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Commentary on Yanoshevsky

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In Response to: Galia Yanoshevsky's *Textual Heterogeneity as an Argumentative Strategy*

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I am going to segue into this commentary by recounting a few details of the passing of a famous French publisher and editor, but I hope that the relevance of this event will soon become clear. Jérôme Lindon, the publisher of Éditions du Minuit died on April 9, 2001. This press was founded by Jean Bruller *alias* Vercors and Pierre de Lescure on February 20, 1942 when it published Vercors' resistance novel *Le silence de la mer*. Lindon began working for it in January 1947 and became its publisher at the end of 1948. For 25 years, from 1955 until 1980, Alain Robbe-Grillet was Lindon's sole literary advisor and he and Lindon were responsible for accepting or rejecting all manuscripts. Éditions du Minuit has become synonymous with the New Novel. In fact there exists a famous photograph of many of the authors associated with the New Novel taken in 1959 and which was reprinted by the newspaper *Libération* in its April 3, 2001 edition on the occasion of Jérôme Lindon's death. The paper comments as follows on this picture:

It has since appeared in literary manuals the world over, creating the impression that these New Novelists formed a school. When Jérôme Lindon was asked about the picture, he answered that the writers in it just happened to be there that day. It shows (from left to right): Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, Claude Mauriac (who happened to be passing by), Jérôme Lindon, Robert Pinget, Samuel Beckett, Nathalie Sarraute and Claude Ollier. It is noteworthy that Michel Butor is absent.

This sideways introduction serves to show how certain literary schools and ostensible affiliations between writers are sometimes born in the public's mind. I have little or nothing to say about Yanoshevsky's theoretical framing which I find potentially elucidating and practically useful. However, I am worried that it may have resulted in forcing Alain Robbe-Grillet's manifesto into a straightjacket in which it fits only to some extent, especially since my preamble already points to the somewhat arbitrary and tenuous nature of the relationship of Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Galia Yanoshevsky opens her discussion of A. Robbe-Grillet's argumentative strategy by stating that "Nathalie Sarraute, another declared head of the New Novel, provides a fruitful thematic and verbal source for Robbe-Grillet. He identifies with and against her theories" (p.4). However, she points out that in the manifesto's final version published in 1978 there are "two cases of omission of Nathalie Sarraute's voice" (p.4). According to Yanoshevsky in the first case "Robbe-Grillet [found] it inappropriate to include a text which breaks the monolithic effect of the collection" and in the second case he deletes the "epigraph... [because] a manifesto is also a revolutionary move, an act of foundation [and hence] there is no place in such a move for ancestors, since a revolution annihilates all that precedes it" (p.4).

In strategic terms, this may well be a pertinent argument but historically there is an important element missing in this analysis; namely the second volume of *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui. 2.Pratiques* which contains the published proceedings of the Cerisy colloquium on the New Novel held in 1971. Sarraute makes her tenuous relationship to the New Novelists crystal clear in her paper entitled "What I seek to do" ["Ce que je cherche à faire"]. She begins by stating that she had "to be persuaded by Jean Ricardou to attend" and that she "feel[s] out of

place [at this meeting] and isolated” (p.24). So much for her considering herself one of “the declared head[s] of the New Novel.” However, she does admit to having practices in common with the New Novelists and she quickly lists them :

What I have in common with them is the use of certain forms.... which I began to elaborate ... nearly forty years ago [i.e. in the Thirties]. They differ from those of the traditional novel...because [in our novels] the center of gravity is no longer occupied by the character who has been stripped of all his prerogatives, his typical characteristics and reduced to a simple appearance, a survival, an accidental support system. This anonymous character is often part of a group for which simple plural pronouns are used. The plot is very loose and lacks a sustained chronological order; it breaks up; disintegrates and often disappears completely. Finally, the same scenes are repeated with certain variations and the traditional novel’s dialogue undergoes important transformations. [p.26]

She immediately proceeds to outline the differences between her and the New Novelists and she begins with the most important one: ” description which constitutes the most important element of their novels is nearly totally absent from mine.” Next she stresses the fact that she has never been able to establish a demarcation line between poetry and prose. The distinction that Mallarmé makes, and which has now become commonplace, between “*langage brut*” and “*langage essentiel*” should also be applied to the language of the novel. Like that of poetry, the novel’s language is an essential one.... As a consequence, I don’t share the opinion of those amongst us who think that boring and banal texts can be assembled and cleverly constructed into producing a work of art [p.28-9].

She also objects “to the notion that everything in literature is composed only of language, that nothing exists outside of words and that nothing pre-exists it” [p.30].

Nathalie Sarraute wants to direct her attention

towards those regions where no one can follow her; the silent and obscure regions where words have not yet been introduced; in which language has not as yet exercised its draining, petrifying action, towards that area where there is still movement, virtualities, vague and global sensations and towards the unnamed that opposes a resistance to words and yet calls out to them because it can not exist without them [p.32].

In the “Discussion” that follows she indicates that some of her views are diametrically opposed to those of Alain Robbe-Grillet. She reiterates that “what she has been attempting to do is to bring into existence something that does not exist as yet and requires a new form.” And she concludes: “To say that there is no such thing as a pre-language, that everything starts with words....is to me absolutely unacceptable [p.49]. In response to this assertion, Alain Robbe-Grillet concludes by remarking: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was.....[p.51].

It is not our purpose to contest Yanoshevsky’s thesis that Alain Robbe-Grillet employed certain argumentative strategies because she is correct in that respect and this applies of course also to the examples that she provides. Rather we wish to illustrate that there are significant parts of the puzzle that are missing in her demonstration. Robbe-Grillet was no doubt aware of Sartre’s famous preface to Sarraute’s *Portrait d’un inconnu* in which he had characterized it as anti-novel but in which he had also stressed its phenomenological grounding and her affinity with his

philosophy. When Sarraute speaks of “those vague sensations that need a language” and insists that “her work consists of the struggle between language and the unsaid” we encounter the very familiar Sartrean notion of the intuitive, immediate grasp of reality and realize that her conceptions are so close to Sartre’s thinking that it is for him to speak of her in laudatory terms. In other words, Robbe-Grillet had long since been aware of the differences between his novels and hers. In addition, a strong argument can be made that his writing did not “stem from Sarraute’s” as Yanoshevsky claims and which, after all is said and done, is something that she herself infers when she discusses the importance of Roland Barthes’ laudatory analyses of Robbe-Grillet’s descriptive treatment of objects because that is precisely what is lacking in Sarraute but also that Robbe-Grillet did not see her as the main writer “against” whom he “identifies” [p.4] his theories.

Who are in fact Robbe-Grillet major targets in his manifesto? Let us list them: they are first of all the traditionalists who still view the novel through the eyes of Balzac and believe in stable characters and a clearly defined plot. Secondly, he excoriates the existentialists such as Sartre who in *Nausea* cannot help but describe objects in anthropomorphic terms. An excellent example is Roquentin’s description of the tree’s roots in the Public Park which he describes in terms of “arms”, “claws”, etc. As well, of course, after WWII, when Sartre takes up the cause of “political commitment”, his views are automatically rejected because, according to Robbe-Grillet, the novelist’s primary function is to find a “new way of saying things”. The title of his Dec. 20, 1955 article “Littérature engagée, littérature réactionnaire” published in *L’Express* could not be more eloquent in this regard. The fact that Sartre was becoming a “fellow traveller” of the Communist party makes the adjective “reactionary” seem even more sardonic. Thirdly, the social realists (i.e. the literary commissars of the French Communist Party) who view the novel as having a revolutionary function: if it does not condemn the ruling classes or describe the working classes in edifying terms it is an artistic failure. Once again the title of the article published in *L’Express* of Feb. 21, 1956 “Le réalisme socialiste est bourgeois” says it all. By referring to them as “bourgeois”, Robbe-Grillet does not hesitate to turn the tables on them and to call the communists their own worst enemies. 4) And finally, the so-called humanists who had accused him of being “inhuman” and of ignoring the “profundity of objects”. For the humanists “the world is man” while for Robbe-Grillet: “things are things and man is only man.”

In other words, Robbe-Grillet takes on the leading lights of the postwar French intelligentsia not just because his attacks on them can be seen as a useful argumentative strategy but because he disagrees in a fundamental manner with the traditionalists, the existentialists, the communists and the humanists.

In turn, my criticism of Yanoshevsky could be viewed as an attempt to ignore what she intends to do, namely provide us with examples of the various argumentative techniques that Robbe-Grillet uses. That is true to an extent but my goal is not to undermine in her in that respect but to point out that her focus seems to result in an interpretation of Robbe-Grillet’s manifesto that does not do it complete justice. It strikes me that the framework that she places him into is too narrowly constructed. On a micro-analytic level and if one is willing to ignore the historical context, what she says about Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute, Barthes, Rousseau and, finally, Mauriac may well be pertinent but when these authors are placed in a broader framework and viewed as part of the overall postwar literary picture in France, her comments go strangely awry.

To summarize: Robbe-Grillet specifically targets such “existentialist” writers as Sartre and Camus, Catholic writers such as Mauriac and the communist ones such as Aragon, and hardly

at all Sarraute, because they are the Gods he wishes to overthrow. His charges against them are quite specific as I have pointed out above. The reasons for dropping the references he had made to Sarraute were also quite specific: in spite of certain similarities, her conception of the novel as well as her noveletic practices were quite divergent from those of Robbe-Grillet.

The case of Roland Barthes is of course very different. Together with Jean Ricardou, whom Yanoshevsky strangely never mentions, he becomes the leading advocate of the New Novel and therefore it is not surprising that it was Barthes (but of course also Ricardou) who articulated the precise nature of Robbe-Grillet's writing for the informed public. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that Yanoshevsky might have more fruitfully stressed the constant conflictual and consensual interaction between the theoretical stances of the various literary, religious and political camps and the productions of those writers who adhered to one camp or another. It is true as she says that "literary criticism" as an independent discipline is born in the Fifties but it is equally true that the various literary 'schools' and tendencies in France displayed and continue to display a partisanship that requires a careful and constant discernment of who is associated with whom and with what school or tendency. This is just as true of Sarraute as it is of Mauriac while, all the same, in the case of Sarraute's *L'Ere de soupçon* or her other works, it is just not true that it "hardly relies on the word of others."

For example, Simone de Beauvoir indicated in *Force of Circumstance* [p.283] and in her letters to Nelson Algren [p.557] that she was terribly offended by Sarraute's attacks on her outmoded "literary techniques" in *The Mandarins* and the awful portrait she painted of her in *Le Planétarium* especially because Sarraute had not hesitated to lean on Sartre for a "Preface" to her novel (as we previously mentioned) which helped to advance her career greatly. Unless, of course, as Michel Rybalka, one of Sartre's editors and a great admirer of Sarraute's novels and plays, also asserted recently at the Eleventh North American Sartre Society Meeting held at Wilfrid Laurier University on September 15, 2000; Yanoshevsky intends to imply that Sarraute was not very graceful in admitting later on in her career that Sartre had been of great help to her and diminished the importance of his role steadily.

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