robbe-Grillet is revealing what happens when the strictures of narrative dissolve: plot becomes nothing but a series of incoherent coincidences. *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 24.

what turns out to be an insoluble mystery. As Jefferson puts it, “The novel constantly invites us to ask “why?” but then declines to answer.”³¹

Marguerite Duras’s *Moderato cantabile* (1958) also presents a hybrid of classical tragedy and detective fiction. In this novel, the protagonist obsessively returns to the scene of a crime, ultimately reenacting the murder in pantomime with a stranger, as if trying to understand where love and death connect. And Butor’s *La Modification* (1957) draws implicitly on the detective novel insofar as it too puts its reader in a position of epistemological quest: the narrative, composed in the second person and in the present tense, immediately throws us onto a moving train without explanation, leaving us scrambling for clues about where we are going and where we have been.

These novelists shared certain stylistic, tonal and structural tendencies. Yet one is also struck by the differences between them.³² Consider the cases of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute, two authors seen as particularly representative of the *nouveau roman*. Both were highly self-aware about their projects, and penned critical reflections – Sarraute’s *L’Ère du soupçon* (1956) and Robbe-Grillet’s *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963) – that have often been interpreted as manifestos for the movement. These novelists diverge in striking ways, however. Robbe-Grillet is a visually oriented writer, a cinematic and psychoanalytic thinker for whom erotic fixation is a key narrative device. Sarraute, by contrast, draws narrative energy from the theatrical and the sociological, and banishes eros from her novels and plays, which tend to be structured around scenes of embarrassment and discomfiture rather than desire. If Robbe-Grillet – like Duras, Butor and Simon – is serious, and aspires to the passion and philosophical gravitas of classical tragedy, Sarraute writes in a more comic vein, foregrounding the social mistakes and missteps of her characters. Her novels set aside tragic seriousness, instead exploring the effort and time required to put on a believable show of cultural sophistication (what Pierre Bourdieu, in another Minit publication, famously calls ‘distinction’).³³ Sarraute exposes the elusiveness of refinement and the strange logic by which certain objects (such as the much-debated novel in *Les Fruits d’or*

³¹ Ibid., p. 20.

³² Jérôme Lindon noted in 1962 that these authors shared not a programme but a ‘refusal of certain attitudes about literature’. Lindon, ‘Littérature dégaçée’, *New Morality*, 2 (1962), 105–14 (p. 112).

³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minit, 1979). For an extended reading of Sarraute’s interest in Bourdieusian distinction, see Hannah Freed-Thall, *Spoiled Distinctions: Aesthetics and the Ordinary in French Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 113–42.

(*The Golden Fruits*, 1963) or the ambiguously valuable pre-Colombian statuette in *Vous les entendez?*) get culturally designated as works of art. And while both authors present language itself as a central concern of literature, Sarraute prefers language in context, as a product of use (or what she terms 'l'usage de la parole'). She approaches language pragmatically – not in relation to the signifier's free play, but in terms of everyday practices of exchange. One *does things* with words in Sarraute.³⁴

What perhaps most strongly connects these otherwise dissimilar authors is the emphasis each places on the logic of incompleteness. Each presents the novel itself as a genre in process. Robbe-Grillet constructs multiply-framed scenes such that the reader never has the sense of seeing the whole picture, and is made aware of the partiality of our perspective.³⁵ Sarraute's novels achieve a similar effect via dialogue: her characters strive to interpret the situations in which they find themselves and struggle to evaluate works much like the texts in which we encounter them. In *Les Fruits d'or*, for example, characters debate the merits of a novel also titled *Les Fruits d'or*, arguing about whether it's original or derivative. Does *Les Fruits d'or* within *Les Fruits d'or* offer up self-conscious, aesthetically stylised platitude ('du concentré de platitude') or mere 'platitude in the raw' ('platitude à l'état naturel')? Is it a 'pure masterpiece' or 'insipid mush'? One character – a respected literary critic – is embarrassed when asked to defend his enthusiasm for the novel: he thumbs through the book, hunting in vain for a beautiful passage to cite. Disappointed, he is compelled to disavow his earlier praise.³⁶ The act of evaluating a work of art is thus revealed in Sarraute as a laborious and risky act, laden with potential humiliation.

To harken back to the mirror trope, we might then say that the *nouveau roman* – Sarraute's and Robbe-Grillet's versions of it, in particular – does not really stage formal or subjective self-sufficiency. These texts posit aesthetic or epistemological wholeness only to undermine it. They take us behind the scenes, into the novel's staging area or scaffolding, where the illusions of verisimilitude are produced.

³⁴ Sarraute's interest in pragmatic linguistics is evident throughout her oeuvre, which explores the social force of utterances such as 'c'est beau' ('it's beautiful'). For Sarraute's characters, such phrases alternately garner prestige or disgrace. See her *L'Usage de la parole* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980) for an example of a work explicitly structured around scenes of speech.

³⁵ Jefferson, *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction*, p. 56; Bruce Morrisette, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 140.

³⁶ Sarraute, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), pp. 560, 584, 540, 592.

This emphasis on incompleteness affects the way we perceive these works' relation to historical event as well. The *nouveau roman* is not actually ahistorical, as is often assumed. Rather, in its most compelling instances, it comments metafictionally on its own – and its era's – attempt to repress history. It presents an always-failing struggle to keep the real out, to shield the gleaming surfaces and clean lines of the novel from the messiness of the real, which inevitably breaks through.

History

I have suggested two ways of understanding the rise of the *nouveau roman*: as an institutional phenomenon (in relation to its publishing house) and in formal or aesthetic terms (as characterised by self-reflexivity, presentness, and by the reader's active engagement in the process of constructing narrative). A third perspective returns to the question of context but broadens the frame, positing the *nouveau roman* as a set of forms built to register and refract historical violence. This perspective, in other words, understands the movement not just in relation to literary history but in the context of French history. In this view, the *nouveau roman* is precisely the form that the French novel takes in the wake of Auschwitz, and during the wars of decolonisation.

Here are two ways of thinking about the *nouveau roman*'s relation to history. First, we might say, with critic Kristin Ross, that the *nouveau roman* is historical only in its *refusal* to acknowledge contemporary and recent events.³⁷ Ross makes the compelling case that the gleaming surfaces and inhuman, mechanical quality of the *nouveau roman* represent a broader cultural phenomenon: a post-war attempt to repress historical trauma. Preoccupations with hygiene, speed and the power couple functioned as a screen against the war in Algeria and the banal horror of recent events (the German Occupation; the shame of French collaboration). Ross thus interprets the rise of structuralism – with the *nouveau roman* as its fictional wing – as a defensive gesture. She argues that the *nouveau roman*, and the Robbe-Grilletian novel in particular, is involved in a 'project of redemptive hygiene': it seeks to 'cleanse' literary language so that the world appears – as Robbe-Grillet puts it – as a 'smooth surface, without

³⁷ Claude Simon's 1959 novel, *La Route des Flandres*, explicitly engages with the French military defeat of 1940, and is thus an exception to the general rule of the *nouveau roman*'s suppression of historicity.

signification'.³⁸ Clean, empty, unfeeling, beyond history: this is, according to Ross, the *nouveau roman*'s dream-world.³⁹

An alternative interpretation would be that the *nouveau roman* doesn't simply efface history, but registers its traumas obliquely. One could even say that these seemingly ahistorical, purely *structural* novels are in fact made to register historical violence in new and strange ways. Fredric Jameson (and before him, Jacques Leenhardt) has argued that colonial violence structures Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*. In its atmosphere of obsessive surveillance, its preoccupation with precise measurements and with looking without being seen, the novel registers the power imbalance and dehumanising logic inherent to the colonial system. As Jameson puts it, commenting on the intensely visual quality of Robbe-Grillet's fiction: 'what if the pure look [...] were rather the vehicle for something like a *will to power* over the external world?' Although this novel cannot be said to be 'about' colonialism, Jameson notes, its structure is produced 'precisely as an effort to *repress* that referential content'.⁴⁰ In other words, the novel exposes its own denial of historical context.

While the oppressive atmosphere of the colonial system covertly structures Robbe-Grillet's narrative of erotic fixation, the unresolved trauma of the Second World War haunts Sarraute's fiction, and especially her 1959 novel, *Le Planétarium*. In *L'Ère du soupçon*, Sarraute describes the novel as a battleground or even a no man's land, a 'devastated terrain where author and reader confront one another' ('le terrain dévasté où [l'auteur et le lecteur] s'affrontent').⁴¹ The opening of *Le Planétarium* allegorises this situation, gesturing toward the *nouveau roman*'s troubled relation to historical events more broadly. A woman (Berthe) anticipates the thrill of returning home to her newly redecorated kitchen but, to her horror, finds her apartment in disarray. Workers have left fingerprints on walls; dirt, debris and tools are strewn about. The kitchen is unfinished – revealed as a deconstructed space of labour. Moreover, Berthe is humiliated by her own aesthetic error. Like the embarrassed literary critic in *Les Fruits d'or*, she finds 'a poor, facile,

³⁸ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 75–6.

³⁹ Jean Rouaud also understands the *nouveau roman*'s attack on plot, character, emotion and memory as a symptom of historical trauma, a compensatory gesture. See *Misère du roman: littérature, idéologie, et histoire* (Paris: Grasset, 2015), pp. 41–5.

⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson, 'Modernism and its Repressed: Robbe-Grillet as Anti-Colonialist', *Diacritics*, 6.2 (1976), 7–14 (pp. 11, 10, 13). Jameson is reviewing Jacques Leenhardt's *Lecture politique du roman: La Jalousie d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Minuit, 1973).

⁴¹ Nathalie Sarraute, *L'Ère du soupçon: essais sur le roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 59.

commonplace harmony' ('une harmonie pauvre, facile, déjà vue partout') in place of the 'exquisite harmony' she had expected. Even stranger, soon this interior decorating disaster takes a turn, and Berthe begins to imagine her home as a war zone, destroyed by labourer-soldiers who are merely 'following orders'.⁴² Throughout the novel, similarly inappropriate images of war and occupation crop up, absurdly incommensurate to the bourgeois furniture and real estate dramas they appear to illustrate. The reader is forced to grapple with the mismatch between historical violence and domestic décor without the guidance of any authoritative narrator. Here vanished narrative omniscience is more than a formalist experiment. We recognise these historically specific references, but we do not know what to do with them. It is as if the text itself is having a nightmare.⁴³

As this example demonstrates, the *nouveau roman* broke with the ideal of political commitment, but was not necessarily apolitical. These novels simply tend to represent history indirectly. Unlike André Malraux or Jean-Paul Sartre, novelists like Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute were never didactic. Instead, they subtly make the reader an *accomplice*. In reading them, we find ourselves vaguely responsible for a historical violence never made explicit: we must labour to navigate a world in which images of French colonial repression and Second World War collaboration crop up without warning and without interpretive frame.

Conclusion

Although the advent of the *nouveau roman* was a major cultural event, its reputation has waned over the decades.⁴⁴ Today the *nouveau roman* lives on almost exclusively in the classroom.⁴⁵ Yet we should not underestimate the

⁴² Sarraute, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 341, 344, 346.

⁴³ On the perplexing complicity effects such texts produce, see Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) and Michael Rothberg, *Multidimensional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). On the *nouveau roman* as a 'child of ruins', born in the rubble of war, see Johan Faerber (ed.), *Le 'Nouveau Roman' en questions 7: vers une ruine de l'écriture? (2)* (Caen: Lettres Modernes Minard, 2012).

⁴⁴ On the critical tendency to see the movement as a *bête noire* at fault for what some see as the dry formalism of the contemporary French novel, see Gerald Prince, 'Talking French', *PMLA*, 131.5 (2016), 1489–94 (p. 1490).

⁴⁵ Wolf, *Une littérature sans histoire*, p. 10. Wolf sees the *nouveau roman* as a movement with 'influence but no heirs' (pp. 7–8).

historical importance of this movement – not only for the French-language novel but for the genre more broadly. After all, it instituted a new experience of reading. The *nouveau roman* is the novel as search, as laboratory. As Barthes puts it, we don't 'devour' a Robbe-Grillet novel; instead, our reading habits are relentlessly 'deconditioned'.⁴⁶ And these reading habits extend beyond the page to the very world that surrounds us: the *nouveau roman* invites us to question not only the conventions of the bourgeois novel, but reality itself.

In its realist guise, at least, the novel was the first genre to hold a mirror up to ordinary people, reflecting their everyday perceptions and desires.⁴⁷ The *nouveau roman*, grappling with the vision of human beings that mass warfare and its horrors had wrought, intentionally frustrates our desires – for identification, for narrative authority, for closure. It compels us to reckon with the realisation that the world is neither our possession nor a reflection of our will. Rather, it's unknowable and strange, ultimately indifferent to us. The *nouveau roman* is thus built on the premise of a radical split between human beings and a world that no longer holds or grounds us. As Robbe-Grillet famously declared, 'man looks at the world, and the world does not return his gaze'.⁴⁸

This perception of earthly ungroundedness and precariousness is still keenly relevant today. In the face of a slowly unfolding ecological catastrophe, artists once again seek to understand the place of the human in a world we have damaged almost beyond belief. We read and write with a paradoxical sense both of our culpability and of the non-centrality of human beings in a larger web of life. The contemporary geological turn, with its post-humanist expansion of temporal and spatial scales, is quite different from the bleak post-war anti-humanism that marked the structuralist era.⁴⁹ But then as now, we invent new art forms in uncertain times, in the hope that they might light our way through the dark.

⁴⁶ Barthes, *Essais critiques*, pp. 51, 58.

⁴⁷ On the democratic resonances of this 'redistribution of the sensible', see Jacques Rancière, 'Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed', *Critical Inquiry*, 34.2 (2008), 233–48.

⁴⁸ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 65. Robbe-Grillet's emphasis on the world's indifference finds a parallel in another contemporary literary movement – the literature of the absurd – whose aesthetics derive from the deafness of the world, *ab-surdus*, to humankind's concerns.

⁴⁹ On the notion that ecological crisis requires artists to experiment with spatial and temporal scale, see, for example, Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015) and Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (eds.), *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

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