LITERARY RENEWAL AND THE READER : THE MULTIPLE PLEASURES OF LA NOUVELLE FICTION.

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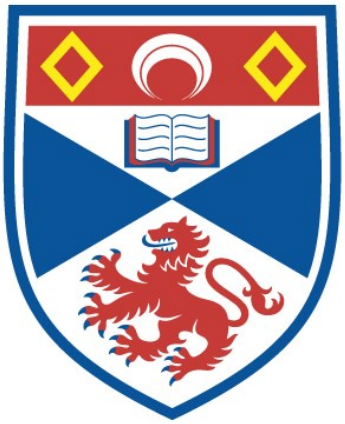
A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



1998

UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

LITERARY RENEWAL AND THE READER: THE MULTIPLE PLEASURES OF *LA NOUVELLE FICTION*

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH

BY JULIAN KÁROLYI

ST ANDREWS

DECEMBER 1997

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To Emma

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank all those who have helped in the preparation of this thesis, in particular, David Gascoigne for his support, guidance and encouragement, as well as the Department of French at University of St Andrews and the Russell Trust for the generous awards that made it possible. I should also like to thank my parents, who introduced me to the subject in the first place, and whose editorial, practical and moral support has been invaluable. My warmest thanks go to my wife, Emma, whose patience and loving encouragement has helped me more than anything else in completing this work.

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I seek to describe, analyse and characterise the contemporary literary movement *La Nouvelle Fiction*, a group that has received no critical attention to date. The movement is examined first in terms of its place in French literary history, taking as reference points both literary and theoretical trends: in particular, the *nouveau roman* and aspects of post-structuralism, with both of which the *Nouvelle Fiction* implicitly compares or contrasts itself.

In Part I, I go on to analyse the theory of the fantastic and detective fiction, both genres that influence the *Nouvelle Fiction*, and provisional descriptions of the *Nouvelle Fiction* are thereby developed based on Umberto Eco's theory of the 'model reader'. I suggest that the *Nouvelle Fiction* demands a particularly active interpretative role of its reader, which is compared in the texts with moral competence in the world.

Through analysis of key narrative strategies in Part II (circular narrative structures, unreliable narrative voices, parody, and *mise en abyme*), the movement is examined for its internal characteristics, and specific differences in practice are established between the *Nouvelle Fiction* and the *nouveau roman*.

In Part III, aspects of reader-reception are examined, first, through the use of Barthes's anatomy of textual pleasure, second, through the relationship between fiction, the world and identity, and thirdly, through discussion of the extent *engagement* is possible in these ludic and interpretatively ambiguous texts. I argue that a picture thus emerges of a fiction that heralds a heightened role for the active reader of texts that represent a renewed relationship with reality and with the

way narrative shapes it, after the reaction against representation that was an important characteristic of the modernist aesthetic.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

La Nouvelle Fiction is above all a movement that has not been shaped by theory. So says Jean-Luc Moreau, the critic who founded the movement, if we may call it that for the sake of convenience, although this term is in danger of suggesting a sense of organisation and programme that is alien to the group's concept of itself. His essay *La Nouvelle Fiction*, published in 1992, formally christened this association of seven writers, Patrick Carré, Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud, François Coupry, Hubert Haddad, Jean Levi, Marc Petit, and Frédérick Tristan. The essay prefaces an anthology of their work, and an interview with each author. In the essay, Moreau repeatedly insists that the movement has no need of theory, no wish to be restricted by a manifesto: 'théoriser la Nouvelle Fiction aurait été la trahir' he states,[1] and goes on to insist:

> De la *Nouvelle Fiction* il n'y a pas de théorie, du moins au sens de programme. C'est pourquoi cet ouvrage ne pouvait être dogmatique ou 'fixiste'.[2]

So what is the *Nouvelle Fiction*, what does it stand for, where has it come from, and what is the meaning of this rejection of theory? In an effort to answer these questions I will discuss a number of theoretical issues of necessity, but I will use existing ideas in an attempt to describe the practice of the *Nouvelle Fiction*; and will try not to presume to 'betray' the movement with any prescriptive theories of my own.

Problematically, the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s lack of theoretical focus suggests, even to its members, a certain elusiveness, even insubstantiality. This is nevertheless a source of delight for a number

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[1]Jean-Luc Moreau, *La Nouvelle Fiction* (Paris: Criterion, 1992), p. 67.
[2]Ibid., p. 20.

of them, even if Moreau himself appears more anxious about it: Marc Petit in particular was amused to point out in interview the difficulty of describing a hard core of *Nouvelle Fiction* theory or practice, and is rather pleased to be part of a group that embraces the disagreement of its members, believing the notion of dedicated artistic militants to be rather dated:

> ...ça ne me déplaît pas de faire partie d'un groupe où les gens ne sont pas d'accord entre eux. Et je trouve que ça donne à la notion de groupe une image tout à fait différente de celle à laquelle on est habitué depuis les avant-gardes du début du siècle, qui se sont plus ou moins formées en référence au modèle bolchevique.[3]

For Petit a sense of the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s identity emerges as much from the various points of divergence amongst its members which form and reform 'des contsellations de types nébuleux' to paraphrase Petit. In the course of this study, some of the extent of this divergence will be examined, along with the nature of these different 'constellations' but ultimately, as Petit and the others acknowledge, it is a certain common view of the world and fiction's place in it that brings the *Nouvelle Fiction* together.

La Nouvelle Fiction was privately named in 1991, but arguably it was born much earlier; indeed its oldest member, Frédérick Tristan, claims his own first work, *Le Dieu des mouches* (1959), as the notional start of the movement, although this obviously predates even the loosest association of the writers.[4] Some have, however, previously collaborated: Châteaureynaud and Haddad were school friends; and several of the other members have collaborated since then on the literary revue *Roman* that appeared throughout the eighties until 1989

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[3]See Appendix 2 for the text of Petit's full remarks on this subject.

[4]Tristan pointed out in conversation that his own work appeared 'au moment où *Les Gommes* ...fait rage' and attributes a certain critical marginalising of his and other similar writing to academic enthusiasm for formal aspects of the *nouveau roman*. See Appendix 1.

and was edited by Coupry. Three were on the committee of *Roman* along with Coupry. His editorials herald to a large extent the article of Moreau, indeed sometimes surpass him in their strident tone. His comments vary in their subtlety, but are typically scathing of an overemphasis on the problems of the writer and of writing itself. He remarks for instance that '[...] ce type de fiction revendiquée ici [dans *Roman*] consiste d'abord à ne pas trop se regarder écrire - maladie qui rongea le roman français depuis Gide'.[5] Châteaureynaud, who also contributed to *Roman*, voices similar concerns as regards a certain sickly narcissism that he fears is endemic in French literature:

> Plus personne ne se soucie, du moins parmi les romanciers qui ont des visées littéraires, de cette notion naguère capitale: soutenir l'intérêt du lecteur. On part du principe qu'on est 'en littérature' et que le lecteur n'est pas censé s'attacher qu'aux vertus purement littéraires. On peut reprocher aux romanciers français d'aujourd'hui d'oublier qu'ils sont sur une scène et qu'il y a des spectateurs dans la salle. Imagine-t-on un artiste de music-hall qui ferait son numéro le dos tourné au public? ... Il y a une sclérose du roman, du moins du roman français, née d'une émasculation générale. Les auteurs ont trop lu, et écrivent comme sous le regard de l'histoire littéraire, divinité omnisciente et tatillonne qu'ils ont intériorisée à la façon d'un surmoi castrateur.[6]

What is striking and indeed characteristic in this statement is the apparent interest in the needs of the reader. Nevertheless, Moreau for his part sees a certain level of introspection as essential to his view of the authors he has gathered together: indeed much of the *Nouvelle Fiction* is in some sense metafictional, creating its effects through the self-regarding techniques of the *mise en abyme* and the constant problematising of the status of the narrator, his identity (it is usually a he in the *Nouvelle Fiction*), his good faith, the value of his accounts. The

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[5]*Roman*, no. 4, p. 160.
[6]Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud, in *Roman*, no. 22, pp. 63-64.

problem lies, then, in finding a balance in the tension between reader and author, a question discussed in Chapter 11.

In resisting the prevailing fashions in French literature and theory, the *Nouvelle Fiction* tends instead to seek inspiration abroad; indeed it is striking in many ways for its 'un-French' character. Once again, Moreau is sharply provocative:

> Par l'inépuisable richesse de son invention la littérature latino-américaine a longtemps représenté chez nous une sorte d'antidote à l'anémie systématiquement cultivée de la nôtre.[7]

He also shows a great admiration for writing in English, something that is evidently shared by Tristan, who frequently dips into popular British culture, in particular of the Edwardian period, for images with which to populate his fictions.

> Mais les grands acquis techniques, les principales recherches dans l'ordre du romanesque, ce sont les Anglo-Saxons qui les ont réalisés. Et avec beaucoup plus d'ampleur que le *Nouveau Roman*.[8]

There then follows a great list of influences, not just Anglo-Saxon, suggesting something of the range of the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s ambition, from Gracián to Bradbury, although precisely which 'grands acquis techniques' and which 'recherches' Moreau is talking about remain unstated, as does whatever the *Nouvelle Fiction* has actually done with them. In the course of this study, I will clarify the extent to which the movement is indebted to Borges and also to Cervantes, justifying at least the 'unFrench' label, though Gallic excitement over Borges is hardly novel. The nature of their interest, however, is not characteristic of the predominantly linguistic enthusiasm that has engulfed much non-Hispanic study of Borges, and turns more on the metaphysical speculation of his work than on any perceived linguistic hermeticism.

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[7]Jean-Luc Moreau, p. 37.
[8]Ibid., p. 45.

Cervantes is respected by the *Nouvelle Fiction* as much for his ability to stretch the boundaries of the *vraisemblable*, as in *Persiles y Segismunda*, as for the quality of his irony in *Don Quixote*. Of course the metafictional games for which such authors are famous are not exclusively Spanish: they have been played in French literature too, by Diderot in *Jacques le fataliste* or in English by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*.

The *Nouvelle Fiction* is an unusual movement in that it is based on a considerable volume of work already written, rather than being a programme for work for the future. Since the publication of Moreau's essay in 1992 there have been a number of new publications from most of the authors, and most recently two collective works on mythic themes that have introduced three new members of the group.[9] Yet the movement was founded on the assumption that the work of its original seven members had in some way enough in common to justify its creation after the event. Indeed, some members seem happy to trace its origins back as far as the first publication of the oldest amongst them, that is to Frédérick Tristan's *Le Dieu des Mouches* (1959). Existing texts, then, are to be considered as much *Nouvelle Fiction* as those written since 1992.

All those members I spoke to insist that Moreau's essay should not be considered a manifesto in any sense, that such a notion is anathema to the spirit of the movement, which thrives on the looseness of its association, and a democratic freedom from the dominance of any single voice. All this, of course, makes the job of the outside observer all the more difficult, as there is no clear statement of intent to examine. Yet it can also be seen as an advantage for the movement, since the critic must attack the questions raised by the fiction itself rather than

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[9]See Bibliography: *La Nouvelle Fiction*: A Comprehensive Bibliography.

measure the distance between theoretical statement and literary practice.

The other problem with analysing a contemporary movement is the constantly changing nature of the target: since the publication of Moreau's catalytic work, the members have published a large number of new works, but since the movement was founded on an existing oeuvre and eschews a prescribed programme for the future, pre-1992 works are as important, if not more so, than those that have come in the wake of its foundation. I therefore give as much if not more weight in this study to the body of work upon which the movement was based as to that which has been written since. Indeed, it would have been impossible to keep entirely up to date, but because of the nature of the movement, that is not a significant limitation.

It has been necessary to be highly selective in choosing texts for analysis: the sheer number of works published is prohibitive, and moreover not all can be considered representative either of the best or of the typical style of the author or the movement. I have therefore concentrated on those works which seemed in some way to exemplify an aspect of the movement and of the author's central preoccupations. This study began as a result of Moreau's essay, and is therefore based on the seven authors who comprised the original core. In fact, since its foundation, three new authors, Francis Berthelot, Jean Claude Bologne and Sylvain Jouty, have been welcomed to the fold, and Moreau himself has been prompted into fictional production of his own. Since Berthelot, Bologne and Jouty only became members very recently, however, it would not have been possible to include them in this study. I have also made no particular reference to the work of Patrick Carré, not because of lack of interest, but simply because he himself regards his work as peripheral to the movement: 'Je ne suis un expert ni en

Nouvelle Fiction ni en fiction tout court' he told me. He has written considerably less than the others, and his writing is not marked to the same extent by the preoccupations and philosophy of the others. Instead I have largely concentrated on fiction that confirms the association of authors, working on the premise that more things unite than separate them, if not in terms of style or even subject matter, at least in terms of their view of fiction and its place in shaping our world.

It is worth noting that the *Nouvelle Fiction* does not explicitly set itself up as a challenge to the *nouveau roman*, nor did any of the authors express special hostility to it in conversation; their way of writing is, they say, simply different: 'La Nouvelle Fiction, c'est vraiment le contraire du nouveau roman' says Haddad.[10] The New Fictionists are not the only contemporary writers to express a lack of interest in the formal experiments of the *nouveau roman*: Modiano in particular is more openly critical of it than any of the writers under discussion.[11] Most, particularly Petit, are, however, disparaging about academic critics who found so much to be excited about in the technical intricacies of the *nouveau roman*, and as a result, they feel, neglected other strands of fiction that stayed with more traditional techniques. Châteaureynaud stated in conversation 'je ne récuse pas du tout le nouveau roman', while suspecting that other members of the group perhaps do.[12] But in that the *nouveau roman* school can be seen as

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[10]See Appendix 4.

[11]Alan Morris states of Modiano that '[he is not] driven by any commitment to extend the formal boundaries of literature, as many of his contemporaries undoubtedly are. "Les gens de *Tel quel* sont pour moi des Martiens', he openly admits, and he finds little common ground with the *nouveaux romanciers* either: "Je ne m'intéresse à aucune école expérimentale et je reproche notamment au Nouveau Roman de n'avoir ni ton vie. (Alan Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p. 7.) Cf Tristan's remarks on the rise of the *nouveau roman* nurtured by academic criticism and Petit's oblique criticism of literature that does not submit to oral reproduction (see Appendices 1-2).

[12]See Appendix 3.

encapsulating to a large extent the essence of the previous modernist aesthetic, and that it is similar in holding together a number of writers with distinct styles, it is a useful comparison to make. It is simply a helpful point of reference when trying to define the distinctive features of the *Nouvelle Fiction*. That said, the title of the movement is obviously an invitation to make such comparisons, dreamt up partly as a joke at a dinner reunion once the group had been formed but had not yet been christened. The term itself was apparently coined by Moreau,[13] who is then obliged in his essay to disclaim any interest in novelty for its own sake: the *Nouvelle Fiction* is new in its outlook, but makes no claims in terms of technical innovation.

My approach to the *Nouvelle Fiction* is shaped by the history of its formation as well as by the preoccupations outlined by Moreau. Firstly, there is the resistance to theory, as already mentioned. Indeed it is clear not only from written sources such as *Roman*, Moreau's essay, and the personal statements from the authors that follow it, but also from my conversations with the authors themselves,[14] that the movement has to a large extent grown out of a discontent with the theory-driven writing that has arguably dominated the recent French literary scene for so long. The *Nouvelle Fiction* has clearly not grown from theory in the same way as structuralism and the *nouveau roman* nurtured each other. On the contrary, the authors of the *Nouvelle Fiction* seem to aspire to steer their writing away from fiction for academics. While structuralism and the *nouveau roman* went hand in

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[13]See Appendixes 1 - 2.

[14]See Appendixes 1 - 4: Petit, for instance, remarks (in Appendix 2): 'Il y a eu la grande période de la littérature des profs. La littérature des profs, ça c'était le nouveau roman. ... et puis alors est venue la littérature des journalistes. Mais il y a une grande différence: un journaliste écrit pour que le lendemain son article serve à emballer les salades. Tandis que nous, nous écrivons pour l'éternité.'

hand, stimulated each other, the *Nouvelle Fiction* makes a point of distancing itself from theory in general.

Secondly, there is an often surprisingly earnest insistence on meaning, on the importance of interpretation, that arguably further serves to distance the movement from such writing as that of the *nouveau roman* where 'content', in so far as one was allowed to perceive it, could appear secondary to formal constraints. Tristan in particular speaks of 'la recherche obstinée du sens,' and this search is characterised by a renewed emphasis on narrative: if the major movement of the previous generation, the *nouveau roman*, was partly characterised by the progressive destruction or subversion of the comfortable reading habits of traditional realism, the *Nouvelle Fiction* is principally distinguished by its whole-hearted embracing of precisely the sort of narrative structures that had earlier been thrown out. But this return to narrative is far from representing a simple return to realism. Moreau also quarrels with the 'naturalistes à la Zola qui entendent remplacer l'artiste par le savant et se livrent à une mise à mort de l'imagination'.[15] The new fictionists are no more interested in reductionist psychology than in what Coupry calls 'le tricotage des mots', and while identity and the self are very much a part of the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s agenda, as shown in Chapter 12, they are typically a vehicle for metaphysical speculation rather than for investigations into the emotional troubles of an individual psychology produced by some realist situation in which the character is placed.

Here, perhaps, is one weakness in the movement, at least, as far as its inspirations and practice are described by Moreau, who attempts to find a model for this narrative of discovery in a revisiting of the adventure novel:

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[15]Jean-Luc Moreau, p. 38.

> Ce que Jacques Rivière appelait de tous ses voeux pour revivifier la littérature française n'est rien d'autre que le roman d'aventures. Le roman d'aventures tel qu'il existait déjà à l'étranger et tel que Stevenson l'avait comme idéalement illustré. ... L'aventure n'est-elle pas pour Stevenson «l'essence même de la fiction»?[16]

What does he mean by this? Does it not all sound rather like a nostalgia for the simplicity of the stories of childhood? Is this notion substantial enough on which to found a new movement, however retrospectively? Indeed, when Rivière was writing, did he not have Gide and his subsequent novels and *soties* in mind? One might dismiss such ideas as old hat, and perhaps the metaphor of the adventure novel is an arguably rather weak way to describe the aspirations of the movement, but it nevertheless conveys something of the renewed concern with linear narrative as opposed to psychological description. It suggests something of the theme of the quest, not necessarily for some goal in the outside world but for meaning within, which may indeed be wedded to outward danger and adventure as well, as in Tristan, or associated purely with personal discovery as so often in Châteaureynaud. All, however, reject what Moreau chooses to call 'le «roman totalitaire» dénoncé par Romain Gary, qui fige l'homme dans une «situation», le détermine dans ce que l'on croit être sa «condition»'.[17] Identity is never a simple, understandable entity, fixed by the world in which it finds itself: the 'characters' of the *Nouvelle Fiction* are constantly in search of a self that corresponds to the changing world around them:

> Pour qu'il y ait fiction véritable il faut nécessairement [une] correspondance entre l'intériorité du personnage et l'espace extérieur ... C'est en cela que réside le secret infracassable de l'oeuvre, ce qui constitue son unité organique. Et cette

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[16]Ibid., p. 36.
[17]Ibid., p. 28.

> correspondance y suffit-elle même vraiment? Ne faudrait-il pas plutôt parler de débordement, d'extension, d'envahissement, le monde obéissant au monde intérieur du héros.[18]

Yet there is never a teleological solution: self and world remain in flux beyond the scope of the text. Such problems frequently populate the musings of Tristan's protagonists; the following is characteristic:

> Ce qui compte, ce n'est pas le fait brut, mais la valeur qu'il prend au regard de l'anecdote. Ce qui compte, ce n'est pas l'ensemble des éléments, mais les éléments qui donnent sens à l'ensemble. ...C'est l'homme qui, par sa présence en tant qu'humain, donne sens à l'événement et éventuellement à l'histoire. Le regard d'un groupe est souvent erroné. C'est pourquoi il faut absolument qu'un individu se lève et témoigne en faveur de l'homme.[19]

Here is that tension between the desire for meaning and the disintegration produced by the inadequacies of narrative, coupled with the earnest concern for human value which is often undermined by an ironic tone.

My approach to the description of the movement is three-fold. In Part I, I discuss the implications of the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s wariness of theory. If the movement rejects a theory of its own to prescribe a programme of works, this does not mean that an outsider cannot make use of existing ideas about reading and interpretation to help describe its works. I therefore make use of some mainstream reader-oriented theories in order to penetrate the practice of the movement. The choice of this kind of theory is not, however, arbitrary: Eco's theory regarding the limits of interpretation has also grown partly from a dissatisfaction with the extremes of French theory that spawned the *Nouvelle Fiction* in the first place. A theory that specifically addresses the role of readers and the limitations of the text is, moreover, particularly suited to

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[18]Ibid., p. 54.
[19]Frédérick Tristan, *Stéphanie Phanistée* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), p. 230.

describing works that are so often preoccupied with the way meaning is created, with the partial nature of perception, and with the relationship between fiction, story-telling and the real world.

After a discussion of the theory of reading that informs my approach, I move to the more specific question, or problem as the *Nouvelle Fiction* sees it, of realism: the *Nouvelle Fiction* is not interested in realism as it is usually understood and thereby represents a departure from France's historical obsession with *vraisemblance* culminating in the extreme subjective viewpoint of some *nouveau roman*. The *Nouvelle Fiction*, however, is characterised by an ambivalent relationship with the real: it is usually more important for a text to be acknowledged first as fiction rather than as any attempt to replicate reality. Some authors, like Tristan, have interested themselves in the boundaries of the believable, in the point at which the reader and indeed the audience of a narrative within the text are invited to question its authenticity and the good faith of the story-teller. Often, as in Tristan's latest novel, *Stephanie Phanistée*, numerous accounts from different narrators of the same or similar events jostle for place in a text where the truth can only emerge provisionally through these partial insights into a reality that remains forever partly obscured.[20]

As a number of the authors are interested in the fantastic or related genres,[21] a form that is particularly relevant to issues of perception and problematic representations of reality, I make a study of the genre following Todorov and Eco's theory. Such a study demonstrates the more active nature of the fantastic's 'model reader' in comparison with other genres because of the way the reader, forced to

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[20]Tristan comments: 'Dans *Stéphanie* il y a ces huit hommes qui racontent des histoires de leur jeunesse et qui,peut-être,affabulent, et la Stéphanie en question n'est pas du tout une femme réelle mais un fantasme.' (See Appendix 1).

[21]Several members of the group have written for an occasional review of fantastic literature, *Le Horla*, another of Moreau's projects.

hesitate between realist and supernatural interpretations, is deprived of the consolation of an overriding order. With reference to works like Levi's *Acclimatation*[22] and Petit's *Le Montreur et ses masques*[23] I show how the fantastic's 'model reader' might be considered a model for the reading of the *Nouvelle Fiction* in general. Moreover, I suggest that in the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s conflation of reality and fiction, a comparison between readerly and moral competence is made in which the reader is forced into a more active role with respect to the text.

In Part II I examine specific narrative techniques that reveal the nature of the movement as provisionally described from the basis of theory in Part I. Through detailed analysis of texts, a picture of the movement emerges, which illustrates as much the divergence of practice amongst the authors as the points they have in common, as well as their varying degrees of radicalism. This serves in part to distinguish precisely how, not just in theoretical intent but in actual literary production, the *Nouvelle Fiction* is distinct from the *nouveau roman*. Once again, the choice of narrative strategies for analysis is not arbitrary but dictated by on the one hand the character and preoccupations of the movement and on the other by the points of contrast these particular areas provide with the *nouveau roman*. For example, the chapter on *mise en abyme* draws directly from Dällenbach's work, *Le Récit spéculaire* which itself relies heavily on the *nouveau roman* as a paradigm of textual reflexivity, and in which he comes to certain conclusions about the future of the phenomenon and of fiction in general which the practice of the *Nouvelle Fiction* invites us to reconsider. The problematic narrator, heralded as more or less a

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[22]Jean Levi, *Acclimatation* (Aix-en-Provence, Alinéa: 1992).
[23]Marc Petit, *Le Montreur et ses masques* (Paris: Mazarine, 1986).

creation of the *nouveau roman* (although of course this was not the case) is also at the heart of the *Nouvelle Fiction*. To what extent can we trust an individual narrator or narrative voice? To what extent does it matter? What does the unreliable narrative voice tell us about the process of story-telling, about perception and our own efforts to make sense of the world?

In Part III, the focus of this study shifts again to questions regarding the external reception of the texts. Chapter 11 continues the comparison with the *nouveau roman* and thereby with much of what might loosely be described as modernist writing in general, by focusing on the extent to which the text offers itself as a vehicle for meaning at all. After all, one of the criticisms levelled at the kind of writing the *Nouvelle Fiction* seeks to avoid is that it tends to go beyond a certain rather indefinite line dividing the private preoccupations of the writer from the comprehension of the reader. I use Barthes' terms invented to analyse *Le Plaisir du texte* to assess how this balance between the reader's and the writer's needs is tackled by the *Nouvelle Fiction*. Moreau sees a danger in 'belle-lettrisme,' in literature that sets itself up as literature, to be admired for its manipulation of fine style and rarefied linguistic intellectualising:

> ... la référence n'est pas le texte écrit, mais la fiction elle-même, et il faut bien au contraire veiller à ce que la littérature ne se *dresse* pas entre le lecteur et le roman, la nouvelle ou le conte. C'est ce renversement qui caractérise au premier chef *la Nouvelle Fiction* ...[24]

On the other hand, he seems anxious to avoid a fiction that simply establishes a relationship with the reader based on realism just in order to subvert it:

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[24]Jean-Luc Moreau, p. 19.

> D'habitude, un romancier éprouve le besoin d'établir des niveaux de vraisemblance pour offrir tout d'abord un sol ferme à son lecteur. Les romans les plus délirants sont d'ailleurs le plus souvent élaborés en opposition à une base très réaliste déstabilisée par quelques miracles appropriés. Il y a une vulgate du commencement: on campe tout d'abord le réel apparemment partagé par tous, puis on entreprend plus ou moins subtilement de l'abîmer.[25]

It is important to note that Moreau just distances the *Nouvelle Fiction* here from writing which starts by settling its readers with a *realist* perspective, although Châteaureynaud arguably proceeds in just this way in *Le Congrès de fantomologie.* The typical *Nouvelle Fiction* text, however, is very often characterised by appealing to some recognisable pattern of reading, although certainly not by any means always realist, and from there proceeding to pull the rug from under the reader's feet by subverting the original reading 'contract' with some twist that suggests we should reappraise the status of the text, take it less or more seriously, re-examine its value. The *Nouvelle Fiction,* as discussed in Chapter 11, is far more obviously 'readable' than its rivals largely because it pursues narrative, the story, as the principal vehicle for meaning, however much it might subvert it along the way. The *Nouvelle Fiction* does not seek to torture its readers with incomprehensibility: 'Le plaisir est roi' Moreau declares;[26] if the text is inscrutable at times, this is all part of the game. The comparison of the *Nouvelle Fiction* with the *nouveau roman* is extended by an exploration of degrees of readability through the theory of textual pleasure developed by Barthes. This further distances the new group from its predecessors in formal terms, demonstrating how its relationship with traditional narrative structures and the balance of *lisible* and *scriptible* is strikingly different from that of the *nouveau roman,* relying heavily on

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[25]Ibid., pp. 53-4.
[26]Ibid., p. 18.

manipulating existing reading responses to create its effect rather than on innovation and radical subversion. Indeed the figure of the reader is very often encoded in the text: interpretation of competing stories or accounts of a shifting reality forms a part of the narrative itself, an image of the quest for meaning that troubles the characters of Tristan, Châteaureynaud and the others. The reader experiences the text as the protagonists experience their world, at once familiar and alienating, recognisable yet inscrutable, open to two or more interpretations to which we are never given an authoritative guide.

The following chapters seek to establish what place personal identity has in this shifting and uncertain view of the world, and how that identity is shaped by the individual interaction with that world. Moreau and particularly Tristan make much of the element of 'quest' in the *Nouvelle Fiction* project, and here I show how that quest includes not just the characters of the fiction but the reader as well. The search for identity is often at the heart of *Nouvelle Fiction* plots and the nature of this quest provides another example of what might be termed the movement's 'postmodern' outlook, by which I mean the characteristically open, teleologically resistant nature of the texts, in which multiple solutions are entertained but rarely ultimately resolved. The problem of uncertain identity is carried over to the text itself, and used as another means to explore ways in which meaning is created. Thus the debate returns to the question of interpretation and the reader's role in deciding between conflicting textual 'identities'.

The movement, as we have already seen, prefers to approach reality by avoiding the limitations of realism, but can it therefore speak of the real world at all? Moreau believes that traditional notions of *engagement* are outdated, and claims a path for the movement that is somewhat at odds with modernist views on the subject, apparently

rejecting the Sartrian notion that some political act of will is required to engage with the world. The New Fictionists are not the only modern writers to be wary of old-fashioned notions of political engagement: Modiano has also remarked 'Si l'on écrit des romans, il faut gommer les préoccupations politiques. Lorsque les écrivains se mêlent de politique, c'est grotesque.'[27] Moreau, for his part, sees the nature of *engagement* in a quite different, apolitical light:

> Importe seul l'engagement de fait, essentiel, dont tous les autres ne sont que des contrefaçons, auquel on ne peut en outre obéir, comme à la recommandation taoïste du non-agir, que dans l'absence de tout acte prémédité et de toute visée d'un résultat. Engagés, nous le sommes tous, effectivement, et la littérature (comme toute autre forme d'art) pourrait bien être là pour nous faire prendre conscience des égarements propres à nous 'désengager' y compris, bien sûr, sous les masques divers de l'engagement. Subvertir le divertissement pour reconduire le lecteur à cet engagement-là, telle est la seule ruse que se permette jamais *la Nouvelle Fiction*.[28]

Moreau notes that Tristan has Delaware, a character from *L'Ange dans la machine*, reflect the same view: 'Votre André Gide a tort sur un point qui me paraît essentiel. Il ne s'agit pas de s'engager. Il s'agit de ne pas se désengager, car engagés nous le sommes tous'.[29] 'Ne pas se désengager c'est précisément reconnaître et préserver en soi cette "dimension de liberté"', adds Moreau.[30] Tristan repeats this sentiment in conversation, claiming to have moved beyond merely political engagement: 'Ce que disait Sartre, ce que disait Gide, c'est qu'il faut s'engager dans une idéologie. Justement, la dissolution de l'idéologie fait que l'engagement est tout à fait d'un autre ordre.'[31] Petit avoids the term *engagement* altogether and describes the purpose or use of writing in more classical terms:

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[27]Quoted in Alan Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p. 7.
[28]Ibid., p. 50.
[29]Frédérick Tristan, *L'Ange dans la machine* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1990), p. 21.
[30]Jean-Luc Moreau, p. 50.
[31]See Appendix 1.

> pour moi écrire c'est distraire et instruire. Et instruire en distrayant. Mais le but, c'est d'en savoir plus; mais pas au sens de la formation, d'en savoir plus sur qu'est-ce que c'est la bonne vie, qu'est-ce que c'est la sagesse. Le seul intérêt de la littérature est de fournir une approche subtile à la sagesse, qui ne soit pas des recettes, qui soit des ouvertures d'esprits pour les personnes singulières.[32]

Haddad goes further and suggests that he is only interested in Sartre where 'il a oublié d'être engagé mais où il a été complètement lui-même.'[33] Ultimately the *Nouvelle Fiction* would appear to aspire to something beyond what is generally understood by *engagement*, to a conflation of reality and fiction which liberates the imagination of its readers, making the business of interpretation a matter for life and not just for books.

So what, in short, does the *Nouvelle Fiction* claim to stand for? There is the 'recherche obstinée du sens' of which Tristan speaks, the renewed interest in narrative and in the relationship with the reader, and a reluctance to be bound by any theoretical standpoint other than that of resisting the limitations of realism and the wilder reaches of linguistic and literary vanity, from which, they argue, French literature has suffered for too long. There is the aspiration to write fiction that achieves more than the mere reflection of the obsessions of the author's own neurosis, but communicates with the reader and creates and engenders a form of engagement with the text that liberates us to explore and create new worlds rather than condemning us to the limitations of language. Such ambitions might indeed be traced back to Cervantes as well as Diderot and Sterne. This thesis will examine in detail what these claims mean in literature now, and indeed in the

[32]See Appendix 2.
[33]See Appendix 4.

context of what might be called a postmodern anxiety, and how, if at all, the *Nouvelle Fiction* seeks to change our view of this world.

PART I

READING *LA NOUVELLE FICTION*

CHAPTER 2

THE ROLE OF THE READER IN THE *NOUVELLE FICTION*

Just as the practice of the *nouveau roman* developed hand in hand with the theory of the structuralists in the sixties, the next organised movement to emerge from France, the *Nouvelle Fiction*, has also advanced in tandem with contemporary theory, though happily, some would say, not the French variety on this occasion. Whilst Paris has been side-tracked by the 'frivolity and transience' of French intellectual fashion,[1] the *Nouvelle Fiction* is characterised by its rejection of post-structuralism. Indeed much of these writers' work parodies the wilder positions of latter-day theory, and despairs over what it has done to French writing. Rather, the writers have more in common with what is arguably more mainstream theory as exemplified in the work of Iser and Eco, where the notion of the reader's freedom is limited by the parameters set up by the text. Readers, in principle, may be free to make a text say anything they like, but if they break the pact with the text, then their response will be irrelevant and unconvincing, and their views will be forgotten.

It is this point that unites the ideas of mainstream reader response theorists. Poststructuralist criticism has often led to a posture of absolute interpretative freedom[2]. Both Iser and Eco, however, reject

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[1]Paul de Man characterises it thus in his introduction to H.R. Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minnesota: The Harvester Press, 1982.) To be fair to de Man, this remark is only the starting point for an argument demonstrating that these qualities are at the centre of good theory, but I am happy to take de Man's more widely publicised advice and ignore his intentions on this occasion.

[2]There are an enormous number of examples that support this position; here are two of the less jargon-laden and indigestible:

> What we have here then are two critics with opposing interpretations, each of whom claims the same word as internal and confirming evidence. Clearly they cannot both be right, but just as clearly there is no basis for deciding between them. One cannot appeal to the text, because the text has become an extension of the interpretative disagreement that divides them. (Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 130.)

the 'anything goes' version of post-structuralist criticism, and Eco in particular stresses the difference between 'using' and interpreting a text. Someone might use a text for a particular ideological end, for parody or for pleasure, bringing to it a whole set of cultural or personal frameworks alien to the text itself. Eco gives the example of a line from Wordsworth,

A Poet could not but be gay

'A sensitive and responsible reader' he states, 'has the duty to take into account the state of the lexical system at the time of Wordsworth. At that time 'gay' had no sexual connotation, and to acknowledge this point means to interact with a cultural and social treasury'.[3] One can use the text to make a joke about homosexuality, but this is to introduce extratextual cultural baggage in the service of the *intentio lectoris*, as Eco calls it, that is, to manipulate the text to the reader's ends, without due regard for the limitations placed upon interpretation by the text. To *interpret*, we must seek out the *intentio operis*, the intention of the text, the term Eco uses to describe these parameters generated by the text itself to limit its possible meanings. This, however, is quite a different thing from worrying about the empirical author's conscious or unconscious intentions, from falling into the intentional fallacy. It means simply that interpretation is limited not by any individual who 'privileges' his reading over others, but by the limits of language contained by the text.[4]

> The statement that 'authors make meaning', though not of course untrue, is merely a special case of the more universal truth that readers make meaning... a poem really means whatever any reader seriously believes it to mean... the number of possible meanings of a poem is itself infinite. (Robert Crosman, 'Do Readers Make Meaning?' in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R Suleiman & Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 151 & 154.)

[3]Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 68.

[4]This argument goes to the heart of the difference between Eco and the more radical theorists: as John M. Ellis notes (in *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p.119), 'One of the most important errors of the thinking

Eco goes on to approach the same issue with different terminology, closer to that used by Iser, for instance. He suggests that 'a text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader'.[5] The 'model reader', akin to Iser's 'implied reader', is a notional reader awake to the possible interpretations justified by the text. 'The empirical reader is only an actor who makes conjectures about the kind of model reader postulated by the text'. By the same token, the empirical reader constructs a 'model author', not the empirical one, but another notional being to whom they impute the intention of the text.

This model of the reading process can be summarised diagramatically in a way analogous to Todorov's formulation of what is essentially the same process:

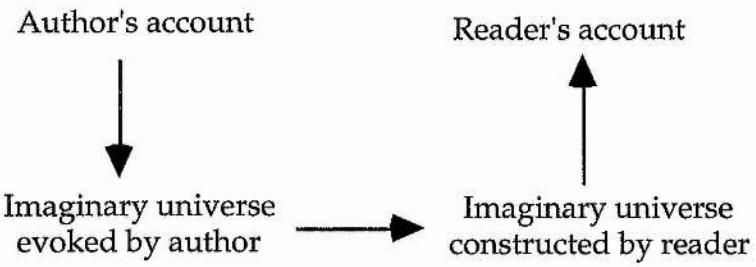

Fig. 1. Todorov's diagram[6]

associated with the word *textuality* lies in the failure to see that there are *two* steps, not one, involved in the notion that a text must be liberated from its author to mean whatever it is taken to mean. There is, first of all, liberation from the author; but second, there is liberation from the rules and conventions of the language it is written in.' Eco clearly is not prepared to make that second dubious step whilst Fish et al. are.

[5]Eco, p. 64.

[6]Tzvetan Todorov, 'Reading as Construction' in *The Reader in The Text*, ed. Suleiman & Crosman, p. 73.

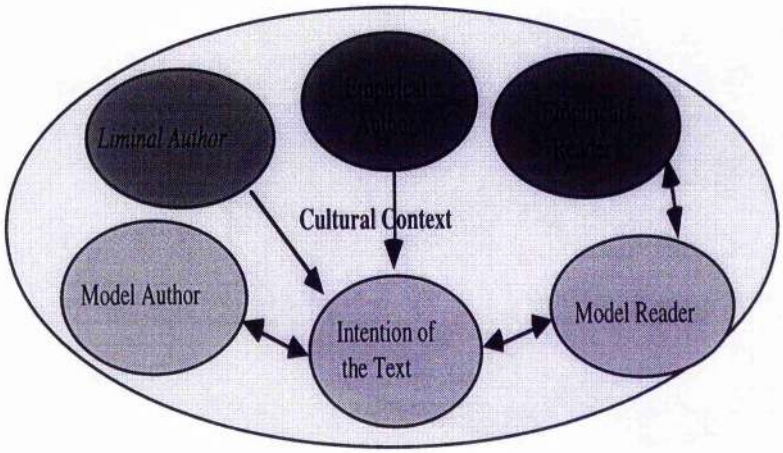

Fig. 2. Eco's scheme

Todorov's diagram is reproduced faithfully, but in my rendering of Eco's ideas I have made use of two-way arrows to indicate the more complex relationship posited by his scheme. The empirical author is the origin of the system, but after the initial creative contribution plays no further role in the reading process, other than to represent a clue to the cultural context within which the text operates. The arrows between 'model author', 'intention of the text' and 'model reader' illustrate how all are products of each other: the model reader, awake to the possibilities of the text, is at the same time constructed by the intention of the text. The model author is the perceived 'source' of this intention, whilst really being the personification of it. Into this system the empirical readers bring their own knowledge and literary competence, thus individualising their readings. But the text provides restraints to this process: the readers are obliged to respect the whole system, including the cultural context that envelops it. If they are willing to respect it, the text will also form its empirical readers in its own image, teaching them its own systems of interpretation, helping

them to become its own 'model readers'. 'Thus every act of reading is a difficult transaction between the competence of the reader (the reader's world knowledge) and the kind of competence that a given text postulates in order to be read in an economic way'.[7]

Eco's model is an improvement on Todorov's since it accounts for the two-way hermeneutic flow between reader and text as interpretation constructs text and vice versa[8]. It also makes clear the subtlety of Eco's position with regard to the value of the author. He states that 'it can look too crude to eliminate the poor author as irrelevant to the story of an interpretation'.[9] First, the empirical author is a useful sign, as has been mentioned, of the cultural context to which the system belongs. An anonymous text must do its best to intimate its cultural context by itself. But Eco also tentatively puts forward the idea of the 'liminal author' (marked in italics on the diagram), a shadowy figure between the real and the model authors whom he defines as 'the Author on the Threshold - the threshold between the intention of a given human being and the linguistic intention displayed by a textual strategy'.[10] Eco cites an Italian love poem by Leopardi to illustrate this: the poem is filled with the sounds of the name of the poet's beloved, including an anagram of it for the last word. Here, the empirical author's intention is quite explicit from the very title ('A Silvia') and it would be absurd not to take this into account. Knowing it to be a love poem it is then reasonable to assume that the poet was obsessed, either consciously or unconsciously, by Silvia's name, and that as intention became text this obsession materialised in the form of sound patterns. We can therefore reasonably comment on the fact of these sound

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[7]Eco, p. 68.

[8]It should be made clear at this point that we are not talking here about the kind of 'textuality' discussed in note 4; more precisely an interpretation *re*constructs the text in one of its possible incarnations. That is not to say that these incarnations are infinitely variable.

[9]Eco, p. 66. A kind dismissal of deconstruction's 'death of the author'.

[10]Ibid., p. 69.

patterns without crediting them to conscious intention - they come from the liminal author. It would be overinterpretation, however, to look for acrostics of the word 'melancholy' in Leopardi's poetry when 'the whole of his poetry tells at each verse, literally and beautifully, how melancholic he was'.[11] It is 'uneconomical', in an interpretative sense, to seek out meaning in such a way when the same meaning is available from a more obvious source.

I propose to adopt Eco's terms for the purposes of this study for reasons which will become clear when we get to the analysis of the *Nouvelle Fiction* texts themselves, and to see how this theory is translated into a semi-theological allegory in which terms like 'model reader' take on a moral edge.

Before that, however, it would be as well to look at some of the typical post-structuralist critiques of Eco's position, first to test it out, and second, because it is this sort of debate between provisional acceptance of knowledge and complete relativism that is the subject of parody in some *Nouvelle Fiction* texts that will later be examined. I will be making use of Jonathan Culler's arguments for this purpose because he has answered the specific points Eco has made in the same volume.[12] He also seems, among the advocates of deconstruction, to be one of the few interested in putting forward an argument clearly. This may be to deprive deconstruction of much of its fascination, which stems precisely from its rhetorical obscurity, but that cannot be helped.

Culler's main objection is that 'interpretation', as Eco attempts to define it, leaves all the interesting questions unaddressed. 'Like most intellectual activities, interpretation is interesting only when it is extreme',[13] he says. One is tempted to agree with Stefan Collini that this statement runs 'the risk of seeming to invoke a thinly adolescent

[11]Ibid., p. 72.
[12]Ibid., pp. 109-123.
[13]Ibid., p110

notion of what counts as "interesting"',[14] but to be more charitable, Culler is suggesting that it is only 'extreme' forms of interpretation that deal, not just with what a text says in the most obvious ways, but also with how it says it, what this says about the text's cultural context and what aspects of experience the text and its context leave out. Culler retorts that the charge that he is claiming that meaning is limitless is unfair; meaning, on the contrary, is context-bound, but the possible contexts within which interpretation occurs are unpredictable and limitless. To fail to engage with the 'hierarchical oppositions which structure Western thought' is 'to risk complacently abandoning the enterprise of critique, including the critique of ideology',[15] and it is precisely this fruitful enterprise represented by deconstruction that Eco seeks to stigmatise as 'overinterpretation'. To accept Eco's view would be to give in to an authoritarian establishment restricting meaning according to its own needs, oppressing new ideas.

A horrifying prospect, if it were true. This passage is however characteristic of much deconstructive writing in that we find false claims mixed with true but simple statements dressed up in bold revolutionary language. To start with the proposition that interpretation is only interesting when extreme: what does this actually mean? An absurd interpretation may be interesting in the sense that it is amusing or curious or instructive (it teaches us how not to interpret), but it is not interesting in the sense that it offers a valuable insight into the text in question. Its value lies precisely in its failure to perform this task. But should we take extreme to mean absurd? If we are to understand by extreme not 'unreasonable' but 'unorthodox though coherent and carefully argued' then Culler's claim is quite true, but he is simply describing normal interpretative practice. All interpretations

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[14]Ibid., p20
[15]Ibid., p. 122.

are accepted only provisionally, pending a new account of the work that is able to account for it in a more 'economical' way, or that can account for aspects of it that previously appeared to be in conflict.

For instance, in the past the Spanish medieval text *El Libro de Buen Amor* has been described both as an essentially pious work and as a licentious love manual. The former interpretation accounts for the book's bawdiness by seeing in it the didactic depiction of vice, whilst the latter accounts for its piety as parody. Neither reading could eclipse the other since both were able to cite passages that resisted the rival reading. But it is possible to reconcile the opposing camps by seeing in this contradiction an expression of that central medieval dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual that has shaped so much of our thought since. The intention of the text then emerges as exemplary, not in the narrowly moral sense, but in the sense in which Cervantes would have understood it, namely, that it celebrates the pleasures of life and contradictions in human nature, and observes ironically man's weaknesses, knowing that moralising rarely achieves anything. The solution to the interpretative dilemma is thus 'extreme' only in the sense that it approaches the problem from a different perspective instead of attempting to solve it by coming down on one side or the other. In fact, it is a typically liberal fudge, striking simply for its moderation.

This example shows how fresh information from the cultural context can be brought to bear to produce a new, improved interpretation. It is only valid though because the information comes from within the system - only the way it is employed in that system is contributed from outside, from the reader. If Culler is proposing this, then we can have no quarrel with him, since he is simply describing good 'conventional' criticism. But his claim that 'context itself is boundless' causes further problems. Does this amount to saying 'we

cannot know what the future may hold'? If so, it is another true but trivial statement. Of course we cannot predict what new contextual information may come to light or in what ways it will be put together by future readers. No critic claims his interpretation to be definitive: as has been said, any interpretation is open to modification, indeed this is the way normal criticism proceeds (for instance, I compared Todorov and Eco earlier in this chapter, found Eco's theory more satisfactory, and proceeded to work with it). Alternatively, if context is really boundless, is Culler suggesting that, for instance, *El Libro de Buen Amor* might usefully be read as a computer manual? This would be extreme, certainly, but also desperately uninteresting, making a nonsense out of any attempt to understand anything.

It becomes clear, then, that post-structuralist objections to Eco's theory evaporate under scrutiny. Either they can be shown to be based on false premises, or they emerge as restatements of conventional theory claimed as the exclusive property of deconstruction. In fact, what these objections veil is what Leonard Jackson calls 'textual mysticism',[16] that is, the inclination evident since Barthes to revere the written word as a kind of god. Culler's closing remarks are telling: 'It would be sad indeed if fear of 'overinterpretation' should lead us to avoid or repress the state of wonder at the play of texts and interpretation'.[17] Note how sharply this contrasts with Culler's claim for deconstruction as 'the enterprise of critique, including the critique of ideology'. Now we are asked not to come to useful working conclusions about anything, but rather to perpetuate the endless play of signification in case we trouble our 'state of wonder'. In uneasy tandem with the dynamic, revolutionary rhetoric of deconstruction, then, goes this sort of linguistic romanticism, profoundly hostile to any

[16]Leonard Jackson, *The Poverty of Structuralism: Literature and Structuralist Theory* (London: Longman, 1991).
[17]Ibid., p. 123.

theory based on empirical observation that seeks inevitably to limit the field of enquiry by rational means. It has been necessary to take up so much space with these objections, not because of the strength of their arguments,[18] but because the intellectual climate that bred the writers I am going to be discussing was rife with the sort of positions that Culler exemplifies. Their work will be shown to parody the relativism of post-structuralism, its textual mysticism and its childish, self-generated iconoclasm ('we, the rebels, are going to make the text say everything that you, the grown ups, the Establishment, don't want it to say'). I will also show how well the theory of reader response developed by Eco accounts for the literary practice of these writers and how the fictionalisation of the theoretical wrangles I have outlined above bring far older philosophical problems to the surface. But first I propose to attempt to find a place for the *Nouvelle Fiction* within a brief history of theory in French literature.

[18]Culler offers, in his "Defence of Overinterpretation", (Eco, p120), just such an argument. In essence: 'because you waste so much time demonstrating the poverty of deconstruction, it must be alive and well'.

CHAPTER 3

PLACING THE *NOUVELLE FICTION*

French writing is often characterised as progressing steadily towards an ever-truer realism: Racinian classical realism gave way to romantic realism, the blending of the sublime and the grotesque, and this in turn to the mimetic realism of the 19th century. In this century, the modern novel since Proust has questioned our experience of, for instance, time and disrupted the so-called traditional narrative forms, in an effort to bring our stories about reality closer to the way we actually experience it. The theoretical debate has centred on the extent to which a narrative imposes a unified vision of the world upon its readers. For Robbe-Grillet, the 'traditional' novel, exemplified by the works of Balzac, seeks to establish a world that 'makes sense', that can be understood through the application of universal truths about humanity. 'The invitation to paraphrase, to interpret rationally, in other words, constitutes a philosophical statement about reality',[1] that is to say, the writing of Realist fiction at all is in itself a claim about the nature of the world, a claim that Robbe-Grillet and other modern writers, it would seem, sought to undermine. They are what Nash calls anti-Realists, Realism here being understood as referring to 19th-century mimesis rather than to any literature with some elusive claim on truth.

The relationship between 19th-century mimesis and realism with a small r can perhaps better be understood in terms of an axis of objectivity. The great stories of 19th-century literature aspire primarily to objectivity, we are told: the reader is presented with a God-like vision of the narrative universe, in which the thoughts and feelings of

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[1]Christopher Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide* (London: Longman, 1993, originally published as *World Games*, 1987).

all the characters can not only be seen but also understood in terms of their relationships with other characters. The narrator is infallible, and our only source of knowledge. But, in an untheological age, this paternalism on the part of authors and their narrators has been deemed increasingly unacceptable: the narrator must abase himself in front of his audience, making his untrustworthiness and unreliability ever more apparent. The narrative thus becomes more subjective, in that it is personalised, but by this token, it is also more *real*, because it is more like actual experience: partial, fragmentary, refracted through individual psychology etc. In fact, this view of 19th-century mimesis is rather crude, and overlooks the numerous subtly 'problematic' narrators that it produced. This was a characteristic problem in the past with modernist criticism of 19th-century Realism. Unamuno, for instance, appears to have completely misunderstood the role of the ironic narrator in Galdós's *Fortunata y Jacinta*, and saw in its author a complacent confirmer of middle-class prejudice. Modernism is nevertheless partially founded on such assumptions about Realism, and on the feeling that narrators should wear their limitations and discontinuities much more visibly on their sleeve than ever before.

This shift in preoccupation for the novelist is generally regarded as symptomatic of a profound existential malaise affecting the modern world: Sartreian nausea overcomes us as we face the brute reality of things, the shapelessness of real life: 'Quand on vit, il n'arrive rien... Il n'y a jamais des commencements. Les jours s'ajoutent aux jours sans rime ni raison, c'est une addition interminable et monotone... Il n'y a pas de fin non plus...'[2] It is above all this aspect of the realist narrative that is objected to in the modernist text: the desire to turn life into a story at all is essentially unrealistic, since stories do not correspond to

[2]Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection Folio,1970), p. 62.

our actual experience of life. Things do not come to a neat end, they just go on relentlessly. Fiction that insists on imposing a reassuring structure on its subject is deceiving its readers, feeding our illusions of some kind of universal meaning to be found in the formless void.

So how does the *Nouvelle Fiction* fit into this history of literature? To look at Moreau's manifesto, it would seem as though the movement is curiously reactionary. Moreau appeals for a return to the 'roman d'aventures', condemns French fiction for its excess of intellectualism, and searches for inspiration from Latin America: 'Par l'inépuisable richesse de son invention la littérature latino-américaine a longtemps représenté chez nous une sorte d'antidote à l'anémie systématiquement cultivée de la nôtre.'[3]

But is this anything more than a sort of nostalgia for the firm ground of the past? Does the *Nouvelle Fiction* herald simply a return to the illusionary security of the traditional authoritative realist narrative? Châteaureynaud would almost seem to suggest as much when he states 'Nous acceptons les règles du jeu, presque les règles de Balzac...C'est naïf: je veux véritablement raconter une histoire; je veux que les personnages la vivent et que les lecteurs la vivent à travers les personnages. Tout ça, c'est très classique.'[4] In fact, the revisiting of tradition has been a characteristic feature of much fiction recently labelled 'postmodern'. This, beyond being simply 'what came after Modernism' is perhaps best understood as a moving on from the modernist discontent with the past that has always seemed in danger of appearing no more than a gesture of rebellion. Umberto Eco remarks in this context that 'postmodern discourse[...] demands, in

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[3]Jean-Luc Moreau, *La Nouvelle Fiction* (Paris: Criterion, 1992).
[4]See Appendix 3.

order to be understood, not the negation of the already said, but its ironic rethinking.'[5]

The *Nouvelle Fiction* does not naïvely seek to re-establish the concept of character as it might appear in a traditional realist novel described by Robbe-Grillet; indeed identity is typically an uncertain, fragmentary affair in a *Nouvelle Fiction* text. But whilst a merely *modern* work is content to show us this fragmentation in all its gory detail, the postmodern is concerned with helping us to live with it.[6] The old certainties may have been swept away, they say, but what remains? To return to the question of realism, this new emergence of narrative, although a reaction in formal terms, may indeed be a step further along the road from subjective objectivity to objective subjectivity: to celebrate the way man creates meaning through the organisation of brute reality into a coherent form is to understand how we inevitably *do* perceive our universe, through the patterns established by tradition, and through forms arrived at through social convention and agreement. No matter how much one may insist on the absurdity of life, people will go on finding meaning in it all the same. Moreover, the danger of a programme of rebellion is that in the end one is left

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[5]Umberto Eco, *Reflections on "The Name of the Rose"*, trans., William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1985).

[6]Whilst the New Fictionists are understandably reluctant to be pigeon-holed, it was actually Châteaureynaud who used the term to describe himself in interview with Moreau (Moreau, p. 212). He further explained himself in conversation with me:

> C'était une boutade ...ce que je voulais dire c'est que, étant post-moderne je voulais revenir en arrière. Le modernisme en soi ne m'intéresse pas beaucoup. J'ai l'impression qu'il y a une sorte de modernité automatique, sans réflexion, qui est une perte de temps, qui est une diminution dans l'air du temps. ... Comme de la musique qui n'en est pas vraiment parce qu'il n'y a pas de notion de plaisir dedans, il n'y a pas de concordance entre les progressions mathématiques qui constituent la musique et qui produisent chez l'être humain un plaisir esthétique. Je ne parle pas volontiers de tout cela parce que je sais que j'ai l'air d'une sorte d'homme de province, mais la musique comme ça n'est pas vraiment la musique ...c'est une manière d'occuper l'espace. ... C'est un peu ça que je voulais dire avec mon histoire de post-moderne: c'est que le modernisme, à mon avis, c'est dépassé et désormais caduque. (See Appendix 3).

with nothing more to rebel against; rebellion becomes itself a new conservatism, a permanent posture of revolt with no aim. In the end, the only thing to do is to enjoy the old forms of narrative that give form to the chaos, but to do so *knowingly*, savouring our ironic superiority, whilst re-experiencing the old pleasure of the text. We might even draw comfort from the thought that the rich multiplicity of meaning is our own creation, the great achievement of human invention, rather than a dogma offered by an outside authority.

The paragon of such writing that gives new form to our old pleasure is surely Borges, whose work is rich in parody of a library of literary borrowings. Borges does not attempt to discard the past, realising that books can only speak amongst themselves. He practises what Eco calls an 'ironic rethinking', and it is precisely such an attitude to which the *Nouvelle Fiction* would seem to aspire. Indeed, a number of its authors express an indebtedness to Borges, not only in conversation with Moreau, but also within their fiction.

Like Borges, the writers under discussion do not seek a return to 19th-century mimesis. This may have been the starting point for modernist rebellion, but the postmodern return can be broader in scope. It can embrace all the strangeness of the world 'discovered' by modernism and continue to explore the fringes of perception. In both Borges and the *Nouvelle Fiction*, this has meant an interest in the fantastic. This is another term which is much used and difficult to pin down, but for the moment we might roughly understand it as concerned with events which are strange, unreal or supernatural.

How does the re-emergence of the fantastic square with the claim that this new literature offers a 'truer' realism than before? Is not realism necessarily removed from the fantastic? In fact, the fantastic is a singularly appropriate genre for contemporary literature to take up.

From a historico-sociological perspective, it would seem to reflect a popular preoccupation with UFO's, the supernatural, the rise of assorted 'New Age' religions, in short, the symptoms of a society in search of meaning in a world deprived of the security of an orthodoxy of order. The fantastic, it is sometimes suggested, offers essentially a form of escape: Neil Cornwell, for example, starts his book *The Literary Fantastic* with the words: 'It might be thought that ten years of Thatcherite government in Britain would be more than enough to send anyone fleeing to the realms of escapist literature'[7]. The fantastic, however, offers more than simply escape from the real world: Borges is often misrepresented, for instance, as detached from worldly concerns, thus attracting structuralist interpretation from critics like Sturrock who see in him a paragon of linguistic hermeticism, while provoking righteous indignation from Marxist critics like Gerald Martin, who despise his apparent aloofness, his failure to muddy himself visibly with proletarian or racial 'issues'. In fact, Borges's fantastic does elicit a concern for the real world in his own oblique and ironic way. It is enough to look at his famous story, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, and to note its date of publication, 1940, when Hitler was at the height of his powers, to understand how the apparently most removed imaginings can seem strangely relevant. The story reveals not the consolation of a universe rendered ordered by the human mind, but its horror. Though reality may be ordered, Borges suggests, it is an order that must always transcend our understanding. Of the order of Tlön, which he casually compares to Nazism, Borges says 'encantada por su rigor, la humanidad olvida y torna a olvidar que es un rigor de ajedrecistas y no

[7]Neil Cornwell. *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, p. ix.

de ángeles'[8]. Ultimately, Borges the narrator retreats into his ivory tower to find refuge from the bogus order of Tlön, but in Art he finds only the pleasure of what he knows to be an illusory man-made order; he does not mistake it for anything more. Borges's story appears to be about an imaginary, fantasy world; in fact it is alarmingly close to our own. Thus out of the strangeness of the unreal comes a new kind of realism, what Brooke-Rose calls a 'fantastic realism',[9] that, rather than naturalising the world around us, makes us aware of its unfathomable strangeness. Rather than express the breakdown of order through the breakdown of narrative, the post-modern writer steps out of mimesis altogether and writes about other worlds the better to express the uninterpretability of this one. To see ourselves in the unreal world of Borges is to understand just how odd the human condition really is.

The fantastic as a genre is also *structurally* suited to reflect the uninterpretable modern world. To understand this we must look first at the theory of the fantastic developed by Todorov, who defines the fantastic in a way that does not depend on the subject matter, but rather on the attitude of hesitation that the reader adopts.

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[8]"Captivated by its discipline, humanity forgets and goes on forgetting that it is the discipline of chess players, not of angels." Jorges Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", in *Ficciones*, (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores S.A., 1956), trans., Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1962), quoted here from new ed. (London: Calder Publications Limited, 1991), p. 33.

[9]Christine Brooke-Rose, *The Rhetoric of the Unreal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

CHAPTER 4

THE FANTASTIC

The Theory of the Fantastic

Todorov sees the genre as essentially defined by the three requirements of unequal weight it makes of the reader: first, the reader must hesitate to the end between a natural and supernatural explanation of events. Second, the hesitation may be shared by the main character, thus becoming one of the themes, and inviting identification by the 'naïve' reader. Thirdly, the reader must adopt a certain attitude to the text, eschewing poetic or allegorical readings, since these interfere with the hesitation which relies on the reader's integration into the world of the characters. The role of the reader is therefore implicit in the text, he says: 1 and 3 constitute the genre, and 2 is fulfilled by most examples. Todorov aims to create a structural entity that depends not on the inclusion of a particular subject (ie the supernatural) - Todorov points out that it can occur in epic without provoking hesitation - but on the ambiguity as to its interpretation. He goes on to use the following schema to locate various kinds of text:

1	2	3	4	5
Uncanny	fantastic-uncanny	fantastic-marvellous	marvellous	

Fig. 3. An approximation of Todorov's diagram.[1]

[1]See Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), p. 49.

The pure fantastic is represented by the central line (3), that separates adjacent genres. Only those stories that sustain the uncertainty and do not provide an explanation either way remain in the narrow domain of the pure fantastic; most texts effectively fall into one of the adjacent genres:

1. The Uncanny: events are not supernatural but strange or horrific, and the emphasis is on the reader's fear rather than on a sense of hesitation.

2. The Fantastic-uncanny: supernatural events eventually receive a natural explanation.

4. The Fantastic-marvellous: supernatural events are eventually accepted as such.

5. The Marvellous: supernatural events are immediately accepted as such, and the emphasis is on the reader's wonder rather than hesitation.

There are, however, some practical problems with this theoretical model. First the narrowness of the pure fantastic (it is just a line) makes it very difficult to find texts that actually fall into the category. Christine Brooke-Rose also points out that if the main feature of the fantastic is its total ambiguity between interpretations then this is a characteristic shared by non-fantastic texts. Should one then fall back on what Todorov was trying to avoid, the supernatural as the basic element, or treat other texts as 'displaced forms of the fantastic'? Brooke-Rose proceeds with the latter, thus preserving the undoubtedly useful categorisation of Todorov while widening its application to a broader range of texts. She also points out the inherent contradiction in Todorov's prescription of allegorical readings: after all the paradox of mutually exclusive meanings is at the heart of the fantastic, as Todorov himself admits. She on the contrary sees the

fantastic as a modern development of medieval allegory and by extension asks 'Is not the pure fantastic, with its absolute ambiguity, a (historical) prefiguring of many modern (non-fantastic) texts which can be read on several levels, and which would thus all be modern developments of medieval allegory?'[2] The rejection of allegory is thus important only on the *fantastic* level in the text, but other readings may coexist in which it is permissible or desirable. The freedom to find allegorical readings makes Todorov's theory more flexible and thus more useful.

Escape, Theology and the Detective

A result of the way Todorov's definition emerges as simply a line is that he inevitably spends a fair amount of time discussing what lies on either side of the line as well as the line itself. But one might also justifiably take issue with some of the assumptions he makes about these adjoining genres. Todorov places the detective story in the uncanny, the genre adjacent to the fantastic. This means that odd events are eventually given a rational explanation: in other words order is restored. The text is thus closer to 'realism' for Todorov because it does not suggest the existence of a supernatural level of existence: the universe is shown to be ultimately knowable, even if we need the help of a superior intellect to find the pattern or rule which governs the particular circumstances we have been reading about.

But this is to examine the place of the fantastic and detective fiction in terms of the axis Todorov sets before us, placing 'realism' at one extreme and mythology at the other. We should at this point be

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[2]See Christine Brooke-Rose, *The Rhetoric of the Unreal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 55-71. The sentence quoted is from p. 72.

clear that the realism on the left of Todorov's axis is traditional 19th-century realism. It offers a globalised picture of the universe to its readers. One might place it next to detective fiction which does the same thing, indeed to a greater degree: a requirement of the genre is that a *character* reveals the order which rules the universe of the narrative. In this sense, detective fiction would seem to be interpretatively 'closed' to a greater extent. Realism, a very large area, may vary in the extent of openness offered, but it nevertheless seeks to impose on the reader a vision of the world described. Here, the extent of openness would seem to go hand in hand with the 'art' value of a particular work. The great works of realism are celebrated for their *ambiguity*: look at Flaubert for instance. Within a genre like detective fiction, the opposite is true, as Todorov points out: it is adherence to the rules of the genre that constitutes a masterpiece of the genre, not transcendance of them. In this way, Todorov distinguishes popular fiction from literary fiction: the former must incarnate the genre; the latter must go beyond the genre to create something new, its own genre.

But whilst in Todorov the fantastic is separated from realism by the levels of hesitation over the supernatural contained in the uncanny (including detective fiction), another way of looking at their relationship would be to see the fantastic as at another level closer to traditional realism: first it is a paradigm of the 'open' text: the reader is necessarily left without a definitive explanation of events. Thus if one were to situate these genres on an axis leading from closure to openness, detective fiction would occupy a restricted space on the left representing the extreme of closure, whilst realism would sprawl from left to right, encompassing a wide range of texts of increasing openness

until one reached the realm of extreme openness, another restricted space occupied by the fantastic.

Detective Fiction	R	E	A	L	I	S	M	Fantastic
CLOSED								OPEN

But can we now return to a classification of these genres in terms of their relationship with reality? Can the axis of closure-openness be equated with one of realism, albeit a different kind of realism to the globalising realism of traditional fiction?

Is this perhaps what Brooke-Rose means when she talks of a 'fantastic realism'? Realism in this sense should be identified not with mimetic description which minimises the role of the reader in the creation of textual meaning, but rather with precisely the task the text presents the reader with in offering ambiguous, undecidable situations to unravel. The fantastic, then, is more 'real' than anything else, since it puts the reader in the same position that he is in reality, hesitating between contradictory possibilities.

The important distinction, from our perspective, between detective fiction and the fantastic remains the fact that in the former events ultimately receive a rational explanation. But far from being a simply formal difference, this has a profound effect on the world view offered by the text, placing the two genres at opposite poles on the second axis of realism we have been discussing. The superficial similarity between the genres is in fact deceptive: whilst the reader remains unsure how to explain events to the end, he is also sure of a rational explanation in the end. This necessarily affects our attitude to

the events: once we know that we are reading a detective story we are secure in the knowledge that reason will ultimately triumph, that the universe will prove to be ordered once Holmes or Father Brown has established the connections between things that remain invisible to us. We depend on a benevolent superior intelligence to save us from an apparently anarchic world, to find meaning where we see chaos. Detective fiction is therefore, as Rabkin remarks, a form of escape literature. It is also, as Chesterton in particular seems to have understood, a form of theological allegory.

Rabkin traces the development of the detective story from its beginnings with Poe to Conan Doyle and then on to Chesterton, noting the change in emphasis from puzzle-solving to morality. Both elements are present from the beginning, but the latter becomes more important in Chesterton. For Rabkin, the world of the detective story 'is a fantastic world, but a fantastic world naturalized'.[3] First, it offers the pleasures of a puzzle:

> In the extra-textual world, except in normal science, only such problems as are manufactured for the purpose have guaranteed solutions: a puzzle is a toy; it offers us escape into a world in which solutions are guaranteed. Detective fiction offers us, by naturalizing the fantastic, the same escape.[4]

But the escape it offers is also an 'escape into the world of justice, the world in which the *problem* of evil becomes only the *puzzle* of evil.'[5] The detective is thus not merely solving a puzzle but restoring a moral order. Rabkin analyses Poe's 'The Purloined Letter' in these terms. Poe's highly intellectual detective, Dupin, is principally interested in the mental challenge offered by the hidden letter, and the central

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[3]Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 69. Rabkin's understanding of the term 'fantastic' is much broader than Todorov's, resting on the notion of a 'reversal of the ground rules' of the narrative as the defining factor.
[4]Ibid., p. 66.
[5]Ibid., p. 66.

device of the plot lies in the 'reversal' produced in Dupin's solution to the plodding policeman's problem. But Dupin's victory is not merely an intellectual one over a worthy opponent as in a game of chess. It is a moral victory, for the minister is not only brilliant but unscrupulous and Dupin not only wins his prize (the reward) but punishes the minister. It would have been sufficient for Dupin to take the letter for him to collect the money from the policeman, but Dupin leaves a decoy in its place. This confers power on the wronged lady: 'like a chivalrous, jousting knight, he not only vanquished evil, but puts it at the mercy of good', in Rabkin's words. Dupin condemns the minister as 'an unprincipled man of genius', and this betrays his own position as being the opposite: he *is* principled, in spite of the overt impression he prefers to give of it being a matter of revenge, since the minister had once done him a bad turn too. 'The detective rules a world that offers us, by taming the fantastic, both the escape of the puzzle and the escape of justice.'[6]

In Conan Doyle, this latter dimension is given increasing prominence. While Poe emphasizes the coolly cerebral nature of the story, problems being largely solved from an armchair, Holmes is much more of a man of action, although the armchair brilliance is still there. There is also, however, a much sharper delineation between good and evil, symbolised for instance by the recurring battle between Holmes and Moriarty, another 'unprincipled man of genius'. Rabkin picks out 'The Speckled Band' as particularly exemplary: a damsel in distress is rescued by Holmes's perspicacity and courage in the face of her wicked guardian, Dr Roylott, who eventually meets the same end he had planned for his ward, that is, being poisoned by a snake,

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[6]Ibid., p. 67.

through the timely intervention of Holmes, who correctly interprets the clues that baffle the rest of us.

In Chesterton, the ascendancy of morality is taken to the point where the detective is actually a Roman Catholic priest. Here, the moral application of reason is specifically identified with religion. Father Brown triumphs over the thief in 'The Blue Cross' because he sees through Flambeau as a priest, not because of a flaw in his disguise, but because 'he attacked reason... It's bad theology.' Father Brown's universe offers its readers an escape into a world where faith in reason and in the wonders of the natural world is the basis for religion, for a system that explains the inexplicable and brings order to the chaos. Yet what characterises Father Brown, what distinguishes him from his fellows, is not his spirituality but his worldliness. Often a bogus spirituality is unveiled as the mask of evil; the priest, meanwhile, is frequently alone in insisting on a rational explanation, even when he has not yet unravelled it, when all about him believe only in the supernatural. In other words it is precisely the absence of the supernatural in the world of Father Brown that confirms the existence of a higher order in that world.

The fantastic, on the other hand, offers no such security. It is detective fiction deprived of its detective. The reader who is at the same level of understanding as Watson or Flambeau is, in the fantastic tale, alone like its protagonist in a world that remains unexplained. Our attitude to the strange is thus radically different: knowing that there will be no benevolent master to guide us through the labyrinth we are forced from our armchair passivity to an active participation with the text. It is no longer an escape to a reassuring universe of order but an adventure in a world of apparent disorder where we alone can create meaning.

Nevertheless the reader of the fantastic can still learn from detective fiction: to find our way in the labyrinth we must become our own detectives. This need introduces the concept of morality to the process of interpretation. For the detective story is in a sense a highly theological genre.[7] This, indeed, is the basis of its escapist appeal. As we have seen, it anwers our innermost desires for a benevolent order to come and save us from chaos. Thus while the modern literary novel has been busy showing us the full extent of that chaos, popular fiction has been offering us a solace. It is the solace of the dream that the world is truly knowable, comprehensible, but, like the order of Tlön, it is 'un rigor de ajedrecistas, y no de ángeles.' The order of the detective story is only a game, a pleasant way of dreaming. Borges and Robbe-Grillet have used the detective story only to subvert it with this in mind: in 'La Muerte y la Brújula' ('Death and the Compass') the detective is trapped by his own reason; in *Les Gommes*, Robbe-Grillet has detective reasoning lead the detective to commit the murder by mistake, turning him into his own quarry.[8]

However the fantastic, as described by Todorov, depends not on the certainty of a solution but rather on the permanent state of uncertainty it generates in the reader. How are we to decide between a

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[7]Further proof might be culled from Dorothy Sayers, translator of Dante and author of *A Man Born to be King* as well as much detective fiction in which theological matters explicitly intrude. Aside from murders connected to the church, there is what amounts to a call for 'engagement', a sense of moral responsibility beyond the Dupont-like delight in the intellectual challenge, albeit humourously resisted by Wimsey, from the earnest detective Parker in the following passage from *Whose Body?* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1923, p. 91):

> 'You want to hunt down a murderer for the sport of the thing and then shake hands with him and say, "Well played - hard luck - you shall have your revenge tomorrow!" Well, you can't do it like that. Life's not a football match. You want to be a sportsman. You can't be a sportsman. You're a responsible person.'
>
> 'I don't think you ought to read so much theology,' said Lord Peter. 'It has a brutalising influence.'

[8]Several members of the *Nouvelle Fiction* admitted their fascination with the genre in interview: see Appendices 1-2 in particular.

natural and a supernatural solution? Jean Levi's *Acclimatation,* in its parody of the Todorovian genre, makes the undecidability of the world the central theme of his work, and raises questions as to what our attitude to it, the world, should be as reader-citizens. We are playfully treated to the deceptions of narrative, and as 'detectives' searching for order, we are led up the garden path like Lönröt in Borges's story.

CHAPTER 5

LEVI'S *ACCLIMATATION* AND THE ALLEGORY OF THE FANTASTIC

Briefly, *Acclimatation* is a first-person narrative telling the story of the narrator's experience of an apparently phantom cat that inhabits his flat, haunting his existence, until it is recaptured by the narrator's wife and life returns to normal. Levi deliberately packs the text with 'la combinaison de toutes les situations fantastiques',[1] including a reference to a number of stories by Bradbury and situations borrowed from Maupassant's 'Le Horla' and other texts from the genre. If one attempts to classify it in Todorov's schema, it becomes clear that whether it is pure fantastic or fantastic-uncanny is debatable. Jean Levi describes *Acclimatation* in an interview with Moreau as essentially a parody of the fantastic genre; he sees it as having something of the same relationship with the fantastic as *Don Quixote* has with the romances of chivalry.

> ...il s'agit d'un jeu sur les contes fantastiques. De la littérature fantastique se trouvent dénoncés, si l'on veut, tous les méfaits, mais tout en la récupérant, en la sauvant, puisque le livre lui-même s'inscrit dans cette lignée, de la même façon que *Don Quichotte* s'inscrit dans celle des romans de chevalerie, même s'il en est le dernier.[2]

In much the same way as Cervantes, Levi also plays particularly on the reader's ambiguous perception of the events narrated, and of the narrator, the difference being that in the fantastic this ambiguity is central to the genre itself. But the reader hesitates not only over the explanation of events but over the trustworthiness of the narrator: is anything strange really happening or are we being deliberately misled?

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[1]Jean-Luc Moreau, *La Nouvelle Fiction* (Paris: Criterion, 1992), p. 412.
[2]Ibid., p. 413.

It is the question of the narrator's intent that separates *Acclimatation* from the fantastic proper: the first-person narrator of Poe's 'The Black Cat', for instance, hesitates himself, while much of the hesitation evaporates as a narrative trick in Levi's story by the end. Whilst the cat is eventually caught, providing on the surface a 'natural' explanation and placing the text in the fantastic-uncanny, the 'integrated reader' implied by the fantastic continues to wonder to what extent the events described were 'objectively' uncanny/supernatural or were simply perceived as such by the narrator. The answer is that the whole story is a trap set at this notional reader's expense: while the fantastic requires the reader's integration into the world of the characters, the pact is broken by the narrator who deliberately withholds information from us, self-consciously generating the imagery of the uncanny while simultaneously undermining it, giving an ambiguous picture of himself. Thus part of Levi's parody of the fantastic involves a parody of the fantastic's implied reader, who is left in a state of hesitation while the narrator smirks with the other, 'meta-fantastic' implied reader, achieving a typical *Nouvelle Fiction* affirmation of the power of narrative to shape the thing it describes and an implicit invitation to be wary of it as well as to enjoy it.

The sense of ambiguity between the natural and supernatural worlds is carefully constructed through the use of the imagery of the fantastic in tandem with the undermining of it. From the opening chapter the narrator's playfulness is apparent in his imaginative reconstruction of the nocturnal cat hunting that takes place at the *Jardin d'Acclimatation* that he then admits he never witnessed and may anyway be a distortion: 'Je n'ai jamais assisté à ces scènes; il se peut que l'animosité m'ait fait déformer un récit écouté d'une oreille

distraite'.[3] Far from a source of innocent educational pleasure for children, the *Jardin* is described as a 'préfiguration de l'enfer', where tortured cries compete with the horrifying sight of common animals transformed as if by magic into ferocious beasts by their captivity; the whole scene resembles a 'tableau de Jérôme Bosch'. This ghastly vision of restrained pain and horror is contrasted with the anarchic playfulness of the cats that come out at night, copulating, tearing at the seats, soiling the whole park. But they are hunted by three park attendants who also take on an unworldly glow through Levi's narrative:

> Alors se glissent hors de la maison de brique du directeur trois formes humaines. Recouvertes de vêtements de peau et gantées de cuir, elles tiennent entre leurs mains des sortes d'épuisettes donts les mailles emprisonnent les rayons de la lune dans une résille d'argent. Deux d'entre elles, des hommes, bondissent à travers le Jardin. La troisième, une femme, reste en retrait. Sa chevelure, où jouent les rayons de l'astre nocturne, tombe en une cascade de lumière sur ses épaules. À la voir ainsi dans la pose d'une statue grecque, bras replié, la tête appuyée contre le poing qui étreint le manche de son instrument de chasse, ne dirait-on pas Hécate, reine de la nuit ou Hérodiade, assistant, songeuse, à la sauvage traque de sa horde de guerriers sombres?[4]

Levi offers an illustration of how the ordinary and banal can be transformed, by putting it in an unfamiliar linguistic context, into something apparently fantastic, thereby mirroring the effect he claims the *Jardin* has on the normal farmyard animals who are transformed into threatening monsters:

> La vache dans son étable reconstituée semble un monstre terrifiant, tout est dangereux, blessant, agressif; pourquoi l'âne si doux est-il derrière des barreaux? Ne serait-ce pas qu'il peut mordre et ruer? On remarque les ergots des coqs, aussi effilés que des poignards; les chèvres, avec leurs pupilles verticales et

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[3]Jean Levi, *Acclimatation* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1990), p. 14.
[4]Ibid., pp. 13-14.

> le double croissant de leurs cornes émettent des ricanements diaboliques.[5]

Thus the imagery of the fantastic is introduced from the start but is more or less instantly qualified by the remarks already noted to the effect that this uncanniness is a narrative construction, at the moment when the narrator emerges in the first person as a character himself.

After the static atmospheric description of chapter one that sets the scene and the mood of playful ambiguity for the rest of the narrative, chapter two begins the narrative proper by focusing on the particular rather than the general. The narrator furthers the impression of his own peculiarity by telling us of his almost erotic passion for cats including his delight in their 'souffle puant de carnassier' and confessing that 'quand la queue haut levée et frémissante, ils découvrent la porte minuscule et troublante qui ouvre sur les infinis mystères de l'organique, je ne puis m'empécher d'y fourrer mon nez comme pour humer voluptueusement le divin secret.'[6] Next the second main character is introduced: Esther, an eccentric artist who has taken up the cause of the cats of the *Jardin* after being alerted to their plight by their sympathetic 'huntress' Elise, deciding to rescue them from death and have them neutered and returned to the park. Having found her own home overrun with recuperating cats, Esther had turned to an outsider to house a particularly difficult female. But after handing the cat over she had discovered that the supposed cat lover was using them in grotesque laboratory experiments. She turns to our narrator for help in a rescue plot. The cat is successfully rescued from the old woman, described as a *sorcière* who claims she maintains contact with other worlds through the mystical souls of cats. Esther runs off with the cat concealed in a basket while the narrator distracts

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[5]Ibid., pp. 10-11.
[6]Ibid., p. 18.

the 'sorcière', and the creature is left at his flat while he is still out. This is where the real mystery begins, in chapter three.

Up to this point it has been simply a question of atmosphere generated by the particular tone of the descriptions; now events also conspire to render the reader hesitant, but the narrative still proceeds in the same way, that is, it builds up the apparently supernatural only to undermine it with a natural explanation. Since this follows on from the first chapter where it is made clear that the uncanniness of the scene is entirely a product of the narrative itself, the implication is that the same is true of the events perceived in the rest of the narrative. The cat is undetectable in the narrator's flat, taking no food, leaving no droppings. At first it seems likely that its wild nature had simply led it to conceal itself; it would come out eventually. After a few days the cat has failed to appear, and the narrator assumes that the eccentric Esther had let the cat escape on entry: it had never been in the flat at all. Yet the narrator's life starts to change in other ways: he dreams, something he never usually does, and Esther is the subject of his dream. The next time he meets her, she is extravagantly dressed as in his dream with long gloves, directing a hysterical rescue of cats by the fire brigade outside his apartment block. He starts to sleep far longer than usual, and his sense of time begins to disintegrate: 'J'ai dû vivre dans une sorte de léthargie; les jours et les nuits se télescopaient. La matinée à peine entamée, j'entrais déjà dans une nouvelle journée.'[7] He eats extravagantly *gourmand* food - snails, andouillettes, tripe, Hungarian sausage and paprika lard - but despite this and his inactivity he finds himself losing weight. Moreover, he feels that not only Esther but also he himself are *envoutés* by the mysteriously absent cat.

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[7]Ibid., p. 49.

A sense of a disturbed reality is thus created as the world of dreams seems to invade the real world, and the changes in the narrator's perceptions of his world are implicitly linked to the malignly invisible cat. It is implied that these changes are a result of some kind of supernatural enchantment. The materialisation of the Sureussa family on the top floor seems to confirm this: previously unaware of their existence, the narrator learns they had been living above him for four years. Now they seem to haunt him continuously - the disembodied voice of the woman calling to her cat Vasthi, accompanied by the silent passing of her husband's shadow on the stairs, contributes to the narrator's apparent sense of his loss of contact with reality, all the more so when he learns from Esther that Sureussa is the brother of the 'Directeur du Jardin'. The coincidence is uncomfortable, particularly since their immateriality seems to mirror the cat's: he receives only indirect proof of their existence - misdirected post, mistaken visitors and the voice and shadow. The narrator seems at times to doubt his own sanity.

In the meantime, the invisible cat has begun to make its presence felt, increasing the sense of the encroaching supernatural. House plants are gnawed, plates are broken in the night. The narrator's rationalisations only increase the doubt over any possible naturalistic explanation. Yet just as the invisible cat's activities seem to require a supernatural explanation, the opposite is furnished: a sofa the narrator had been storing for an acquaintance is removed; in the process something seems to rush from its bowels, though the narrator does not see it himself, and a secret lair full of droppings and the remains of dead mice is discovered inside the sofa. This appears to solve the mystery: a thorough search of the rest of the house had yielded nothing, but this places the cat firmly in the real world. On

subsequent nights, however, the disturbance not only continues but increases, and our narrator's frantic pursuits of an ever more visible cat (its eyes glow at him in the dark or a silhouette stands out against the moon), always ends with it leaping into nothingness in a dark corner in the kitchen. The idea of a fourth dimension is floated, but this too is explained away when the narrator, on moving all his kitchen appliances, discovers a gap in the partition wall that connects his apartment with a disused room in the neighbouring block: another natural explanation seems to resolve the hesitation.

But the fantastic is to encroach on us one more time as the narrator attempts to trap the cat. He enlists the help of Esther and her formidable friend Elise, who is described in terms that recall the other-worldly imagery of the first chapter. The narrator's presence is, however, overt here as the generator of the images put before us; in the first chapter he deliberately conceals himself until after the fantastic atmosphere has been created. Thus here in chapter eight, its recurrence is in the context of metaphoric expressions, half-comic, describing the strangeness of a particular individual rather than a whole world.

> Elle avait quelque chose d'archaïque et de barbare comme une idole de l'Egypte ou de l'Asie et en même temps de très moderne. Et ce mélange de traits primitifs et de conformité aux canons de la mode la plus récente, lui conférait un air hybride; cette blonde Atlante aurait pu être le fruit du monstrueux accouplement d'une poupée Barbie et du dieu Thot.[8]

Thus the timeless eerieness of the generalised description of chapter one is transformed into the specific attempt to fix character through description of appearance here. The comic comparison deflates any sense of the uncanny and brings up front the increasingly visible parody taking place as the modern icon of the plastic bimbo is paired with the seriously mythological. The game Levi has been playing with

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[8]Ibid., p. 79.

the imagery of the uncanny is made particularly obvious by Esther's appearance that throughout the narrative is defined by her wild silvery hair, brightly coloured outfits and her ever-lengthening gloves. Here her hair is calmer, her outfit less shocking, and her gloves shorter. Thus these three key variables prove a barometer of the state of the fantastic in the story - indeed the story ends with her thoroughly 'tamed', wearing pastel colours, short gloves and with cropped dyed hair, coinciding with the return to normality.

Elise produces an enormous trap big enough to catch a wild cat, which is installed in the kitchen, making the room practically unusable. But despite the narrator's best efforts, he succeeds only in catching his own fingers in the trap, whilst the cat remains invisible, snatching the bait without being trapped. Again the only explanation appears to be supernatural, but by now the tone of the narrative has shifted to far more overt parody, as is indicated by the play on the imagery of the fantastic discussed above. The result is that hesitation no longer seems to be important: the narrator is not alarmed by the cat's elusiveness but simply infuriated; the episode leading to the appearance of the narrator's wife ends with him raging impotently at the useless trap:

> Je fus pris d'une crise d'animosité contre le piège; je lui donnais des coups de pieds, qui me faisaient plus de mal à moi qu'à lui, je lui tordais les barreaux, je lui tirais violemment les crochets, je lui tapais sur les tiges, je lui tambourinais le fond métallique. Il était très solide, car il résista à tous mes mauvais traitements, et, en dépit des torsions sournoises que j'imprimais aux pièces les plus fragiles, le système continuait à fonctionner imperturbablement.[9]

It is now that the narrative illusions created up to this point are shattered and the gaps in the narrator's account are revealed. 'Un jour ma femme revint. L'ampleur de son ventre me surprit, je ne m'imaginais pas qu'une peau fût si extensible...' he tells us. But his

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[9]Ibid., p. 91.

wife had never been mentioned before, nor had his expected child. This new information throws the whole of the narrative into a different light: the strange, lonely male with an erotic obsession for cats, given to bouts of Gargantuan macho feasts, neglecting his appearance and apartment, keeping abnormal hours, can be explained as merely the husband on a binge while his wife is away, relishing an undirected freedom before the new responsibilities of fatherhood are imposed. The uncanny events and discoveries of the story are suddenly viewed in another light, slotted into the banality of the everyday, and so deprived of their eeriness.

> Je tentais de me justifier en parlant de ma découverte. On pourrait gagner beaucoup de place - cinq mètres carrés - en mordant sur le mur qui recelait une caverne, et peut-être même acquérir le studio mitoyen. Je mentionnai aussi mes liens avec le directeur du Jardin d'acclimatation, presque un ami et un très proche parent de nos voisins. C'était important quand on a des enfants de connaître quelqu'un comme lui. Peut-être pas tout de suite, mais après.[10]

Thus the fantastic is *acclimaté*, adapted by the narrative, and the unreal is made real through the power of language. We see how the whole narrative had constructed the fantastic out of air only to whisk it away again. The narrative mirrors the procedure that takes place in the *Jardin* itself, where children wonder at, and are horrified by the captive 'real', only to end their process of *acclimatation* in a state of nonchalant familiarity with it, unconcerned by its banality.

This reading of the parody of the fantastic is paralleled by the allegorical sub-text developed through the pointed borrowing of the names of Racine's protagonists from *Esther* for the characters in *Acclimatation*. There is of course Esther herself, whose possible Jewish origins the narrator hints at when she is first introduced (chapter two), as well as Elise, Esther's accomplice from within who helps in the

[10]Ibid., pp. 91-92.

salvation of her particular chosen species. The director of the *Jardin* and the narrator's invisible neighbours, the Sureussas, owe their name to an inversion of Assuérus, King of Persia, and the two named cats (the narrator's dead cat and the Sureussas') are Mardoéche[11] and Vasthi respectively. The purpose of these careful signposts is not to attempt a slavish modern reproduction or even parody of Racine, but rather to evoke the underlying subject - the persecution and assimilation of the Jewish people - as a complement to the theme followed in the parody of the fantastic, namely, the accommodation of the strange in reality by narrative. The existence of this Jewish sub-text introduces a framework of moral ambiguity to our reading: the violence of Esther's crusade is gradually tempered as she becomes increasingly familiar with the director, to the point where she adopts the director's own ethos, arousing the narrator's suspicion:

> En outre, de cette façon, les chats pourraient être peu à peu domestiqués, éduqués, tout en servant la formation des enfants. Sans renoncer à ses nouvelles orientations, le Jardin renouerait avec son projet primitif, qui était avant tout 'acclimatation' des animaux.
>
> J'étais en train de me demander si en fait de chat ce n'était pas Esther que le directeur était en train d''acclimater'.[12]

The story ends with the words: 'j'appris, trois mois plus tard, qu'elle avait épousé le directeur du Jardin d'acclimatation, monsieur Sureussa': she has been *acclimatée*, and her appearance that had told us of the level of the fantastic also betrays the extent of her assimilation. Like the text, she has suddenly assumed an *air banal*. But what is the significance of this? Levi deliberately draws back from any conclusions. On the one hand, the narrator suggests she is naïvely swallowing the director's agenda, becoming an accomplice to the perverse enclosure of the animals she had formerly championed; he

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[11]Mardochée is Esther's uncle in Racine's play.
[12]Ibid., pp. 81-82.

also regrets the loss of her eccentricity - she is suddenly flat and uninteresting. On the other hand, she has saved the cats from extermination, even though some compromise was necessary; she is tamer but the narrator acknowledges that she is also prettier, and as a result the obsessive spinster has found a husband. In this respect she parallels the narrator whose strangeness evaporates on the appearance of his wife - both Esther and the narrator are 'acclimatised' by their marriages. The text thus ends ambiguously: we can take comfort from the narrative's power to render the incomprehensible understandable and unthreatening, but we should be wary of its ability to make the horrific seem banal (the comparison Levi makes to Moreau is between Esther's revised view of the activities in the *Jardin* and the revisionist historians' accounts of the holocaust).

In parodying the fantastic, *Acclimatation* celebrates just what Brooke-Rose notes as the significant characteristic of the genre from the point of view of the modern theorist, that is, the paradoxical coexistence of mutually exclusive endings. The hesitation essential to the fantastic is exploited at all levels: the narrative creation of doubt between the natural and supernatural is there, the basic component of the fantastic, but also the hesitation between laughter at and appreciation of the genre, the same ambiguous relationship *Don Quixote* maintains with the romances of chivalry. Beyond that the main thematic centre for hesitation is the narrative itself - we hesitate between the different readings, between delight at its power and horror at its deceitfulness. *Acclimatation* also confirms Brooke-Rose's conclusions about the fantastic in the modern novel: the real is stripped of its interpretability and shown up as 'the fantastic which it is. For ultimately all fiction is realistic, whether it mimes a mythic idea of

heroic deeds or a progressive idea of society, or inner psychology or, as now, the non-interpretability of the world, which is our reality as its interpretability once was (and may return).'[13] *Acclimatation* does not, however, rest with an image of the world as fantastic, but celebrates the ability of narrative and of language to render this strange and incomprehensible world benign. The stretched belly of the narrator's wife is a metaphor for this accommodating flexibility afforded to the world by our capacity to turn it into narrative.

To return to Eco's theory of reading, we should now ask: what is the *intentio operis* of the fantastic text? In short, the fantastic text is constructed so as to make it impossible to decide between two or more possible interpretations. As empirical readers we may be inclined to attribute for instance the comte d'Athol's visitation by his dead wife in Villiers de l'Isle Adam's story 'Vera'[14] to the psychological effect of intense grief: Athol reincarnates her in his mind, through the sheer force of desire. But the implication of the *style indirect libre* of the narrative is that there is something far more concrete present. The narrator's opening remark 'L'amour est plus fort que la Mort, a dit Salomon: oui, son mystérieux pouvoir est illuminé' is wonderfully ambiguous in this respect. Can love really bring on a ghostly visitation, or is he speaking metaphorically?

The model reader, however, suspends judgement. There is no certainty either way, and he must be prepared to live with this uncertainty, which is a sign of the model author's invisibility. This is not to say that the model author is not there: every text exhibits its model author's narrative strategies: without them there would be no text, just chaos. The kind of model author posited by the fantastic text

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[13]Brooke-Rose, p. 388.
[14]This text is one of Levi's sources for *Acclimatation*.

is, however, one who withdraws to the greatest extent possible from visible intervention. His strategy is to leave open specific interpretative possibilities rather than to push the reader towards one or other solution. Thus the model author's strategy is one of apparent absence. For the purposes of interpretation, at least for what Eco calls the 'first level reader', he may as well not be there. But of course the choices we are presented with are themselves a sign of design. To employ a rather circular argument, they are a sign of the kind of choices the model author wishes us to ponder over. Flaubert provides an example of this from within Realism: an authoritative, interventionist narrator does *not* guide the reader to form particular opinions about his characters, yet certain interpretative avenues *are* indicated structurally through ironic juxtaposition. For instance in *L'Éducation Sentimentale*, during Frédéric's last meeting with Madame Arnoux, the reader is witness to Frédéric's hesitation in front of this visibly aged woman, his sense of repulsion. She sees his hesitation differently and exclaims 'Comme vous êtes délicat! Il n'y a que vous! Il n'y a que vous!'[15] From this we can extract a certain world view, that of Flaubert the model author, who has created a universe in which such bitter ironies arise.

Meaning is inescapable, even if the message is that there is no meaning. For instance, when we read supposedly 'irrelevant' descriptive passages in Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*, we interpret them as signs left for us by the author of the meaninglessness of physical things: these items resist interpretation in symbolic terms as something to do with the narrative of sexual jealousy, but by this resistance they achieve a meaning above the fiction: the act of meaning nothing is as

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[15]Flaubert, *L'Éducation Sentimentale*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), p. 504.

significant a statement about the world as the symbolisation employed in a romantic text.

In the same way, the model author of a fantastic text posits a world in which certainty over some matters is impossible. The model reader, then, is someone who can accept this. It is therefore structurally a profoundly *realistic* genre. The model reader of the fantastic text is the model reader of the world as text, that is, willing to suspend judgement while still engaging with the narrative, willing to adopt that Borgesian scepticism that saves us from the follies of faith in either excessive reason or in superstition. If we compare this reader with the model reader of detective fiction, the gulf that separates the genres becomes clear: the model reader of detective fiction remains at the first level simply in wait for enlightenment, sure of the escapist pleasure of a moral ending, and at the second level he savours not uncertainty itself but the way the initial chaos is progressively transformed to order through the uncovering of clues. Levi satirises our struggle to find absolute meaning by deceiving us as readers of a bogus fantastic.[16]

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[16]Although Levi has used the fantastic to great effect in *Acclimatation* and a number of the other members of the group have written for Moreau's review *Le Horla*, christened in honour of Maupassant's famous tale of the fantastic, all have expressed a reluctance to see the *Nouvelle Fiction* too closely identified with the fantastic. Even those who are more interested in the genre, like Châteaureynaud and Haddad, reject the notion of horror at the heart of the original 'gothic' fantastic: they are not interested in merely thrilling or upsetting their readers (see Appendices 3-4). This takes us back to Todorov's original problem with defining the genre, which led to his choice of the notion of hesitation as being the central definition of the genre. For Petit and Levi, however, the fantastic still lies dangerously close to realism in that it relies on the hesitation between realist and marvellous explanations. For them, this represents an unnecessary dependence: they prefer the freedom of pure imagination to the more pedestrian need to keep one foot in the real world. Hence Levi's description of *Acclimatation* as something of a *Don Quixote* in relation to the fantastic. To be whole-heartedly part of the marvellous is to be free to explore without constraint all possibilities of the imaginary. Nevertheless, if the fantastic is seen as a model for all fiction that provokes hesitation in the reader with regard to the status of the text, then the link remains. For this is surely at the heart of the *Nouvelle Fiction*, the desire to disturb its readers, to subvert their way of viewing the universe, thereby to force them into a new relationship with the narratives that shape their worlds.

Another *Nouvelle Fiction* writer, Marc Petit, approaches the question of the world as text and the reader's role in both in a way that gives a greater prominence to the idea of morality: to continue the analogy with the detective story as analysed by Rabkin, if Levi emphasises the puzzle-solving aspect of the reader as detective, Petit gives more weight to his role as an agent of justice. The next chapter will explore Petit's work further.

Haddad prefers to see this as a permanent state of doubt (see Appendix 4), but the essential notion remains the same.

CHAPTER 6

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE READER IN MARC PETIT'S *LE MONTREUR ET SES MASQUES*[1]

The extent to which the world is made text in the stories of *Le Montreur et ses masques* through the metaphorical use of reading and interpretation is examined in this chapter, but first it seems reasonable to attempt to describe these texts in the light of the theory of reading just described. What sort of a model reader does the text posit? What is the cultural context within which it is operating? How is the empirical reader taught the text's ground rules, shown the way to becoming the model reader? Indeed, it is only through asking these questions that we can arrive at the intention of the text, which can in part be described as an allegory of this theory.

From the first text, 'Histoire du Nègre blanc',[2] it is clear that the collection is concerned with metafiction: the narrator is telling a story about a story (that of the title) which itself remains obscure: the subject of his narrative is rather the history of the story, in particular his attempts to discover what the story actually is. I do not propose to make a detailed analysis of this text, but want briefly to note how it primes the reader to be prepared for what is to come. The narrator apparently belongs to a some unspecified race or ethnic minority of ancient lineage. As his search through archives and his various frustrated attempts at pinning down the story are recounted, the nature of his people becomes more obscure and not less, along with the nature of the story. As with Borges's Babylonian lottery, which becomes progressively more chaotic as man attempts to order it until it

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[1]Marc Petit, *Le montreur et ses masques* (Paris: Éditions Mazarine, 1986).
[2]Ibid., pp. 7-20.

exactly resembles life, the more the narrator of Petit's story attempts to pin down the *histoire*, the more its nature becomes indefinable, and indeed, the more his mysterious race comes to resemble the whole of mankind. Once we learn that the narrator has decided to devote his life to some great work which 'n'était pas sans rapport avec l'histoire du Nègre blanc',[3] the narrative becomes steadily more garbled, touching on the use of language 'sans y être contraint par la nécessité',[4] mixing metaphoric with literal use of language, until the text finishes in a nonsense of contradictions and with a note of desperation:

> Notre ville est une ville inverse, ses fondations descendent du ciel.
>
> Le Nègre blanc l'atteindra-t-il jamais? Sa route est longue; elle n'est pas longue, mais infinie. Pleine de détours et pourtant droite, elle ne mène nulle part. Il n'y a pas de route. Un homme avance dans le désert, bâton en main, n'avance pas; la ville est là, elle n'est pas là, la ville est aux portes. Qui est le Nègre blanc? Que fait-il? Que veut-il? S'il n'y a pas de buissons, à quoi sert sa machette? Serait-ce en moi qu'il veut ouvrir une porte? Demain peut-être? Ou bien peut-être l'a-t-il déjà ouverte? Qui est-il donc? N'est-il pas cette ombre dans mon ombre qui me suit partout et semble me porter, soutenant mes pas?[5]

The text remains deliberately ambiguous: without going any further it might support an interpretation that saw the 'Histoire...' as the quest for that 'transcendental signifier' that deconstruction so despises. On the other hand, it might equally well be seen as a parody of the idea of endless chains of signifiers and the teleological worries that apparently dissolve the character's reason. In the light of what comes later, I believe that the second interpretation is closer to being true than the first, but for the moment, it is enough to note that we know a little about the text's still shadowy 'model reader' who must be awake to metaphysical speculation, in particular issues concerning the

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[3]Ibid., p. 19.
[4]Ibid., p. 19.
[5]Ibid., p. 20.

relationship between language and the world, and should be sensitive to parody of them. As to the target of the parody and its tone, as aspiring model readers, we must keep our minds open.

In 'Contrepoint',[6] however, Petit allows his model author to be far more explicit about the kind of interpretation the text is guiding us towards. In fact, it can hardly be described as a story; it is rather a parody of modernist writing aimed particularly at Sartre's *La Nausée* and accompanied by a commentary that includes lamentations about what this sort of writing has done to French literature. After reading lines like

> Pourquoi après Sartre et Beckett, le jeu d'écrire n'est plus qu'un épilogue futile de fin de partie et l'auteur français d'avant-garde (inutile de parler des autres) une espèce de mort en sursis dont la survie artificielle ne repose plus que sur la maintenance d'un outillage sophistiqué.[7]

one can be in little doubt that the parody is somewhat hostile. Indeed, since the text is in the first person and represents an author's frustration with the restrictions imposed on him by his age, and his desperation to write in a different way ('arriverai-je jamais un jour raconter une histoire simple?'), we might even consider this text as a creative essay, to which the rules of fictional analysis do not entirely apply, allowing us momentary access to the empirical author. But this would really be dangerous speculation on our part. It is enough to note that a model author is indicated here with particular clarity, however close he is to the real Petit, and that this model author is expressing the same frustration with modernism that Eco describes in *Reflections on 'The Name of the Rose'* as being the starting point for postmodernism. When breaking the conventions becomes conventional and art becomes unhealthily obsessed with its own

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[6]Ibid., p. 71-80.
[7]Ibid., p. 78.

processes, then the only escape is to revisit ironically the old, thus recovering the pleasure of the text while saving one's intellectual dignity. Here the model author reveals himself as straining to join that road.

From this mapping out of the text's frame of reference, the knowledge expected of the reader, and the kind of model author the text posits, we can now move on to more detailed interpretation. Two stories stand out in particular as of interest in relation to Eco's theory: 'Schéhérazade' and 'Le montreur et ses masques'.[8] Both are metafictions that use the image of the reader's relationship with the text as an allegory of man's relationship with the world.

The analogy seems to work very well: the world requires a kind of competence if one is going to make one's way in it, just as a text requires literary competence if one is to interpret it. 'All interpretation is misinterpretation' is an intensely unhelpful starting point in both cases. Rather, just as a text constructs its model reader, open to various possibilities, but restrained by the limits of the text, so the world could be seen to create a model citizen, again, free to a great extent, but ultimately limited by empirical reality. Indeed the world, as a fount of multiplicity, could be described in these terms as a paradigm of a postmodern text - forever ambiguous, resisting definitive interpretation.

The analogy becomes even more interesting when one considers the question of the empirical author. Once the text has been produced, the author, as Eco states, cannot adjudicate between different interpretations of it. The text is there, and if it says things that he had not thought of, then that is beyond his control. The readers of the text, on the other hand, can no more access the empirical author's intention

[8]Ibid., pp. 117-148 and pp. 163-190.

than they can know the mind of God. Indeed, the 'readers' of the world as text can not even be sure of God's existence; the best they can do is construct an idea of a god, the 'model author' posited by the evidence they see about them. Or, if they are more abstractly minded, they can resist the temptation to personify, and think in terms of the *intentio operis* of the world.

The image of the invisible author whose wisdom man must do without as he 'interprets' the world is treated more fully in 'Le montreur et ses masques', but first I will examine how the notion of respecting the ground rules of the text is used in 'Schéhérazade' to draw a parallel between literary and moral incompetence.

This in itself is a startling idea for French literature and represents what could be seen as a reactionary moral backlash after a century devoted to the expression of personal freedom and the overthrowing of authority. Existentialism preached the absence of God and encouraged the turn toward the self for personal liberation. In our state of alienation, as subjects in a world of objects, we must perpetually reaffirm our freedom so as to avoid becoming objects ourselves. The nihilistic contradictions of such a notion of freedom are a recurring subject in the work of Gide, where flawed characters pursue personal ends that become increasingly meaningless the nearer they come to realising them. This sort of freedom risks becoming nothing more than what Roger Scruton calls a 'posture of negation',[9] in which we remain frozen in a permanent state of adolescent rebellion against the bourgeoisie, the establishment, authority in general. What Petit is offering, through an allegory of the reading process, is the passage through this stage of estrangement from the world to a

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[9]Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy: An Introdcution and Survey* (London: Sinclair -Stevenson, 1994), p. 460.

recovery of our relationship with it. This recovery must also imply an acceptance, rather than the fearful rejection, of ourselves as objects, a matter explored through images of literary reflection, the *mise en abyme*, discussed in chapter 10. In this light, the attitude towards Sartre and modernism as rebellion against textual convention displayed in 'Contrepoint' takes on a new dimension: Petit's reaction is not the aesthetic objection of someone who prefers 'old-fashioned' writing, but represents a rejection of the whole existentialist creed that Petit sees as having dominated French literature for too long. By extension, we can also now see the postmodern revisiting of previous conventions not as the lame gesture of modernists who have gone too far and been forced into retreat (as it is often characterised), but as the shift from rebellion to a mature return to 'parental' tradition and the reforming of this tradition to suit the modern world.

In 'Schéhérazade', we see how the resistance to the objectivisation of the self turns to aggression and becomes a dangerously anti-social force. As the title suggests, Petit's text leans on the frame narrative of *The Thousand and One Nights*: its metafictional nature is therefore announced from the outset, and we know we are dealing not just with a story about a story, but a story about story-telling itself. Petit's narrative is set during the Second World War in Prague, and focuses on the Old Jewish Cemetery which was used by the Nazis, we are told, as a temporary camp for various 'undesirables'. The camp is run by the sinister professeur Achab, not a real Nazi, but motivated to join them by a secret agenda:

> Il est vrai qu'il n'était pas nazi; il méprisait les hitlériens comme il haïssait tous les hommes captifs d'une idéologie, d'une foi quelconque. Une idée fixe, une passion froide l'habitait: la destruction. L'autre trait de son caractère était une grande intelligence. Mais c'était une intelligence toute logique, dénuée d'imagination; ou pour mieux dire, qui employait les armes les

> plus aiguës de la logique à seule fin de détruire chez les autres cette faculté mystérieuse dont il se savait dépourvu. Il possédait une vaste culture, ayant apparemment beaucoup lu dans sa jeunesse. Mais il haïssait tous les livres et s'était donné comme but de les faire mentir, de les réduire, d'en démontrer l'absurdité comme celle de tous les récits, pensées et inventions diverses que les hommes de tous les temps avaient produits et répétés pour se consoler du malheur et se donner les raisons d'espérer. Aussi, après avoir dans sa jeunesse fréquenté quelque peu les milieux anarchistes, s'était-il rallié dès 1933 aux nazis, depuis cette fameuse nuit du 10 mai, à Berlin, où le docteur Goebbels avait fait brûler les livres. À vrai dire, il n'appréciait guère l'aspect carnavalesque d'un tel spectacle. Surtout, il jugeait que ces livres jetés au feu n'étaient que l'enveloppe, le signe matériel de quelque chose de beaucoup plus subtil et impalpable. C'était cela qu'il voulait, lui, détruire: l'ennemi intime, non pas le livre, mais ce qui fait le livre possible. L'âme du livre. Il rêvait de bûchers invisibles allumés dans le seul esprit des hommes et dans leur coeur.[10]

The phrase 'l'âme du livre' is significant. It suggests that a book is more than simply a collection of structures, waiting to be 'deconstructed' by a master critic. The use of the religious term prompts a comparison with a human being: books are individual entities with characters of their own, and should be respected as such. The soul of a book, then, can be compared to Eco's more neutral *intentio operis*. It is this individuality of a text that human beings cling to, for without it, the world dissolves into meaninglessness. But it is also worth noting that the passage is in *style indirect libre* at this point: the narrative voice is mimicking the thoughts of Achab. Whilst we can view the use of the word 'soul' as a metaphor prompting a healthy respect for the text, it is clear that for Achab the image is more literal: he dreams of pyres in men's hearts. The power he sees invested in the individuality of the text is anthropomorphized by him into an image of religion, and as such becomes an external authority, a constraint on his freedom.

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[10]Petit, pp. 121-2.

The image highlights the contradiction in Achab's position: on the one hand he wants to destroy what he tells himself is an illusion; on the other he elevates the essence of objective reality to a religious plane, and it becomes an object of terror. This contradiction is drawn out in his confrontations with the philosophers and theologians of the camp: determined to achieve his project - 'non la soumission, mais véritablement la conversion de ses patients sans recourir à d'autre contrainte que celle de la pure logique'.[11] Achab first summons the thinkers in his power, asking them to attempt to persuade him with their arguments on the following subject: '*Sur quoi fondez-vous votre espoir?*' Anyone who can do so is promised his freedom. But his posture of superiority ('Allons! J'attends! reprit Achab tout en s'allumant un cigare') elicits nothing but laughter. Achab, 'avec tout le sérieux d'un professeur allemand', does not see the joke: one of the philosophers explains:

> Pourquoi rions-nous? Oui, pourquoi? dit-il en regardant Achab dans les yeux. Il me semble que c'est à moi de te poser une question: pourquoi ne ris-tu pas toi-même? Réfléchis donc. Sur quoi notre espoir se fonde-t-il? as-tu demandé. Tu le sais bien: sur la promesse que tu as faite de libérer l'un d'entre nous. Mais si telle était vraiment ton intention, dans ce cas pourquoi nous aurais-tu défié de te convaincre? La chose est claire: dans ton esprit, notre espoir n'est fondé sur rien. Tu sais d'avance qu'aucun de nous ne sortira vainqueur de cette épreuve.[12]

In other words, the philosopher understands the impossibility of arguing with a relativist, with someone who does not conceive of the world in terms of an objective reality, but sees it as constructed by the individual language user. Achab will not listen to what they are saying, will not attempt to assess whether their arguments are valid, as he is only concerned with what interests are advanced through them.

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[11]Ibid., p. 122.
[12]Ibid., p. 126.

When the philosopher points this out ('Je n'ai rien dit qu'aucun témoin lucide et objectif ne puisse approuver'), Achab resorts to the defence of the Nietzschean superman:

> Témoin, témoin! Il n'y a pas de témoin, reprit le professeur Achab. Et même s'il y avait un arbitre, il serait du côté du plus fort.[13]

Paradoxically, this also reveals the true meaning of Sartrian alienation: Achab, caught up entirely with his subjectivity, is therefore incapable of identifying with himself as an object. He has thereby lost his humanity. It is only through seeing oneself as an object in the world that one can come to understand the world and other people in relation to the self. The philosopher has pointed out the logical inadequacy of what Achab was asking: he demands argument but refuses to consider any view but his own, lest it impinge on his 'freedom'. He is an intellectual joke, but because he cannot see himself he has no sense of humour either.

If the philosophers demonstrate the logical poverty of his position, the theologians whom he summons next demonstrate the moral poverty of it. Achab makes a similar offer to them, promising them the life of a child of their choice, but they too refuse to argue, realising that he is raising false hopes, and that the effect of his offer is pernicious, encouraging selfishness and destroying the community:

> Tu es Satan qui vient semer la zizanie en soulevant un faux espoir dans notre coeur. Tu es Satan: car tu me forces à faire un choix injuste et impossible.[14]

Philosophers and rabbis are sent to their deaths but Achab senses that his victory is meaningless, and is troubled by 'une impression de solitude désespérante',[15] again, the pain of alienation. His next attempt

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[13]Ibid., p. 127.
[14]Ibid., p. 129.
[15]Ibid., p. 130.

to impose his creed turns towards two gypsy girls, Tilka and her sister, to whom he has taken a fancy. He promises their freedom if Tilka, a celebrated storyteller, can tell a story that entertains him. Otherwise they face death. Naturally, she tells the story of Schéhérazade. The full consequences of this choice with regard to *mise en abyme* are discussed in Chapter 10, but for the moment, I wish simply to note how this choice forces Achab to confront an image of himself as an object of someone else's narrative. His stance in regard to Tilka's story is the same as his stance toward the philosophers and theologians: he has already made up his mind not to be amused, and so sleeps each night through Tilka's narrative, only to awake for the dénouement, one thousand and one nights later. The end, of course, sees Schéhérazade freed, but because Achab sees himself in the story as an object, he also sees himself controlled by the narrative. He rebels, seeking to rewrite the text in his own image:

> Sais-tu ce que dit le roi Shahriar la dernière nuit? 'C'est assez! Qu'on lui coupe la tête, car ses histoires, les dernières surtout, m'ont causé un ennui mortel!' Demain, Zdenka sera à moi et toi, tu seras morte, conclut-il.[16]

He thinks he can make the text say anything he likes, but Tilka insists that his reading is false: no matter what he does to her, her story remains unchangeable - it cannot be interpreted in the way Achab chooses. In the world of the story he has therefore lost control - Tilka the narrator is queen and he is the object of her imagination. It is this world that magically encroaches on reality at the end of the text: the ironic narrator intervenes to tell us that no more was heard of Tilka or her sister, but of Achab, on the other hand, he says

> Dans l'histoire comme je la raconte, on dit que le lendemain matin, son cadavre fut découvert au pied de la tombe de Rabbi Löw; il tenait son pistolet d'ordonnance et ses lunettes s'étaient

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[16]Ibid., p. 145.

> cassées en heurtant le rebord de la pierre. Cette conclusion est-elle invraisemblable? Je n'en sais rien. Peut-être que convaincu par les paroles de la jeune fille, le professeur Achab avait voulu par ce dernier geste rejoindre l'histoire qui jusque-là lui avait toujours échappé; ou que l'histoire, magnanime, lui a donné ce coup de grâce, qu'elle prenne en pitié même les rois ou qu'elle craigne leurs revenants.[17]

The play on the French word *histoire* neatly brings the analogy between reading and living to life: since Tilka's story is a mirror of his own, his failure to read her text competently, his lack of respect for its 'intention', translates into a misreading of his own existence. The open ending permits two interpretations, but both lead to similar conclusions: either his failure to identify with his 'other' in the story meant that he was 'written out' of existence - powerless as an unwilling object of another's text, his self was consumed - or, in horror at the realization of his error, he killed himself, which would still satisfy the demands of Tilka's narrative. These 'magical' endings float happily side by side with the mundane historical explanation - the allies reached Prague and he shot himself rather than face capture.

It would certainly be a case of gross overinterpretation to insist on an explicit link between Petit's picture of this imaginary and idiosyncratic Nazi and deconstruction or any of its advocates, notwithstanding the allegedly dubious war record of Paul de Man. Such an argument would immediately run into the ground not least for reasons of chronology (de Man's posthumous embarrassment started late in 1987; Petit's text was published in 1986). Nor would it be particularly interesting - the text, as we have seen, has far more to offer than bitchy point-scoring within the academic world. Nevertheless, what Petit's text does put forward is a vigorous and humorous critique of relativism in general. The dangers of such positions when taken to

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[17]Ibid., p. 147.

extremes are exemplified by the uncomprehending inhumanity of Achab, whilst the logical poverty of his arguments is shown for the folly it is, and the reader laughs with the philosophers at his blindness. But this humour also brings us closer to him: for all his unpleasantness, he is a tragic figure. We experience the horror of seeing someone who is a victim of alienation, terrified by the world, convinced that he is right, commit acts of barbarism. Petit offers a peculiar balance between the light, ironic tone of a modern fairy-tale and the grim taste of catharsis offered by a Calderonian honour play.

This fusion achieves a stylistic simplicity that belies the complexity of ideas it conceals, thus annulling T S Eliot's dictum to the effect that modern art has to be difficult to suit the modern world. Petit, by leaving his readers familiar grip-holds to establish the 'ground rules', allows us to enjoy the game of reading while commenting on how this game can go wrong, and asking us to reflect on the consequences of incompetent reading in life as well as literature.

'Le Montreur et ses masques' addresses many of the same themes as 'Schéhérazade', and does so also within a framework that can be described in terms of Eco's model of the reading process. Here, though, the allegory of 'the world as text' is more explicit, and the problem of the author, indeed the death of the author, is related to the death of God. As in Eco's model, however, the text will encourage us to adopt Eco's view that 'it can look rather crude to eliminate the poor author as something irrelevant for the story of interpretation.'[18] This is not to say, however, that Petit is pushing religion down his readers' throats: his position (or rather, that of the text's model author) remains sceptically theoretical - the model author as God is just as much a construction of the world as Eco's creature is a construction of the text.

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[18]Eco, p. 66.

The parallel is drawn in the following way: the narrative tells of a classic form of theatre in the Javanese islands at the turn of the century. In fact, it is a sort of living puppet show, in which a *montreur*, known as a *dalang*, directs his actors who remain masked like in ancient Greece, and silent whilst he plays all the parts through them. The text focuses on one master *dalang*, Yozar Kebal, who is particularly celebrated for his dedication to his art, and his faithfully immaculate interpretation of the classics:

> Bien qu'il ne jouât jamais que le répertoire traditionnel, des pièces dont tout le monde savait le texte par coeur et dont chaque épisode était connu d'avance, il passionnait par la vertu de son seul verbe ses auditoires et les gens ne quittaient jamais la place avant l'aurore.[19]

He rules his troupe with a rod of iron, and those who join him are submitted to absolute obedience to their master's art:

> Ils apprendraient à jouer leur rôle, un rôle muet, accepteraient de n'être plus personne, de mourir au monde, à eux-mêmes, pour trouver leur accomplissement dans l'obéissance absolue. Les premiers temps, le maître du jeu imposait à chacun de jouer le rôle qui s'accordait le moins avec son caractère. Au timide, il donnait le masque du guerrier; au rêveur, celui de valet, à l'orgueilleux celui de bouffon... Celui qui s'était défait de soi n'était plus qu'une marionnette entre les mains toutes-puissantes du dalang qui disposait d'elle.[20]

It is clear that this society in miniature is highly authoritarian. The structure, it appears, is never broken: those who rise high enough in their art to become more than mere actors attain that mystical understanding of all roles, proper only to a *dalang*, and are forced out of the troupe to form their own. There is no room for two within the same world.

The structure is, however, to be broken by a revolt led by one of the *dalang*'s actors. Petit weaves in a story of young love: the *dalang*'s

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[19]Petit, pp. 166-7.
[20]Ibid., p. 168.

star actor falls for a young princess at the Sultan's court to whom the troupe were playing, but he is jealous because he feels eclipsed by his master, his true identity trapped behind his mask. This simple theme of adolescent revolt is used to veil the metaphysical significance it also carries. The argument that ensues over the meaning of the mask is revealing: throwing the mask to the ground (a great sacrilege in the *dalang*'s eyes), Hadi the actor expresses his frustration at the constraints placed on him by the *dalang*'s discipline - 'pourquoi devons-nous toujours nous dissimuler?...N'avons-nous pas le droit de jouer visage découvert, de jouer notre propre rôle et non celui d'un personnage?'[21] Hadi declares that he has heard of a theatre where the actors perform without masks, a land where people are free and equal, and it is his ambition to join them. The horrified *dalang* replies:

> Un masque. Un autre encore. Retire tous les masques et sous le dernier d'entre eux tu te verras: du vide. Regarde-le donc, ton visage, mais regarde-le! Où est-il? Peux-tu seulement l'apercevoir sans ton miroir? Un rien, un vide. Toi-même, tu n'es qu'une ombre, une idée, un fantôme. Le masque seul est une personne. Il ne te cache pas, il te montre.[22]

The relevance of this metaphor to the questions about the subject-object problem raised in 'Schéhérazade' is clear: the *dalang* is describing the nothingness that results from failure to identify with oneself as object; to strip away the masks that constrain the self is to strip away the whole being.[23]

Nevertheless, once the authority of the dalang has been challenged, it seems to evaporate. The actors find that they only submit to his severe discipline out of choice, so the departure of Hadi provokes more defections until he is left alone. But their revolt points

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[21]Ibid., p. 172.
[22]Ibid., p. 173.
[23]Indeed the very concept of 'person' seems to be bound up with theatre and the mask: in Latin, *persona* denotes the mask worn by the tragic actor.

out not so much their dependence on him, at least, not yet, but rather his dependence on them. As one of the actors states, 'Que serais-tu sans nous? Que serait ta parole sans nous pour l'incarner? Du vent, du buée, un vain bruit.'[24] Thus the author is put in his place - without his creation he is as void as he feels they are without their masks.

The scene is loaded with Biblical and Freudian symbolism: the *dalang* has already drawn a comparison between himself and God, so we are prompted to view the revolt of the actors in terms of man exercising his free will. But, given the authoritarian nature of his regime, their revolt seems justified: the free will was theirs to take anyway. Once this step has been taken, their relationship is different; they are children leaving their father,[25] making a necessary move towards maturity. Indeed, the *dalang* is powerless to stop them because he is obliged to follow the rules of the world he has created for them, in which his authority is founded on the actors' consent. To this extent, then, they are like characters in a book, free, not in the sense that they lead autonomous lives but free within the boundaries of the world in which they live.

It is now that the theme of this limited freedom is exploited by Petit to rediscover the concept of Christian free will in a secular metaphysical context. The *dalang* retreats to distant mountains to live in isolation, while in the world below, his former actors take part in the anti-colonial movements which sweep the islands. Thus a new parallel emerges: just as the actors choose to rid themselves of authoritarian rule, so the rest of the society to which they belong shakes off the external power of the Dutch colonists. The islanders have chosen to rule themselves. But the vacuum of power that this leaves results in

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[24]Ibid., p. 175.
[25]Ibid., p. 177.

civil war: too many conflicting interests erupt into violence. It would be easy at this point for a Marxist critic to dismiss the whole text as a complicated excuse for oppressive colonialism dressed up with bogus philosophy. This would be, however, to misrepresent it. The text certainly uses the image of post-colonial disintegration to support its metaphors, but does not praise colonial rule. Nor is it leading towards the conclusion that we would all be better off if we followed the diktat of the pope or anything like it. Petit is not lamenting a current age of godlessness whose problems would be solved by some sort of 'back to basics' campaign. Rather, he is laying before his readers a picture of mankind's condition as it always has been. In other stories (for instance 'La nuit du sorcier'[26]) he has characters in medieval France lamenting just the same sort of chaos that is described in the 20th century here.

The universal relevance of the story becomes clear in the denouement where the two actors who remain alive from the troupe come across their old *dalang* in the mountains as they flee the military reprisals that are devastating their country. They decide to play a game. They will reverse roles, the *dalang* will wear a mask, and the actors speak on his behalf. Nevertheless, what actually occurs seems to be yet another staging in which they are the actors: they perform a trial of their former *dalang*, one as prosecutor, the other as defence, in which they argue to what extent he was responsible for the disaster they have made of their lives. As an all-powerful master, should he not have forced the actors to conform, kept them to his rule? Did he not deliberately allow them to fall, all the better to assert his power over them later, when they realise that they need him? Alternatively, perhaps his indulgence was intended to be for the actors' good: having

[26]Ibid., pp. 191-248.

the freedom to choose, they would happily take up the constraints of the mask rather than fearfully obey him ('Pour que nous choisissions nous-même de jouer nos rôles au lieu de lui obéir comme des pantins?'[27]) The *dalang*, impassive, refrains from answering them. As with the author, or God, the actors are not privy to his intentions. He does, however, in his dying moments, attempt to express the inadequacy of both arguments, hinting at the possibility of harmonious plurality that does not rely on the authority of an outside voice:

> Un récit, ce n'est pas une seule chose, une idée, dit Yozar en cherchant ses mots, l'air épuisé, comme si le souffle, soudain, allait lui manquer. Ce n'est pas un seul cri, l'opinion d'un seul homme. Un récit, ce n'est pas la possession d'un seul, ce n'est pas la possession de celui qui raconte. Qui raconte? Pas celui qui raconte... Non, vraiment, pas celui qui joue le rôle de celui qui raconte... Un récit...[28]

Thus while in 'Schéhérazade' Petit guides the reader towards an appreciation of the limits of interpretation and the need for such limits, here he turns back from the univocal authoritarianism that represents the opposite danger. The *dalang* accepts authorial impotence - the text is not the possession of the *conteur* and realises that the *conteur* is as much a character of the text as any other. Ultimately, his respect rests with the *récit*, the text, alone. This means that, as Eco says, whilst it may be impossible to choose between 'good' interpretations, it is possible to define 'bad' ones as those that do not respect the coherence of the text. This conclusion, Petit seems to be suggesting, can hold for our interpretation of our roles in the world too.

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[27]Ibid., p. 186.
[28]Ibid., p. 189.

PART II

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

CHAPTER 7

THE CIRCULAR NARRATIVE

Having established a notion of the theoretical background of the *Nouvelle Fiction*, of the character of the new kind of active 'model reader' it demands, and the relationship it aspires to achieve between text and world, more through playful subversion than earnest engagement, I propose here in Part II to examine specific aspects of *Nouvelle Fiction* practice. The choice of textual strategies discussed (the circular narrative; parody, pastiche and intertextuality; narrative masks; and *mise en abyme*), arises firstly from the preoccupations and characteristics of the texts themselves. These aspects of the texts also serve to distinguish further the *Nouvelle Fiction* from the *nouveau roman*, since these strategies are frequently employed by the earlier movement, but usually in a markedly distinct way. This analysis, however, also demonstrates the breadth of *Nouvelle Fiction* writing, and the divergence of practice amongst its members, despite their philosophical common ground.

The narrative as a circular structure takes a variety of forms. Its most familiar apparition is as a loop in time, in which the starting point in narrative time is also the end. This is usually described quite simply as flashback: a situation is presented to the reader which is then explained in terms of the events leading up to it until the narrative comes full circle and the text ends temporally at the point where it started.

Such a device can, however, be understood in terms of two distinct effects, with different implications for the reception of the text. First, it can be what one might term a 'readerly gambit', a structure

employed in order to elicit a desire in the reader. We read of strange, exciting or inexplicable events, and the text imposes the desire for an understanding of how this situation came about on to its model reader. This is also the case with narratives that start *in medias res*, where the text grasps the attention of the reader by introducing the story at a moment of high tension, and only fills in the necessary details once the reader has been as it were seduced.

Secondly, such temporal circularity can be a device of 'writerly' reflexivity. The text starts in the narrative present and flashes back only to explain how the words we are reading have come to be written. It tells the story of its own production. This kind of circle is by its nature more of a self-conscious entity: it necessarily draws attention to the writing process alongside any readerly immersion in the plot.

The circle as a structuring device in a text need not, however, involve a temporal loop, the technique of flashback and resolution. A circle can be formed through the repetition of text or of situations which return the protagonist, the reader or both to their starting point.

The writers under discussion make use of just these variations on the circle in a number of different works. Sometimes it acts merely as a means of giving narrative structure, but in the more interesting examples, as will be seen, the structure implicit in the design of the narrative is married with thematic material. The symbolic potential of circularity is exploited to various effects, whether positive or negative. On the one hand, the circle can be seen as a positive symbol of continuity, of closure and of definite meaning. On the other, it could be interpreted as a symbol of entrapment, of the inescapable.

Hubert Haddad:'L'homme des gares'[1]

Hubert Haddad's short stories often make use of one or more of the circular structures outlined above. He focuses in particular on the railway as a motif with which to convey circularity. It is not, however, always used in the same way, and the train motif is used in different stories to emphasise both the positive and negative aspects of circularity.

The train has, since Butor's *La Modification*, held a special position in modern French literature as a place of psychological change. In *La Modification*, the narrator is imprisoned by the train with his thoughts and a limited number of stimuli within the small world of his carriage. The journey between Paris and Milan represents not just a movement in space but an emotional shift between women, the wife and the mistress. The association of geographical with emotional movement make the latter seem as inevitable as the former: the train, running on its rails, is as inevitably bound for Milan as the hero is bound to leave his wife. In fact, this association is a false one: the train may go on to Milan, but inside, the hero goes on a psychological journey that takes his heart back to the woman in Paris. The train exists as a vehicle for transformation.

In Haddad's 'L'homme des gares', the train operates in some ways as precisely the opposite. Rather than as a means for transformation it seems to offer this hero an escape from life, an escape from precisely the kind of vital life decisions made in *La Modification*. He withdraws entirely from the world outside the system. In fact the train, far from being a positive force for change, brings about a gradual

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[1]Hubert Haddad, 'L'homme des gares', in*Le Secret de l'Immortalité* (Paris: Criterion, 1991).

disintegration of his life outside: the disposal of his fortune and eventually even his divorce is arranged through telephone calls from the various stations he passes through. The entire European rail network operates as an alternative universe removed from the real world which the lonely protagonist chooses, or is unable to leave, until a final ecstatic embrace of the world outside the closed system of the trains brings a mystic revelation of meaning and freedom from the endless circling around the system.

Uriel Hope-Felice's situation superficially bears some resemblance to that of the hero of *La Modification*. Rather than Paris to Milan, however, Uriel is going home to Paris from Barcelona, where he has been spending time with a mistress, although we are given to understand she is very much a passing fancy, a bit of company for a wealthy but lonely traveller:

> Il s'efforçait d'imaginer l'avenir immédiat, son retour à Paris, l'accueil de sa famille. Dans quelques minutes, il s'emploierait à se défaire d'une mince nostalgie liée à cette fille de Barcelone qui lui avait refusé un baiser d'adieu après sept nuits somptuaires à l'hôtel Calderón.[2]

The sense of purpose of the travel in *La Modification* is also lacking in 'L'homme des gares'. Uriel travels not for business reasons or even to visit a particular woman, but rather to alleviate a rather old-fashioned 'ennui':

> Un compte en banque et nulle ambition réduisent ainsi un homme au spéctacle paralysé de sa vie. Les voyages par chance variaient l'angle et la teinte des jours. Les voyages en train, principalement pour goûter sans subterfuge à l'effet de dépaysement qui constitue l'essentiel de l'aventure.[3]

The function and atmosphere of the train itself is also quite different to Butor's use of it. The train in *La Modification* functions at one level as a

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[2]Ibid., pp. 11-12.
[3]Ibid., p. 9.

place of security in which the hero can make his decision in peace, his thoughts stimulated by his responses to the limited physical world of the railway carriage and of its occupants. The adventure is entirely psychological, albeit that the patterns of thought are steered by the interaction of the memory and the physical. The process always stops when the hero leaves the compartment though: the train does not represent any physical threat to his well-being.

In Haddad the status of the train and of the railway network is quite different. Uriel's misfortunes commence as *physical* accidents: cows on the line cause the train to lurch, throwing a young woman against him; disturbed by the smell of perfume and perspiration she leaves on his hands, he goes to wash himself; the lock gets stuck in the washroom and he misses his connection; and so on. These mishaps necessitate explanations with the ticket collector, and bring on his first sense of panic and self examination:

> Il fallut bientôt s'expliquer avec le contrôleur, un Basque à l'accent appuyé qui répétait sans raison, en hochant la tête: « Je comprends, les vaches, la poignée, très bien, très bien...» Pourquoi eut-il alors le sentiment que sa vie même était en péril? Le wagon n'allait pas dérailler ni le contrôleur l'expulser du train en marche! Cela procédait plutôt d'une sorte de révélation obtuse liée au parfum de la passagère, au savon noir sur ses mains, à l'accent basque de l'employé - il ne savait trop. Une chose lui paraissait évidente: un dessein venait de se dévoiler, une figure impalpable de ce qu'on nomme hasard ou destinée.[4]

The scent on his hands and the series of events, thoughts and sensations it provokes are the beginning of a radical shift in his existence: the point being that the train and the rest of the physical world plays a far more active role than in Butor. It is more than a secure vessel in which reflection can take place.

Thrown off schedule by his missed connection, Uriel is forced to change at a desolate suburban station, Deuil-le-Vautre, where he is

[4]Ibid., p. 8.

further disturbed by the hostility, ugliness and emptiness of the world in which he finds himself. This is only relieved by the image of ordered travel offered by the station's activities:

> Uriel Hope-Felice recouvra tout son calme quand, à la seconde près, l'omnibus entra en gare: il y avait là un ordre, une planification horlogère de l'espace propre à mater son agoraphobie. Il était séduit par cette réduction de tout trafic à la ligne sur un plan, au sein d'un réseau d'arabesques d'acier - ce qui supprimait la dimension panique.[5]

Uriel's retreat into the train network is precipitated ultimately by the attack by skinheads on the next train he boards, but curiously the physical violence is almost cathartic for him; it purges the sense of panic from which he had been suffering since the first interruptions of his journey.

> - Ton fric, maintenant! dit le plus acharné.
> Bizarrement, toute l'angoisse accumulée depuis Barcelone et Moulins s'était d'un coup évanouie grâce à cette effraction de violence triviale qui avait du moins sur son esprit la vertu des choses tangibles. Ainsi guérit-on de ses migraines à la guerre! La situation toutefois ne manquait pas d'être critique car on menaçait de le jeter sur la voie. Il estima que tomber d'un train devait équivaloir, à cette vitesse, à une défenestration d'un huitième étage. Son sangfroid, né d'une impérieuse distraction de rescapé, impressionna assez les «skin-head» pour les faire hésiter jusqu'à l'entrée en gare.

Curiously, it is the belated helpfulness of the frightened passengers who witnessed the attack that disturbs Uriel again. 'La soif de réparation l'inquétait plus que le dommage'[6] we are told, and the eager pursuit of the tardily well-meaning passengers gives him a sense of fraternity with the skin-heads, ('Uriel s'enfuit un peu à la manière de ses agresseurs'[7]). Haddad does not attempt to elucidate the actions of his hero; we are simply told that the aspect of the *place de la gare* turned

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[5]Ibid., p. 11.
[6]Ibid., p. 14.
[7]Ibid., p. 13.

him away, 'le coeur battant'.[8] Liberated of his baggage by the skinheads, he gets on the next train that is leaving, as it happens, for Milan, and so begin his aimless wanderings across Europe, his years of constant travel, his nights spent in first-class sleepers or sitting up if there are none available.

Uriel spends his time going round in circles within the railway network, visiting the same cities again and again. This, then, is a symbolic circularity rather than a structural one, an image of an apparently futile treadmill existence that does not emerge at the level of the text as a means of organising text. The *narrative* circle, however, is only made apparent when it is closed by a repetition not even of events but of a smell, when a Proustian memory returns him to the incident which started the narrative years before, and that first induced in him that panic.

> Uriel s'agita; il regrettait l'entassement des armoires, l'usure des vieux habits, les rêves de départ. La portière entrouverte filtrait un parfum de femme, une senteur délicate et poivrée. Il se mit à trembler de tous ses membres. ...
>
> Uriel voulut se dégourdir les jambes. Une femme très maigre et fardée occupait le compartiment voisin. Il ne put détacher d'elle son regard. Ses traits brouillés par l'âge l'effrayaient un peu. Il se dit qu'un parfum sur un vieux corps prend vite une odeur organique. Le soleil mourant dorait son visage. Elle fixait sur lui des yeux agrandis; ses lèvres bougeaient. Il crut entendre de mots perdus, des chuchotements. Uriel Hope-Felice se précipita à l'autre bout du couloir et tira calmement la poignée d'alarme.[9]

It is only now that he finally leaves the system and rejoins the world, completing the circle and thereby finding an order, a pattern in life, in the world outside that had previously seemed such a threatening void. The attraction of the trains had been the appearance of order in a void: the network, the timetable offered the security of a pattern that could

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[8]Ibid., p. 15.
[9]Ibid., p. 25.

be followed unthinkingly at the moment he felt existentially threatened and agoraphobic in Deuil-le-Vautre and then later at the threshold of the *place de la gare*; now the outside world has provided its own structure and Uriel is able to free himself.

On the one hand the circularity implied by the repetitive train journeys brings with it a representation of infinite play, of perpetual travel without end, with its own compensations, such as the pleasure of the adventure of travel without the anxiety of arrival, and the cure for insomnia offered by the cot-like motion of the *wagon-lit*. On the other, Uriel seems stuck in an inescapable network of empty signs, all sliding from one to another, the stations no longer representing their cities, but simply existing as 'des portes donnant sur de longs corridors de ciel et d'arbres...'[10] The circle opened and closed by the scent of a woman, however, actually does offer us and Uriel a beginning and an end: here parodoxically the circle *does* provide not only a narratorial but also an emotional *telos* for reader and Uriel respectively. The 'system' is not, in fact, inescapable; its parameters are limited and through the mystical personal association of smell Uriel is able to find his own meaning, which is beyond the system he had clung to for the security of its explicit order.

'Le livre de la fin'[11]

Haddad's story 'Le livre de la fin' gives a quite different example of the circular narrative. Here, the circular structure is formed by an actual repetition of text. The significant difference is that on its first appearance it is in quotation marks, and on its second it is not; that is to

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[10]Ibid., p. 24.
[11]Hubert Haddad, 'Le livre de la fin', in *La Rose de Damocles* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1982)

say, the first instance the text appears is as part of another text, in fact a story written by the protagonist of Haddad's story, an author called Jean Belmain.

> ...Il descendit l'escalier, fou d'angoisse, avec une impression de chute dans le temps. A mi-étage, sous le vitrail d'une mezzanine, il s'arrêta pour regarder sa montre: dix-sept heures. Il ne lui restait plus que dix minutes à vivre. Tout se passait selon l'ordre prémonitoire. Chacun de ses regards semblait cadrer minutieusement le film du rêve. La sueur coulait dans son dos, glaciale comme une lame. Dans la rue, la panique culmina. Ébloui par le soleil couchant, il se prit à courir vers l'encombrement des boulevards. La foule devant lui fendait ses eaux noires. A chaque pas, l'horreur se précisait. Un tourbillon d'images le portait vers le fond. Mais ces mouvances bientôt s'organisèrent selon une structure inouïe. Quelque chose éclata. Mille vitres dans le sang du ciel. Est-ce un camion qui le heurta? Le soleil broya son crâne et l'univers entier gicla de toutes parts...[12]

The protagonist of the Belmain's story thus runs to his death. The author is particularly disturbed by this work, more than any other, and feels unable to finish it, hence the suspension points. He finds that his work always forces itself into his life, prefigures the events of his own existence, and so on this occasion things have clearly gone too far.

> Jean Belmain referma violemment son manuscrit. Il ne pouvait continuer plus loin ce récit. Chacun de ses livres auparavant avait empiété sur sa vie avec une voracité de goule. Il en sortait toujours amoindri, transparent comme après une symbiose épuisante où tout son sang passait dans l'imaginaire. Mais cette fois c'était trop. Il perdait le souffle et le sens. Sa main tremblait sur l'intransigeance du papier. Il jeta le cahier dans un tiroir. Le livre resterait inachevé, à moins qu'un autre prît la plume.[13]

When the opening text is repeated, at least up to 'Tout se passait selon l'ordre prémonitoire', it is clear that his work has indeed intruded into his life, and that the circular structure of the narrative is formed by a *mise en abyme* that 'structures by embedding' to use Dällenbach's

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[12]Ibid., p. 109.
[13]Ibid., p. 110.

term.[14] Here again the circle is paradoxically anything but a closed structure: within a very controlled text of only three pages the reader is confronted with a range of interpretative possibilities. Firstly, the story can be seen as a sketch on the agonies of authorship, a typical modernist piece of writerly self-preoccupation, in which the pain of creation is described in terms of the recovery from an illness.[15] Secondly, the artist who is to live beyond death through his work is perhaps also in a sense killed by it: we know the artist only through his work so the man himself is lost. It is a literal working out, perhaps a gentle mockery, of the theory of the 'death of the author', although the more radical interpretative possibilities associated with this theory are not explored. On the contrary, the *mise en abyme* forces us to accept the author as a character in his own fiction; he is not abolished altogether. Thirdly, one might see the story as a vision of the inescapability of art and of fiction in general. The writer's own story catches up with him at the moment he decides to abandon writing as a career. It is emblematic of another *Nouvelle Fiction* preoccupation, namely that our identities or values are, like it or not, all formed by a collage of half-assimilated fictions, that our perceptions of the world are constantly loaded with the baggage of the imaginary. The tight circle of the narrative represents this inescapability, the inevitability of all things turning back to fiction.

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[14] '[La] Structuration par enchâssement.' Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), p. 77. See Chapter 10 for a full discussion of *mise en abyme* in the *Nouvelle Fiction*.

[15] "Chaque titre était le nom d'une maladie inconnue dont il avait subi docilement l'hystérie jusqu'aux fièvres de rejet." Hubert Haddad, p. 110.

'Ouroboros'

In 'Ouroboros', Haddad turns back to the train motif once again for a symbol of circularity. Here, however, it is the metro that is chosen to represent the 'train-train de la vie ordinaire', to misquote Coupry.[16] The circle emerges as a horrifying representation of sterility, futility and the inescapable. Michel Hesdé, an office worker forced through the sameness of the Parisian rush-hour each day, finds himself oppressed by the recurring apparition of a weeping woman in the corridors of the underground. The striking image of the stranger's grief arrests his attention, yet he is unsure what to do, and so rushes on with the rest of the commuters:

> Il marchait d'un même pas, accablé d'ennui, quand il aperçut une silhouette appuyée contre un mur. A mesure qu'il approchait une femme se dessina, brune et très jeune, et qui sanglotait dans une sorte d'abandon du corps au désespoir, la tête dodelinante, les épaules secouées. Il allait la croiser, le coeur battant. Que faire? L'aborder, la consoler, lui proposer ses services? Autour d'elle, on se pressait sans s'arrêter, jetant sur l'incident un regard oblique où se lisait une trouble curiosité mêlée d'inquiétude. Michel Hesdé fut bientôt au niveau de la femme éplorée. Il ralentit pour mieux saisir l'incompréhensible drame. Elle avait posé son front sur le carrelage et pleurait, indifférente, les yeux noircis et les cheveux défaits. Au comble de l'indécision, il finit par dépasser l'apparition sans même oser tourner la tête.[17]

The narrative concentrates entirely on the morning routine but it is implied that it represents the whole, and the rest of the day is summarised thus: 'Michel Hesdé s'enfonça dans sa vaine journée comme en une manière de coma.'[18] When the next day comes, the reappearance of the weeping woman upsets Hesdé ('...il sentit soudain

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[16]In François Coupry, *Le fils du concierge de l'Opéra* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1992), it is 'le train-train du merveilleux' that the hero is forced to come to terms with.
[17]Hubert Haddad, "Ouroboros", in *La Rose de Damocles* , p. 71.
[18]Ibid., p. 71.

son dos se glacer'[19]); he wonders whether it can be explained as a practical joke played by his office colleagues. The next day, however, brings the same scene, and Hesdé decides to confront the woman and clear the matter up. At the last moment, he is relieved by the thought that she must be a madwoman, laughs at himself, and resolves to buy a bus pass the following week in order to make a change to his routine. It is only on Friday, the fifth day he has witnessed the same scene, that his perception of the situation suffers a change: the single moment of particular dramatic significance acts as a focus which sharpens the reader's and Hesdé's sensitivity to all that is repetitious in Hesdé's life. The sobbing woman is emblematic of a pattern of which she is also a part.

> Une effarante révélation le prit alors à la gorge: ce taxi tout à l'heure, et cette dame offusquée, et cette borne humaine au milieu du circuit! Dans le wagon les écolières chahutaient de plus belle. Épouvanté, Michel Hesdé se jeta hors du train au nouvel arrêt. Tout s'organisait dans sa mémoire avec une précision d'horloge. Il tourbillonnait, fétu dans un ressac de signes. Enfin la rue, les voitures, puis, nécessaire comme l'anneau bouclant la chaîne, ce grand fracas de tôles entre le jour et les ténèbres.[20]

We now look back at the preceding narrative, and find a new significance in the words chosen to emphasise the habitual, routine nature of the actions. 'Il prépara machinalement du café...'; 'La journée s'inaugurait pourtant comme à l'ordinaire...'; 'Depuis combien d'années empruntait-il ainsi le morne chemin du bureau, l'oeil sur sa montre tous les dix pas pour s'assurer de ses cinq éternelles minutes d'avance!' All these quotes come from the first paragraph alone. Inconsequential on first reading, they seem to form a very ordinary 'realist' description of the daily grind. The revelation experienced by Hesdé throws these ordinary events into a chilling metaphysical

[19]Ibid., p. 72.
[20]Ibid., p. 74.

perspective. For the woman seems to have stepped off the wheel of life, or to have got stuck somewhere on it. As Hesdé puts it in the last line of the story: '-Une folle, une pauvre démente bloquée dans son histoire...'

'Ouroboros', then, represents a far bleaker vision of the implications of circularity than any we have encountered so far. 'Le livre de la fin' and 'L'homme des gares' use the circle ambivalently, seeing in it both life-denying and life-enhancing qualities, as we have seen. 'Ouroboros' presents us with a choice between the dreary, soul-destroying circularity of the monotonous metro, or the prospect of madness in isolation outside the system.

Marc Petit: 'Ouroboros'

Marc Petit uses the same title for his epic novel set in Baroque Germany. It is of baroque proportions and complexity itself, and there is not space here to examine it in detail, but we can hardly let it go by without a mention in this context. The great worm is monstrously represented in the daunting structure of the text itself. A glance at the *table* is enough: excluding the *post-scriptum* its three parts are horribly serpentine. From the small head of Part I, 'Quirinus' (ten pages) to the smaller tail of Part III, 'Corona' (ten pages), there coils the monstrous body of Part II, 'Andréas', some four hundred and seventy-two pages long. The principal circle formed within these chapters is a temporal and so structural one: Part I tells the story of the burning of Quirinus for heresy in Moscow. Lost in the completely different histories introduced in Part II, it is some considerable time before Quirinus as a young man is introduced and the reader is able to give some significance to the opening chapter. By the third part, Quirinus's

career as a heretic has been thoroughly plotted, and the narrative finally catches up with the story started in Part I.

The great worm is not, however, merely structural, but is used as a vehicle for rambling searches for meaning from all the principal characters. Circles are formed by the repetition of events, the revisiting of places, the rereading of books. As Petit summarises it,

> Chacun des personnages, une fois au moins, à son heure, aura la vision d'Ouroboros, le serpent qui se dévore lui-même, emblème de l'éternel retour selon la tradition ésotérique, dont aucune interprétation en perspective n'épuise la richesse de sens ou bien, peut-être, l'inanité profonde.[21]

There is one example of *l'eternel retour* that stretches beyond the temporal bounds of the book. In Part II we witness a town council meeting about how best to dispose of sorcerers and heretics couched in the most fantastic and blackly comic terms:

> C'est qu'à chaque fois, il nous faut faire pareille dépense alors que nous pourrions commodément grouper les frais si nous brûlions les condamnés ensemble. A combien reviendrait le pain si, au lieu de le cuire par fournées, j'utilisais autant de bois pour cuire une seul miche? Construisons donc une sorte de four, alimenté par un seul feu, assez grand pour qu'on y brûle quarante sorcières. Nous y gagnerons tout à la fois temps et argent. Les principes de l'hygiène s'en trouveront également mieux respectés: une seule cheminée convoiera toute la fumée vers les hauteurs, évitant que les miasmes ne retombent dispersés sur la foule, ce qui ne fait qu'accroître les risques d'épidémie. De surcroît, nous pourrions utiliser la chaleur dégagée par la combustion des corps à des travaux profitables, comme la cuisson de briques et de tuiles, dont l'industrie est une des premières ressources de notre région.[22]

The worthy baker's homely comparisons with his trade, the public-spirited way in which he thinks out how the enterprise can be turned to profit, inevitably create a comic effect, however grim. It is not until Petit draws our attention to the scene again in the exaggeratedly

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[21]From the blurb to Marc Petit,*Ouroboros* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).
[22]Ibid., pp. 455-456.

learned *post-scriptum* that the historical wheel is brought alarmingly full circle, as he tells us

> l'invention du four crématoire destiné à brûler collectivement les sorcières n'est pas une facilité de plume. Il semble que ce procédé ait été mis au point en Silésie, non loin d'Auschwitz, dès 1639.[23]

Not only was the image drawn from reality, despite the comic distance, but we are not permitted to consign it to some previously barbarous age: the serpent has returned this particular practice to us in our own century.

Circularity pursues the main characters too: Quirinus is the son of a sorceress burnt at the stake herself, an event Andréas witnesses in Part II,[24] and snatched from her arms as a baby: hence he is more or less born of fire only to die of it. Is this destiny or a self-fulfilling obsession with flames, only originating after he discovers the terrible secret of his birth? As Andréas's adoptive son, he then deserts him to begin his career in heresy. This in itself forms a repetition of Andréas's early life: he too left the family home after a discovery about his father. The theme of the sons cast out of their fathers' houses then prompts us to recall the story of Genesis, where another snake comes into play. The theme of transgression followed by journey and exile is repeated continuously; the circle is resolved only to begin again.

Petit resists conclusions in *Ouroboros*: the morality of the Baroque world is rewritten for the post-modern age and the endless circling of plot, characters and events within and outside the text is used to depict a Rabelaisian, carnivalised world-view in which the reader is abandoned in a sea of playfully deceitful multiplicity to make up his or her own mind.

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[23]Ibid., pp. 503-4.
[24]Ibid., p. 76.

G-O Châteaureynaud: 'Le fou dans la chaloupe'

Châteaureynaud's *Le fou dans la chaloupe* offers, particularly with its first two stories, 'Ses dernières pages' and 'Après', fine examples of the temporal circular narrative, though in quite different ways. The first, 'Ses dernières pages', is a classic case of analepsis, in which both 'readerly' and 'writerly' strategies are employed to structure the narrative. The text exists in order to explain how it came about, but it also tells the story of the career of a writer. The readerly strategy, the appeal to our desire to uncover mystery, is a classic formula, employed in countless works, both literary and cinematic, from the most serious to the most commercial. Stefan Zweig's story 'A woman of no importance', for example, starts with one of the most effective ways to create this strategy, in essence: 'If you are reading these words then I am already dead'. Such an opening gambit forces us to ask 'Why? What happened?' The text immediately offers to explain the history of its author and its own reason for existence.

Châteaureynaud does just the same in 'Ses dernières pages', which begins thus:

> Voici que l'Armoire est vide, et le soir tombe. Sans doute va-t-il falloir mourir ou ce sera tout comme. Ces pages seront les dernières. Et d'une certaine manière il s'en faut de peu qu'elles ne soient aussi les premières. Cependant j'ai trente-huit ans, mon nom est célèbre. Mes livres ont fait fortune de mon éditeur et ma gloire, mais aussi l'équivoque désespoir sur lequel ma vie s'achève.[25]

The portentous upper case for *Armoire*, the certainty that these will be the last pages to be written, the mysterious suggestion that they are also the first, the promise of death, all demand an analeptic explanation. Just this is provided: the story starts eight years before the

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[25]G-O Châteaureynaud, "Ses dernières pages", in *Le fou dans la chaloupe* (Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1973), p. 9.

narrative present when the narrator is a thirty-year-old with literary ambitions but with no definite inspiration, no muse. A picture is painted of the amusing preparations made by the narrator before he begins.

> Puis j'ordonnai près du sous-main mes propres instruments. Mes stylos, mes crayons, mes gommes, ma colle, mes ciseaux, mes agrafes, mes fétiches. Puis une rame de papier bon marché et une autre de beau vélin pour la mise au propre, et la machine à écrire débarrassée de sa housse que je disposai en attente sur une chaise toute proche.[26]

Despite having all the physical props of the writer, there seems to be nothing there: 'Des mois, des années, j'avais attendu cet instant. Et puis rien. La même vieille impuissance effarée, la même fatigue.'[27] Then he makes the discovery of a life's work of anonymous scripts in a battered wardrobe belonging to his landlady. He spends the next years copying them, yet the process is not really copying, since he actually writes the text himself, then consults the original to check that he has got it right.

Thus the story is brought to the narrative present when the *Armoire* is exhausted. The circular structure provided by the analepsis is here an effective narrative strategy, but it can not be said to carry any thematic importance in itself.

In 'Après', however, the loop in time is at the story level and not merely a structural device. The text we read is, once again, the story of its own creation, but this time there is no analepsis: the narrative starts at the beginning of the story. The circle is drawn by an actual voyage through time, the two ends of which are only closed by the text. It is the story of the career of a ghost from the moment of his death to his successful reincarnation through the possession of a young witch at the

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[26]Ibid., p. 12.
[27]Ibid.

end of the 16th century. It is only in the last pages that the 'author's' purpose becomes clear: denied true death after his soul left his body, pestered with every kind of heaven and hell imaginable, the heavens seem as empty in all their multiplicity as life had done before. The release he searches for is real oblivion, nothingness, an end rather than a continuation. The only way to achieve this is by breaking the rules of the underworld: by entering life again, he can be sure that when death comes to him for the second time it will be final. All that will remain of him will be the text we read, a last sign of an existence that was, but definitely is no more. The circle is closed by the reader: the fact that we are reading the text at all indicates that the temporal loop has been brought up to date.

> L'oeuvre touche à son terme. Je n'ai plus d'illusions quant à son utilité, je me contente de l'avoir accomplie. Non, les hommes ne se soucieront pas de mes révélations. Mon livre se perdra dans la masse des histoires qu'ils se racontent, si même un berger n'en use point pour allumer son feu un soir de pluie. Et peu m'importe. Il ne me déplaît pas de l'abandonner aux fantaisies de l'histoire. Il me suffit de savoir qu'un jour peut-être, avant la fin du monde, un homme l'ouvrira et le lira, et que peut-être aussi, après avoir tourné la dernière page, il en rêvera quelques instants avant de quitter son fauteuil pour replonger dans sa tourmente. Cette chance infime, voilà tout ce que j'ai jamais espéré, et le destin malgré tout s'est montré clément qui m'a permis de la tenter au-delà du temps qui m'était imparti.[28]

These words are the key to the closing of the circle in time: they draw a picture of the readers, who are implicated in the narrative structure, and become characters themselves. The fact that we are reading these words, now, in the late 20th century, proves that the ghostly narrator's wish has been granted, and that his readers are contemporaries of his first incarnation. Hence the 'first level' reader is employed in the narrative game. At the second level, however, there is a Borgesian wink at the audience which arguably places the text in the realm of the

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[28] G-O Châteaureynaud, "Après", in *Le fou dans la chaloupe*, p. 128.

fantastic: we need not suspend our disbelief for ever, but are now invited to enjoy the story as an amusing distraction: 'il en rêvera quelques instants avant de quitter son fauteuil...'

Reading, writing and existence are bound together by the structure of the circle. Just as in Haddad's 'L'homme des gares', the circular structure implies not infinite play, not a world of playful shift without meaning, but ultimately precisely the opposite. It is above all a teleological vision. Through the process of writing, the ghost has given himself the kind of immortality he desired, beyond the futile shifting from the various alternative paradises he finds in the afterlife, from beatific contemplation of the godhead to sensual self-indulgence in an African Eden. Through reading we have assisted in that process, given the author what he asked for, and witnessed the creation of meaning from nothing. The apparently closed, self-perpetuating structure amounts to more than the sum of its parts when the reader is made part of the interpretation, a living character within the fiction.

The circle, in the hands of a New Fictionist, beyond being merely an effective practical gambit for gaining the attention of the reader, is at its best when its full potential as a rich source of metaphysical symbolism is exploited. In all but 'Ses dernières pages', the examples discussed have indeed explored such possibilities beyond the structural. It would be difficult to argue that there is a consensus in the group; the circular in narrative and in life is approached by Petit for instance as an eternal form, a symbol of inevitable return, amoral in itself. Haddad and Châteaureynaud are inclined to internalise it, to use it as a source for a personal quest for meaning, or indeed as an obstacle to that quest. Perhaps most striking is their resistance to the closure the circle would seem to imply. Paradoxically the *Nouvelle Fiction*

circular text tends more towards interpretative openness, as we have seen. For the protagonists implicated in the circle, the position is ambivalent. For Uriel Hope-Felice, for instance, it is only after he has borne the sterility of the first circle that he breaks through to the delight of the second, the full circle of the senses, started and finished by perfume. As usual with the *Nouvelle Fiction*, the text is not allowed to stand in frosty intellectual isolation, but however fantastic or esoteric the tale, its protagonists confront an overwhelming imperative, an absolute obligation (Ananké, the personification of Necessity, the figure that binds the three stories of *Le fou dans la chaloupe*) to find meaning. In 'Après', perhaps the most striking example, the reader is part of this search.

CHAPTER 8

PARODY, PASTICHE AND INTERTEXTUALITY

Intertextuality: problems of definition and use

Books, as all writers know, have always spoken of other books, and all stories have already been told. Intertextuality, a term coined by Kristeva, is really a fashionable, post-structuralist word to describe the many and various relationships between books. It is by no means a new concept, then, only a usefully concise way of expressing an old one. Convenient jargon has the habit, however, of attracting all manner of extraneous theoretical baggage, so it would be as well to make clear from the beginning how the term will be used here. I do not propose it as a complete model for all literary discourse, a picture of the linguistic universe, a deconstructive cypher for the inescapable play within the system, as a sign of the inescapably self-referential nature of language, a picture of instability as one text slips into another and then into another and so on, like Uriel Hope-Felice on his trains, arriving only to depart again, apparently lost in a system with no external points of reference. It is possible to weave no end of exotic theories about the political, sexual, psychological or philosophical significance of intertextuality, and these may be more or less convincing. My own interests in intertextuality in this chapter will be far more modest: I propose to examine examples of the different relationships some *Nouvelle Fiction* texts have with their predecessors. This will probably not tell us anything startling about literature in general, but by concentrating on finding meaningful limits to the potentially boundless realm of intertextuality, following the example

set by Eco in other areas of interpretation, it may at least further map out the theory and practice of the movement.

Genette in *Palimpsestes* attempts to define more closely some of the different phenomena covered by the term 'intertextuality'. He sees Kristeva's use of the term as limited to mere reference or allusion, and proposes 'transtextuality' to cover everything, although Kristeva's term in the broader sense seems since to have taken on Genette's notion of transtextuality anyway. His five divisions of the inter- or transtextuality , as summarised by Worton and Still, are as follows:

> 'Kristevan' intertextuality (now perceived as covering allusion as well as quotation and plagiarism); paratextuality, which he radically redefines as the relations between the body of the text and its titles, epigraphs, illustrations, notes, first drafts etc.; metatextuality; architextuality, now defined as a tacit perhaps even subconscious, gesture to genre-demarcations (and therefore as implying, for the reader, a Jaussian horizon of expectation); hypertextuality... Genette defines the latecome text as the *hypertext* and its pretext as the *hypotext* - although he distinguishes here between metatextual commentaries and literary, transformatory texts, be they imitative or revolutionary.[1]

These refinements may be useful, particularly the notion of architextuality, which would seem to highlight one important aspect of the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s practice, namely its playful uncertainty over genre, while coinciding with reader-response theories of readerly expectations, or for that matter, limitations. Nevertheless, the issue of intertextuality seems to be no different from any other aspect of interpretation in that it is governed by the limitations placed on the reader by the intention of the text. In other words, it is no use one reader detecting deeply veiled references to obscure intertexts, possibly anachronistic or drawn from the collective literary unconscious, if they

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[1]Worton and Still (eds.), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 22.

are not plausible within the textual context, and cannot be incorporated in an 'economical' interpretation.

We must try to distinguish, then, between individual readers' perception of possible unacknowledged intertexts, detected through a faint similarity of ideas, images or structures between the main text and anything else an empirical reader may have read, and a more narrow band of intertexts reasonably implied by the *intentio operis* as being within the knowledge required of the model reader. As usual, the line between these two categories of intertext is difficult to draw. Eco, in *Interpretation and over interpretation*, tells us how he was faced with just this problem by his Russian interpreter, who also wrote a critical essay on the book, in which she discovered similarities between his book and Emile Henroit's *La rose de Bratislava*. Eco admits that 'it is perfectly useless for me to say that, as an empirical author, I had never read Henroit's novel and that I did not know that it existed.'[2] If books speak amongst themselves then it does not seem unimaginable that Eco and Henroit should have other intertexts in common; his interpreter, however, elaborates a connection between the memoirs of Casanova (the sought-for manuscript in Henroit) and the lost document in Eco's story. Eco goes on to explain why to him, as a disinterested model reader of his own text, this reading is uneconomical and uninteresting. Whilst the contact between Henroit and Eco is undoubtedly there, despite the empirical author's ignorance, it simply does not lead anywhere. Relations with intertexts should therefore be pursued with as much care as any other aspect of interpretation.

This kind of uneconomical interpretative movement is a very common psychological reaction when reading. We spot a similarity with something we have read before; this helps us understand the

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[2]Eco, p. 75.

current text better: we are put at ease by the vision of something familiar. At this point, however, we must resist the temptation to force the comparison beyond the initial similarity. There are a limited number of possible situations within a given genre, so it is inevitable that we should continually be revisiting old haunts. Some perceived points of contact may be more or less private to the individual reader, a matter of what helps a particular image to work for him or her, and of little interest to the model reader. In Coupry's *Le fils du concierge de l'Opéra*, the phrase 'Valentine avait une peau qui sentait l'odeur de ces arbres que je n'avais jamais approchés'[3] evokes, after a lyric expression of sentiment, the absent ideal by means of a sensual relationship between smell and imagination. There are probably odours of Proust here, but this particular reader was first reminded of a phrase from Gabriel Miró's novels *Our father St Daniel* and *The leprous archbishop*.[4] 'Flowers almost always smell of a brief moment of happiness that is no longer with us',[5] when spoken by the sensual priest don Magín in the context of the book, recalls a garden of childhood loaded with Biblical and classical symbolism. The image of an ideal garden is used as an emblem for a series of meditations on aesthetic and moral values dominated by a yearning for the absent. There is no reason to assume that Coupry has read Miró, nor any to justify a direct link between the two texts. Coupry only mentions trees, not gardens, but that is not perhaps so great a leap. The garden as a literary source is, however, hardly a rarity, and Coupry could have adopted any number of models, including Miró's own, for his image. It is indiscreet of me, then, to expose this private association to public scrutiny. It is an

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[3]Coupry, p. 27

[4]Gabriel Miró, *Nuestro Padre San Daniel, El Obispo leproso* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial S.A., 1969).

[5]'Casi siempre huelen las flores a un instancete de felicidad que ya no nos pertenece'

example of a moment of familiarity offered to one reader by chance, but is not part of the model reader's competence, and should therefore not be used as a pillar of interpretation. Aside from specific intertextuality, though, Coupry offers here an image of the magical effect of intertextuality in general, arguably a central theme of the story. In the *Opera*, the invention of art is celebrated for its power of transcendental evocation. For the son, who strives to reach beyond representation, it is these moments of heightened awareness when a sense of Baudelairian *correspondance* takes place and he is able to glimpse *le réel* fleetingly through association and imagination. Intertextuality is perhaps an image of this quest for meaning: art speaks of other art which once spoke of 'le réel' but which is now no more than a memory in another text.

Intertextuality and the Nouvelle Fiction

Intertextual relationships are perhaps given a heightened prominence in the *Nouvelle Fiction* because of the nature of its writing: as we have already seen, there is at the heart of the movement's aesthetics a post-modern urge to revisit the past in a spirit of ironic detachment. The contemporary narrative world is actively represented as a rich tapestry of past narratives all speaking amongst themselves, bound together through nostalgic as much as ironic *correspondances* brought out by the author. Of course, fiction has always fed on its predecessors, but in the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s attitude to intertextuality there is a heightened sense of the importance of literary inheritance as opposed to innovation. This is one of the things that distinguishes the movement from its predecessors; it does not seek out striking new literary forms, new

kinds of narrative or anti-novel, but continues to use 'traditional' structures and techniques while letting the reader know that the process is not wholly innocent.

The outstanding literary hero of the movement seems, perhaps inevitably, to be Borges. Again, there is nothing unique about this; Robbe-Grillet in *Les Gommes* is in debt to Borges's 'Death and the Compass', and Eco's *The Name of the Rose* also pays homage to him as the blind librarian in the labyrinthine library. The choice of Borges is particularly apposite, since Borges himself exemplifies just the attitude to the literature of the past that is espoused by the *Nouvelle Fiction.* Borges himself creates his texts through sophisticated reference and discussion of real and imaginary texts. Borges is, however, held up by a wide range of modern writers and theorists as exemplifying whatever it is that they are interested in, from complete intellectual detachment and retreat from the world into language to more or less the opposite. So what does the *Nouvelle Fiction* get from its mentor?

It is really impossible to make generalisations about the manner in which literary borrowings are used across seven very different authors. Indeed, it is more interesting to note the radical difference of practice between authors: here I propose to examine two specimen texts to demonstrate diversity rather than cohesion with regard to intertextuality in the *Nouvelle Fiction.* The movement probably does not stake out any radical new ground in this area, but it is clearly an area worth examination for a group that lays such a broad claim to literary tradition.

In the first example, we will see what could be characterised as a more 'closed' intertextuality, that uses its intertexts or hypotexts in a specific context, through quotation and parody, that is, an example of classic Kristevian intertextuality. The second will demonstrate a more

'open' intertextuality, playing explicitly with Genettian architextual and hypertextual boundaries.

Jean Levi: *Acclimatation*

Parody necessarily feeds off other literature. The object of parody is another text or a particular genre, in this case, the fantastic. Levi uses a range of sources to generate his own doubtfully fantastic atmosphere, from Poe's 'The Black Cat' to Villiers de l'Isle Adam's 'Vera', from a range of classic tales fitting Todorov's narrow definition. Quite specific instances in Levi's text are borrowed from moments in the sources, in fact Levi points them out to Moreau:

> Le récit fait référence à l'un des contes fantastiques de Bradbury, *Terrain de jeu*, qui est en quelque sorte le frontispice sous lequel s'ouvre toute l'histoire. Puis interviennent peu à peu toutes les situations possibles du fantastique, comme par exemple avec *Vera*, de L'Isle-Adam, où il est question de la présentification d'un être disparu, par l'effet de la seule pensée. Le problème de la disparation est évidemment traité lorsque le chat semble s'évanouir dans une autre dimension et on n'est alors pas loin du *Mystère de la Chambre ardente*. Il est fait allusion à Jean Ray et à son *Manuscrit français*. Le passage où le narrateur paraît à ses propres yeux devenir fou rappelle un peu *Le Horla*. Sont également évoqués les contes fantastiques chinois, le filet de l'animalière ayant quelque chose du tue-mouches des taoïstes. Hoffman est lui aussi discrètement présent.[6]

Next to the parody of the fantastic is the weaving of the Racinian theme of *Esther* into the fabric of the text. The idea of *acclimatation* itself, the assimilation of the alien into its surroundings, encourages us to draw parallels with the dilemma faced by the Jews.

> Naturellement, en jouant sur le symbole du chat, on en arrive aux Juifs, les Juifs étant, en principe, ceux qui ne sont pas encore acclimatés, mais qui tendent toujours, comme finalement Esther,

[6]Levi in Moreau, p. 412.

> à s'assimiler. Le problème est donc, là aussi, celui de l'acclimatation, avec juste cette petite différence apportée par la volonté de se fondre, de se faire accepter, ou même d'accepter.[7]

The relationship with the Biblical story, revealed by Levi's use of names (Sureussa, the director of the *Jardin d'Acclimatation* stands for Assuerus; Esther is the name of the heroine and saviour of the cats; the cats themselves are Mardoéche and Vasthi), does not, however, primarily send the reader back to specific moments in Racine. The allusion to *Esther* raises the theme of cultural difference as a comparison to difference in perception. Esther in *Acclimatation* is herself tamed: her clothing and hair become calmer and she finally marries the Director of the Park, the former persecutor of her beloved cats. Apparently he is sympathetic to her cause, and dismisses Aman, the Syrian employee who had treated the cats so cruelly. The sides that at the start seemed clearly defined blur as Esther surrenders some of her identity when she merges with the culture that she had opposed, thereby influencing her host as well. Levi sees the cultural *acclimatation* of Esther as a comment on the extension of realism through the taming of the fantastic:

> On en arrive à la distinction posée au XVII^{e} entre convenance, bon ton, et vraisemblable. N'est vraisemblable, et donc vrai, que ce qui ne choque pas l'opinion commune. A travers ce chat dont on doute l'existence, c'est le problème de la vérité qui est posé, surtout quand il s'agit d'un événement inouï dont personne ne peut plus témoigner.[8]

Racine's *Esther* is used as an intertext in a quite controlled manner, acting as a source for the Jewish theme to embellish the sense given to *acclimatation*. This embellishment implicitly encompasses not only the ancient persecution of the Jews, but the Holocaust as well.

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[7]Levi in Moreau, p. 414.
[8]Ibid., p. 414.

There is, however, another level of intertextuality in *Acclimatation*, that is, its relationship with *Don Quixote*. Levi's parody of the fantastic is modelled on Cervantes's sending up of the novels of chivalry, as he himself admits:

> - *Le narrateur étant lui-même, bien entendu, grand amateur de contes fantastiques!* [Moreau]
>
> - Si bien que l'ensemble fonctionne aussi, toutes proportions gardées, à la manière de *Don Quichotte* dans lequel s'exercent une dérision et un jeu sur les romans de chevalerie. Sauf que pour *Acclimatation* il s'agit d'un jeu sur les contes fantastiques. De la littérature fantastique se trouvent dénoncés, si l'on veut, tous les méfaits, mais tout en la récupérant, en la sauvant, puisque le livre lui-même s'inscrit dans celle des romans de chevalerie, même s'il en est le dernier. [9]

The dependence on Cervantes is particularly important, especially in the light of these remarks. Levi leans on the mainstream view of the *Quixote* as an affectionate rather than harshly critical parody of the romances, and thereby allies his own work with this same attitude to the fantastic. Indeed the ironic and ambiguous game Cervantes plays with the romances, the hesitation the reader experiences between scorn and appreciation, is matched not only by Levi's ambiguous relationship with the fantastic as a genre, but also by the hesitant stance of the reader towards his perceptions encoded in the fantastic. The interpretation arrived at in Part I through an analysis of the fantastic as a metaphor for the reader's relationship with the rest of the world is given added support from the sly ghost of Cervantes, who hovers over the text, urging rapt involvement in the mystery and strangeness of events and at the same time an ironic mistrust of their presentation.

Instances of intertextuality in Levi are not, therefore, wormholes in the fabric of the narrative that inevitably suck the reader off into other narrative worlds or into ceaseless drift between texts. The text

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[9]Ibid., p. 413.

exists first as a parody of the fantastic as a genre, using existing texts as a foundation. The reader is not required, however, to know the secondary texts intimately, but only the basic Todorovian rules that govern the genre. Spotting the allusions is an added bonus for the enthusiast. The importance of the fantastic is, as we have seen, general rather than specific. Second, Levi makes use of a particular aspect of the story of Esther and the salvation of the Jews in order to merge the playfully uncertain scepticism of the 'Cervantine' fantastic with the exploration of the way our perception deals with reality. Levi does not push us into detailed analysis of Racine, but simply presents us with his own use of an aspect of Racine's text, which is to be accepted as just another part of the limitations put on the model reader.

FrédérickTristan: ***L'énigme du Vatican***

Intertextuality is at the heart of Tristan's *L'énigme du Vatican*, though its character is quite different from what we have looked at so far. The associations with other texts are much freer than in Levi, and act not so much as specific keys to aspects of the primary text, but rather as signs of the kind of ludic relationship Tristan aspires to with his 'sources'. It is therefore not of enormous interpretative significance to trace the various references; more important is to analyse what they all have in common in their relations with Tristan's narrative.

The title by itself, let alone what follows, is enough to suggest Gide's *Les caves du Vatican*. This is borne out by aspects of the plot: Tristan's story also involves a plot against the Pope, the murder of a harmless academic and a chain of bizarre events involving a convoluted conspiracy of communist spies. Like Gide, Tristan takes

pleasure in christening his characters with suggestive and ludicrous names: there is a Professor Standup, a Mgr Caracolli, le chanoine Tortelli; the hero himself, Adrien Salvat, is perhaps a hint of the unification of the classical and Christian interests that are brought together by the character during the course of the book. The faint resemblance to Gide, however, ends more or less here: while the plan to assassinate the Pope in Gide is a spurious invention, in Tristan, we are asked to accept it as genuine.[10] The reader is bound to ask whether we have been deliberately misled by this intertextual blind-alley.

The whole work is prefaced with a quotation from Borges's 'Death and the Compass':

> Je connais un labyrinthe grec qui est une ligne unique, droite. Sur cette ligne, tant de philosophes se sont égarés qu'un pur détective peut bien s'y perdre.

In Borges's fantastic parody of the detective story, the detective is ultimately trapped by his own logic in a web of crimes committed for the benefit of that logic. While this is the only direct reference to Borges, Tristan does also parody the detective genre in a much more heavy-handed way. His 'detective', Salvat, however, explicitly states that he has abandoned rationality in his search for the manuscript:

> Je ne doutais pas en effet, connaissant vos mérites respectifs, que vous n'eussiez tout essayé depuis de longues années et que les voies que vous aviez empruntées fussent toutes du domaine du raisonnable. Était-il utile de les reprendre? Évidemment pas. Que me restait-il donc? Les chemins de l'irrationnel.[11]

In other respects, however, Salvat is an entirely intertextual creation, an obviously comic cocktail of a range of literary detectives and living icons, drawn from sources that include Borges's own inspiration, Edgar Allan Poe:

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[10]Gide's *sotie* was, of course, based on a real fraud, but the plot to kill the Pope was always fictitious.

[11]Frédérick Tristan, *L'énigme du Vatican* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 15.

> Ajoutons que Salvat est, au physique, une manière de Winston Churchill mâtiné de l'Orson Welles des années 80, et, au mental, un Auguste Dupin renforcé par l'humour mathématique de Lewis Carroll.[12]

He smokes disgustingly strong cigars which are frequently a cause for complaint from those around him: another faint reference to Churchill, or to Holmes's pipes perhaps. Conan Doyle's hero is given a mention too, along with Hercule Poirot, immediately after Salvat's plea for irrationality:

> Standup parut choqué par ce préambule. Pour lui, Salvat jouait le Sherlock Holmes mais n'était qu'un Hastings sans Hercule Poirot - références toutes britanniques, comme il se doit.[13]

Agatha Christie's detective is referred to only once more, and on this occasion Salvat explicitly rejects the comparison:

> - Adrien, il va falloir secouer tes cellules grises.
>
> Cette illusion à un célèbre détective belge ne plut guère à Salvat. Il avait rencontré le petit homme chauve aux moustaches lustrées et l'avait trouvé d'une insupportable fatuité. C'était lors du crime de Stratford-on-Avon. Sans l'aide du professeur, le malheureux Poirot n'eût pas été capable de découvrir que le comedien assassiné l'avait été par son domestique indien et non par la ravissante Miss Cloud-Buster que le belge s'obstinait à accuser, par misogynie sans doute.[14]

Tristan thus points out with exaggerated emphasis all resemblances between his character and those of the texts that feed it, the kind of genres he wishes us to see he is playing with. He also establishes the character of his hero through what Celia Britton calls 'intertextual shorthand'. Describing the practice of Gide, her words are equally applicable here: Tristan produces a 'swift and economical evocation of a certain stereotype which relies for its effect on recalling a model more fully developed elsewhere'.[15] Moreover, if texts speak amongst

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[12]Ibid., p. 18.
[13]Ibid., p. 15.
[14]Ibid., p. 138.
[15]Celia Britton, 'Fiction, fact and madness: intertextual relations among Gide's female characters', in Worton and Still, p. 160.

themselves then Tristan is not going to let us forget it: here he makes the point more explicit by allowing the fiction of others to intrude into his own fictional universe, not as 'influences' but as rivals on the same plane of reality. Hercule Poirot is given equal status in terms of a place in reality, while more literary influences above are not acknowledged (except Borges outside the text itself).

All these games with the detective genre are not, however, only reminiscent of Borges: although Robbe-Grillet was also indebted to him, the more obvious connection with Tristan here is Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. The story centres around a lost manuscript, the *Vita de Sylvestre*, a life of a saint, hitherto known of only through two references in other texts. When Salvat discovers the manuscript's location, it turns out to be filed in the Vatican library under the infamous code 666:

> 666, le nombre de la Bête! le nombre utilisé au XI^{e} siècle pour stigmatiser une oeuvre particulièrement impie! Or, jamais, de mémoire d'homme, on n'avait retrouvé un tel document. Après avoir été marquées du sceau d'infamie, ces oeuvres abominables étaient brûlées.[16]

Eco also pays homage to Borges as well as popular detective fiction: his hero William is particularly indebted to Holmes. There is the quest for the lost manuscript, supposedly containing some terrible, possibly satanic, secret. While Eco's is discovered only at the end of the book and burnt unread, Tristan's story starts with the discovery of the manuscript which ought to have been burnt in the eleventh century but which is actually 'translated' for us during the course of the text, and forms the focal point for the investigation.

The validity of the manuscript is gradually challenged through the course of the story, however. We begin by thinking that we are

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[16]Ibid., p. 17.

reading an authentic early Christian legend. It becomes clear, through orthographical analysis and the changing style, that it is first of all a ninth-century text that was then either finished or copied in the sixteenth century. Then it seems that the manuscript is likely to be a fake anyway; where, then, is the authentic manuscript? Will we, the readers, ever get to see it? In a final twist, the whole history of the manuscript comes to light: it is both original and fake: begun in the ninth century, continued in the sixteenth, the last part was genuinely lost, and finished on sixteenth-century paper in the twentieth century. This last section, however, contains within a list of names encoded by the Polish forger as part of the communist plot against the Pope: the extravagant names of devils surrounding Satan during his interview with Basophon in hell comprise a black list of Nazis helped by the Vatican at the end of the war, which is going to be used to destabilise the Vatican by the communists who fear John-Paul II's influence in the Eastern Block.

The elaborate self-consciousness of the frame story, the bogus leads he gives us through the intertextual references in one direction or another, is belied by the simplicity of the *Vita* itself, which, despite the confusion as to its origins, is striking for its transparency. All sections are in a sense as valid as each other; all are a contribution to a story we have enjoyed. Enjoyment, indeed, is ultimately all that is demanded of us: through the games of the frame narrative, Tristan has had us scrutinising the *Vita* for all manner of deeper interpretations, which simply are not there.

By parodying parodies of detective fiction, Tristan to a certain extent restores the pleasure of the innocence of the naïve original while guarding his back as it were. If metafiction is parodied, the result is not, necessarily therefore yet more rarefied metafiction, but can result

in something of a step in both directions, a movement further into the ironic distance while allowing a new immersion in the illusion, the postmodern rediscovery of innocence after irony that Eco speaks of in relation to his own work.

Again, the nature and flavour of the parody is a complex matter: it is far from being harshly sarcastic, nor could it be when Eco's book has itself a similar standpoint vis-à-vis its influences, indeed evoking Borges and Holmes in ways similar to those of Tristan. Tristan does, however, leave his text intertextually far more 'open' than does Levi. We are not presented with an authorised 'authorial' reading of the intertext for use in enriching the main text. In *L'énigme du Vatican*, intertexts jostle for position as one borrowed image or scenario overtakes another, but they do not offer any particular limits to interpretation. On the contrary, they are deliberate false trails laid as part of a grand fictional game, a celebration of fictional, Sternian *divertissement*, an upbeat version of Châteaureynaud's offer of distraction to the reader 'avant de quitter son fauteuil et replonger dans sa tourmente.'[17] We are simply invited to enjoy it; indeed, the only limitation to the pursuit of intertexts is no more than the question 'where does it lead?' We are free to wonder about this or that reference, whether it is worthy of more or less investigation, but throughout we are winked at by an ironic, Cervantine narrator or narrative voice, addressed cloyingly as 'cher lecteur', and receive forced, over-elaborate explanations for various narrative decisions. For example, before the translation begins we are treated to the following comic delaying tactic:

> Certes, nous ne prétendons pas que la traduction sortit des lèvres du professeur Standup bottée et casquée comme Minerve du crâne fendu de Jupiter. Le cher homme, tout savant et habile qu'il fût, ne manqua pas d'hésiter, de bégayer, de trébucher, de

[17]G-O Châteaureynaud, 'Après', in *Le fou dans la chaloupe*, p. 128.

> revenir sur un mot afin d'en polir et parfaire le sens, mais le rapporteur actuel a pensé qu'il serait plus expédient de dispenser le lecteur de ces imperfections qui n'apporteraient rien à la connaissance du texte. On voudra donc bien lui pardonner cette licence, d'autant plus qu'elle ménage la susceptibilité toujours en éveil de la savante Albion.[18]

The overblown classical simile, the over-emphasis of Standup's hesitation, the unnecessary explanation all draw grotesque attention to the artifice of what we are reading. Like Eco's mask at the beginning of *The Name of the Rose*, this sort of device is to be seen as the postmodern author's defence before launching into a 'naïve' narrative, which is precisely what Tristan then does with the *Vita*. At the end he also pointedly reminds us of the illusion:

> - La fiction, voilà bien la merveille! Et laissez-la intacte, dans son innocence! Les aventures de Basophon n'ont d'attrait que par leur haute fantaisie. Si vous cherchez à en tirer quelque leçon, vous voilà perdus! Et pourtant, cela ne veut certes pas rien dire, mais c'est un dit en quinconce, dans le désir toujours vif et insatisfait, donc revivifié, du voyage. Quel voyage dans la tête, n'est-ce pas? Et qui est ce *on* qui écrit?[19]

These comments are made about the *Vita*, but could they be implicit comments about the frame narrative as well? The whole edifice of the text, the narrator seems to suggest, is perhaps not worth too rigorous a scrutiny. And yet the narrator then immediately prompts us with 'literary' problems:

> (Le lecteur attentif qui suit depuis la première page le cours de ce récit reconnaîtra en effet que la question de ce *on* n'est pas si simple qu'il paraît. Qui raconte en effet? Et qui traduit?)[20]

At another level, however, the ambiguous protestations of a lack of moral purpose from Salvat bear a striking resemblance in inversion to the ironic insistence on moral usefulness with which Cervantes, for

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[18]Tristan, p. 21.
[19]Ibid., p. 348.
[20]Ibid., p. 349.

instance, prefaced his Exemplary Novels. So we are back with parody again.

While Levi offers a more traditional, controlled intertextual relationship with his three main intertexts or collections of intertexts, Tristan espouses a radically different view. *L'énigme du Vatican* parades intertexts almost for their own sake. Tristan does not enter into a serious extended parody of any of them. He borrows playfully to build his own collage through an assimilation of more or less guaranteed reader responses to individual elements which bind to create a deliberately puzzling text. We are familiar and comfortable with the parts, but the sum is an elusive quantity. To Tristan, literary multiplicity, intertextual co-existence is an inescapable part of writing, and we are not allowed to forget the patchwork nature of the work, but at the same time he is playing a game to see how far he can take the self-consciousness, the ironic intrusions of the narrator or the narrative voice while maintaining the readerly aspects of the narrative. In fact, through humour, through sheer silliness at times, the distance which laughter requires helps in stretching our indulgence further than the earnestness of avant-garde experimentalism can ever do.

I started this chapter by saying that intertextuality is not a new phenomenon, just a convenient term for an old one. It is not therefore surprising to find it in the *Nouvelle Fiction* in a variety of forms. In the examples discussed, however, two distinct movements would seem to emerge, one towards the controlled use of ideas from intertexts which are imported into the new text for specific limited effect. This is what might be considered a 'traditional' intertextuality, one that privileges the new or hypertext over its intertexts. In Tristan, however, we see a heightened role for the intertexts, which jostle for position in a sea of

literary images, and which largely constitute the text itself. Indeed, the story turns on the idea of uncertain textual identity and the shifting nature of a palimpsestic text. We lose all sense of authenticity, indeed the question of what is authentic and what is not in the manuscript gradually becomes unimportant as the fiction itself takes over. Textual identity, a problem that we shall return to in Chapter 12, is permanently put in question by the 'architextual' generic games played, and the patchwork nature of the text, while reflecting an anxious 'postmodern' vision of a world of conflicting values and narratives, arguably is also in danger of appearing nothing more than the sum of its parts, a loose association of literary stereotypes. It is this tension between the desire for meaning and the relationship with existing literature that the authors of the *Nouvelle Fiction* attack in different ways, Tristan's overtly self-conscious borrowing being the most extreme but perhaps also the least nuanced in its depiction of the world as fiction. In this respect, the less-radical Levi is more immediately 'readable' even though Tristan's intertextual collages rely expressly on the readability of the common cultural heritage, the 'coulisses de l'imaginaire' from which they are drawn. Nevertheless Tristan and the others do strive for an authenticity of sorts, and their problematic and tortuous route journey to find it is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 9

NARRATIVE MASKS: UNRELIABILITY AND AUTHENTICITY

The problematic character of the narrator or of the narrative voice is an issue from which no modern movement can escape. Since Modernism's preoccupation with the subjectivity of language, in particular since the *nouveau roman*'s quest to show nothing but the subjectively real, writers have struggled with the contradictory urges to write a story on the one hand, and on the other, to show that the author is aware of his own linguistic psychosis, and able to transcend it through self-conscious reflexivity that ponders and deconstructs its own processes. One manner in which the problem of partial vision has been attacked has been through the device of the flawed first-person narrator. Again, this is no innovation: Prévost used it with *Manon Lescaut*, but the twentieth century has arguably seen a heightened sensitivity to such visions. We scrutinise Michel's unpleasantness in Gide's *L'Immoraliste* all the better to understand the flaws of our narrator and thereby to understand the construction of the text. Michel's sickly narcissism is the chink in the narrator's armour, the fault that exposes his self-deception, the key to unravelling the conceit of the text.

The *Nouvelle Fiction* does also make use of the flawed first-person narrator, but here the emphasis is definitely on the problem of the narrative rather than on the character, unsympathetic or otherwise, of the narrator himself. In *Acclimatation*, which has already been discussed, and in Coupry's *Le fils du concierge de l'Opéra*, the first-person narrators deceive the readers with a selective vision, with carefully chosen imagery, all the better to illustrate their own experience of enchantment and disenchantment. In both cases, the

point of narration is after the disenchantment, so the narrative has been constructed for our benefit as a recreation of a particular experience of which the repositioning of perception that the reader feels through the illusion of narrative is a part. These texts do explore to a certain extent the problem of a limited vision, but in a sense this problem vanishes when the nature of the narrative illusion has been revealed. The partial vision of reality is, in *Acclimatation*, the source of the pleasure of the story, its *raison d'être*. Unreliability, uncertainty is to be celebrated here rather than condemned. In Coupry, the disillusionment with the artifice of the text corresponds to the moral development of the narrator, his loss of childhood innocence and his *re*enchantment in the potential of glimpsing the transcendental through the illusions of art.

The *Nouvelle Fiction*, however, really comes to grips with the question of the relationship between narrative and truth not through the single flawed first person narrator so much as by means of more elaborate layers of authorial masks.

Eco again provides us with an analysis of this device when discussing his own *The Name of the Rose*. He wants to recover the pleasure of the innocent narrative, but cannot do so in this post-modern age without 'apologising' for it. The main text of his book is thus 'written' in the middle ages, but the introduction distances this narrative from Eco at several removes:

> Thus I rediscovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told. Homer knew this, and Ariosto knew this, not to mention Rabelais and Cervantes. My story, then, could only begin with the discovered manuscript, and even this would be (naturally) a quotation. So I wrote the introduction immediately, setting my narrative on a fourth level of encasement, inside three other narratives: I am saying what Vallet said that Mabillon said that Adso said...[1]

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[1]Eco, *Reflections on "The Name of the Rose"*, p. 20.

The New Fictionists make use of just this procedure, in some cases taking it to a far higher plane of complexity. While for Eco the masks stand as post-modern excuses for the *naïveté* of the main text, and do not interact with the narrators or protagonists of the principal narrative, in the two examples I will examine from the *Nouvelle Fiction*, the relationship between the layers of narrators and their narrative is explored for its own sake.

G-O Châteaureynaud: *Mathieu Chain*

Mathieu Chain illustrates how it is possible to wed narratorial self-consciousness with the conventions of the traditional omniscient narrator. It is another circular narrative: the first person introduction narrates the events that close the main text. Mathieu Chain, a celebrated author, appears incognito in a remote island community, striking for the simplicity of its way of life. His last days are related to us by the pastor who becomes his friend and confidant. The pastor's text is itself addressed to an unnamed man, a friend of the writer. He then offers his own third-person account of the events that led up to Chain's breakdown and death. He admits that it is a fictionalised account, and perhaps naïvely hopes that his own voice will disappear. Châteaureynaud does not himself make this plea to the reader to forget the narrator; it is the supposedly simple, inexperienced pastor who speaks:

> Cette aventure, d'autres que moi sauraient mieux la relater s'ils la connaissaient aussi bien. Mais je suis le seul à qui Chain en ait conté lui-même l'entier déroulement. Au terme de cette

> introduction, je compte au demeurant m'effacer. Il m'avait simplement paru nécessaire, pour fonder à vos yeux mon témoinage, de justifier le rôle de confident qu'il m'a été donné de tenir près de lui après cette tempête et tout au long de son exil. Voilà qui est fait, j'abandonne sans regret des tréteaux où je ne me sentais guère à mon aise.
>
> C'est Chain qui parlera dorénavant à travers moi. Vous l'avez connu, vous avez lu avant quiconque chacun de ses manuscrits. Vous ne prendriez pas un instant pour la sienne la pauvre voix que je vais lui prêter; je n'essaierai donc pas de le contrefaire. J'espère cependant qu'au passage une inflexion, un coup d'oeil, une attitude, vous rappelleront votre ami dans un éclair, et vous persuaderont qu'en le mettant en scène, je ne l'ai pas trop profondément trahi.[2]

Is this lengthy excuse intended to draw our attention to the narrative that follows, to put us on our guard against self-conscious post-modern tricks to come, or is the empirical author merely asking us to accept the conventions of fiction for the duration of what follows, while covering himself with the innocence of his pastor? It is perhaps not easy to put it in either of these categories: the truth lies somewhere between the two.

Amadeus Ritter, the island pastor, is in fact not as innocent as the quotation above suggests. His first-person introduction reveals the sophisticated voice of a man who has known the world 'outside' and who, despite the protestations of his own limitations offers a carefully constructed account of the metaphysical dilemma that faced Chain. He also provides a further third-person sponsor of himself in quoting a letter from a friend, from which it becomes clear that during his time away from the island he himself had shown the potential for intellectual stardom, but had voluntarily renounced it for retreat on Nieseln. 'L'étrange chose, que de se voir par les yeux des autres', he comments. The man described by the friend is discussed almost disparagingly as a third person, and Ritter shows a striking self-

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[2]G.-O. Châteaureynaud, *Mathieu Chain* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), pp. 45-6.

consciousness about the distance between the 'character' of the letter's text and the person he regards as himself:

> Si j'ai été, vraiment, l'étudiant modèle dont parle cette lettre, et plus tard ce théologien de salon, je ne m'en souviens plus, ou plutôt je renonce, j'ai renoncé voici longtemps à les avoir jamais été. Je me suis quitté moi-même. Pardonnez-moi cette formule; en dépit de sa solennité un peu ridicule, elle n'est pas fausse : je me suis quitté moi-même, car j'avais rendez-vous avec le pasteur de Nieseln.[3]

Behind the self-deprecation of *pardonnez-moi* and *un peu ridicule* there lies a disarming sophistication that deliberately undermines with apology the significance of its own statements. We are, for instance, about to see Chain 'par les yeux des autres' ourselves.

In fact Ritter and Chain are in a sense two sides of the same coin, and Ritter shows himself to be aware of this when he describes himself as 'le confident singulier, le témoin dont il avait besoin.'[4] Chain, the worldly man of letters, ends his life in seclusion and stops writing; Ritter, who could have been like Chain, spends a life in isolation and starts to write the text we are reading as a result of his encountering his other 'possible' self. The silence of one stimulates the writing of the other.

In attempting to describe the radical change that Chain undergoes, Ritter focuses constantly on the use of language and on comparisons with other language-users. Chain establishes a bond with Job, a simple local: 'peut-être se ressemblaient-ils enfin?'[5] Ritter speculates. Job's relationship with words is vividly described in physical terms:

> Les mots, et les notions qu'ils véhiculent, n'ont pas beaucoup d'importance pour lui. Il sait à peine écrire. Ces mots sans forme, dont il ignore la plupart du temps où ils commencent et

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[3]Ibid., p. 17.
[4]Ibid., p. 17.
[5]Ibid., p. 29.

> où ils finissent, ne représentent pour lui - il travaille à l'entretien des bateaux sur la cale - qu'une sorte de graisse dont on enduit les choses et les êtres à la va-vite.[6]

Ritter is apparently very aware of the barriers language sets up between us and things, between the elusive truth he has faith in as a pastor and the uncertain reality that Chain struggles with. He again cautiously sponsors his own attempt to tell Chain's story in the following way:

> Avec moi cependant il jetait bas le masque. Ou plutôt, car nul ne se montre jamais vraiment à visage découvert, il n'en portait plus d'autre que celui dont il s'illusionnait lui-même. Tous, nous en portons un semblable, mais il colle au plus près à la chair, il n'en est séparé que par l'épaisseur des mensonges et des consolations dont nous rembourrons notre misère, non plus vis-à-vis des autres, mais de nous cette fois. Le peu de vérité que nous puissions appréhender individuellement, quant à ce que nous sommes, commence et finit là, à ce masque.[7]

The world-weary tone is surprising from this supposedly sheltered man, and betrays a metaphysical sophistication beneath the earnestness and apologies. The notion of the mask, not just as a narrative strategy but as a symbol of our identity, is itself the basis of Petit's 'Le montreur et ses masques', and the image of the last mask, inseparable from the face itself, is picked up in a similar way: behind the last mask is not reality for Petit but a void.

Ritter also has a sense of humour: he enjoys telling us, or rather Chain's unnamed friend, about the journalist's write-up of Chain's last retreat. The reporter's misrepresentation of Nieseln is a joke, but is it so easy to distinguish the other accounts we have of the island and of Chain from 'reality'?

> Le tableau qu'il brossait de Nieseln, qu'il écrivait *Nüsseln*, fit rire tout le monde chez Wurtz où je le lus à haute voix. Nous ignorions que l'Allemagne possédât si près de ses côtes des îles si polaires. C'était au moins Thulé qu'on nous décrivait là! Et

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[6]Ibid., p. 28.
[7]Ibid., p. 30.

> Chain, à l'en croire, aurait vécu dans une cabane misérable, presque une hutte, un igloo pourquoi pas, alors qu'il habita toujours chez Frau Wurtz, où l'on ne risque guère d'attraper froid. Pour ce qui est enfin de sa mort, je me demande d'où ce journaliste tenait la fable du naufrage.[8]

Just as he questions the account of himself offered by his student friend, he mocks the journalist too. The role of alternative accounts is apparently precisely to be questioned, to throw into doubt any narrative, including the one we are reading. We should perhaps question Ritter's account more than any, but we are not in a position to do so: no alternative is offered. In comparison to the journalistic account, Ritter is 'setting things straight', but where does the truth really lie? As a pastor with a clearly defined faith, what sort of gloss is he putting on the breakdown of a man who has never experienced his certainty but in whom he sees some sort of resemblance?

In the end, however, we are not only forced but perhaps also inclined to take Ritter as an honest if necessarily unreliable narrator. When we go on to read the third-person narrative, we have already been introduced to the voice as a first person. It is not the disembodied voice of Flaubertian omniscience, but the self-confessed artifice of a man who has shown himself to be aware of the uncertain ground on which he treads, but willing to attempt the project all the same.

Ritter goes on to express the essential characteristic of Chain's psychosis, and it turns on the literary distance, and indeed indifference with which he relates his own life. The pastor ponders on the insubstantiality of reality: how can one tell the difference between a rose dreamt and one actually perceived? The real rose might be destroyed, cut by a gardener. 'Rose rêvée, rose vraie, il n'en demeure au bout du compte qu'un acte de foi: je dis que j'ai vu une rose'. For the pastor, then, it is characteristically faith that provides the necessary

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[8]Ibid., p. 33.

metaphysical certainty. For Chain, however, the only certainty is the narrative itself:

> Chain mesurait parfaitement l'invraisemblance de son aventure. Mais il y avait ceci de très particulier, dans sa façon d'en faire le récit lui-même: *Il-est-vrai-que-je-dis-que-j'ai-vu-une-rose.* Qu'il y ait eu en vérité une rose à voir, tout scandaleux que cela semble car il s'agissait précisément de sa vie et de ce qui l'avait brisée, je crois qu'il n'en avait pas la moindre idée. Quand, une fois, je l'interrompis pour lui demander de la manière la plus pressante ce qu'il pensait au fond de lui, et toute littérature mise à part, il ne put me répondre qu'en ouvrant d'abord ses mains en signe d'impuissance. Puis après un temps:
>
> Je n'en sais rien, Amadeus. La tête sur le billot, je vous jure, je ne sais pas ce que j'en pense![9]

All that is left for Chain is the text: the question of what it refers to has been lost in the complicated world he left behind. Perhaps Nieseln represents through the pastor a utopian textual land where what is said speaks of things rather than of itself or of other texts, a refuge of pre-modernist innocence.

The main text which follows does not then require further interrogation of the narrator: his identity and credentials have already been established and we are simply reminded occasionally that we are not dealing with a traditional omniscient narrator. The text is an artifice, but we are asked to make an 'acte de foi' and accept its conventions.

Frédérick Tristan: *Le Théâtre de M^me^ Berthe*

If the subtle questionability of Châteaureynaud's first-person narrator ultimately leads us back to faith in the text, Tristan, on the other hand, delights in playfully stretching unreliability and the possibilities of the

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[9]Ibid., p. 43.

mask to the limit. The boxes within boxes that begin *Le Théâtre de M^me^ Berthe* , which is incidentally a collection of short stories, immediately signal the kind of post-modern literary game that will be played on us. The bogus preface, inscrutably entitled 'Un infini singulier' and accompanied by a quotation from Hölderlin, purports to be written by Matthiew K. Fitzgerald. His scant three pages contain, excluding the Hölderlin, seven direct references to the works of other authors including Tristan's own Goncourt prize winner, *Égarés*. Beyond direct reference there is also allusion. The precious name-dropping, the multilingual quotation, the intellectual snobbery is perhaps reminiscent of Borges's narrator in the story 'Pierre Menard, author of *Don Quixote*'. There is also a coded reference to Nabokov: Adrien Salvat, with whom Fitzgerald has conversed, enjoys, we are told, visits to Florence (Arizona); 'Le professeur se plaît à y étudier les papillons lasiocampidés dont il paraît que la région est exceptionnellement fournie.'[10]

This is not simply a game of quotation-spotting, however. They act as ornaments, magnifications of the central theme, namely the self-consciousness of the text, the doubt as to its validity, the distance between reader and reality. Here Tristan takes that distance to the nth degree, to absurd lengths. First, Fitzgerald begins with the admission that he has never met Tristan, the man we know to be the author of these pages. He knows only Adrien Salvat, whom aficionados of Tristan will know as another authorial mask used in previous texts.

> J'ai longtemps possédé un avantage sur beaucoup de gens. C'était de n'avoir jamais approché M Frédérick Tristan mais de bien connaître son vieil ami et compagnon, le professeur Adrien Salvat.[11]

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[10]Frédérick Tristan, *Le théâtre de M^me^ Berthe* (Paris: Balland, 1986), p. 9.
[11]Ibid., p. 9.

So, we are to learn of the author's 'intention' through Fitzgerald's interpretation of Salvat. By having Fitzgerald quote Salvat, however, Tristan is able to state his reasons for such complex literary covers: 'Il y va d'une pudeur, sans doute, et aussi du seul moyen qui reste, quand la littérature est usée, pour maintenir l'écriture à ce haut niveau de ludisme qui, divertissant le factice, permet à l'essentiel de paraître.'[12] Just like Eco, he can allow others, his masks at several removes, to say things that the disillusioned modern writer dare not speak. The boxes still allow him to preserve that playful ambiguity, and this stepping back from the brink of stating a definite purpose is underlined by the references to other authors, in particular to the Cervantes of the *Exemplary Novels*. Cervantes also dons an ironic mask, earnestly insisting on the didactic moral quality of his stories, assuring us that he would rather cut off the hand that wrote them than release them to the public if he thought they could induce any evil thought or desire in his readers. Cervantes has just reminded us that he lost his left hand at the battle of Lepanto, so there are obvious practical difficulties to his carrying out his pious threat.

While Cervantes ambiguously dodges the question of moral usefulness, Tristan, through this allusion, wishes us to see that he aspires to an equal degree of uncertainty towards the relationship between his texts and meaning. We are prompted to question where the line is between the ludic and the serious. Fitzgerald goes on to quote Ben Jonson to this effect:

> Come on! Come on! and where you go,
> So interweave the curious knot,
> As even the observer scarce may know
> Which lines are Pleasure's, and which not.[13]

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[12]Ibid., p. 10.
[13]Ibid., p. 11.

It is, we are significantly told in a footnote, from 'Pleasure reconciled to Virtue'.

Yet the masks of the preface are not enough: having made himself a character of his own work, Tristan now introduces the stories with another device calculated to distance himself still further from his fiction with an interior preface signed F.T., the 'author' spoken of by Fitzgerald and Salvat.

> Il existait, rue Cuviau, une maison close où se donnaient des spectacles singuliers qui tenaient du mimodrame et des ombres chinoises que les initiés appelaient du nom de son ancienne propriétaire 'le théâtre de madame Berthe'. Trop jeune pour y être convié, je n'en connus les extravagances que par ouï-dire, mais les personnages, les événements que l'on me rapportait marquèrent d'autant mieux mon imagination qu'ils me semblaient appartenir assez naturellement à mes plus intimes répresentations du monde. D'où le titre de ces récits où les Chinois, les fantômes, les dogaresses affichent une improbabilité majeure que l'on ose croire plus sérieuse et plus juste que l'évidence.[14]

Here again is the paradox: the stories are associated with the entertainments put on in a brothel, therefore with yet further fictional production, and thereby linked specifically to sensual pleasure, yet by turning himself into the character F.T., Tristan allows himself to appear to be offering an intimate insight into his inner world.

The ultimate purpose of all these ironic devices, of the elaborate self-consciousness, of the hints to question the reliability of the narrator, is to re-establish a kind of authenticity. In the narratives which follow, the question of reliability is now irrelevant. First-person narrators telling a variety of stories but offering no secondary sponsors of their validity do not invite analysis. Unreliability, then, is only an issue in the frame of the stories. It is a device for fore-grounding the value of fiction itself, for questioning in a simultaneously playful and

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[14]Ibid., p. 13.

serious way the notion of identity and authenticity through the use of masks. Only in the last story, which amounts to a perpetuation of intertextuality between his own works, does Tristan turn back explicitly to this question and allow the voice of F.T. to speak openly again. F.T. has been merely editing material presented to him by Adrien Salvat, whom he proceeds to eulogise. The conceit of the preface has been inverted, and F.T., who was discussed by Salvat and Fitzgerald, is now in the position of discussing Salvat. In other words, three of the author's masks have been speaking amongst themselves. As to the question, what lies behind the mask, F.T. provides an answer remarkably similar to that offered by Châteaureynaud via Amadeus Ritter:

> Et moi, l'éditeur, pris au piège de cette machine, tandis que j'évoque l'identité d'Adrien Salvat, à mon tour j'en distille l'absence. Qui sommes-nous en cette assemblée d'ombres confuses pour que nous ayons l'intolérable audace d'ôter le masque de qui n'a plus de visage?[15]

Like Châteaureynaud and like Petit, Tristan sees the mask as indivisible from identity. This or that narrator may be questionable to a greater or lesser extent, but this uncertainty is ultimately something to relish rather than to deconstruct, for it does not veil, but rather constitutes, the thing of the value.[16]

The narrative mask is, then, given a special status in the *Nouvelle Fiction*. Eco's post-modern excuse for the innocent narrative is just the starting point; in the *Nouvelle Fiction*, a virtue is made of a post-modern necessity, and used once again to probe the boundaries between fiction and reality in a curious blend of the ludic and the earnest. It is part of

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[15]Ibid., p. 201.

[16]See Appendix 1 for Tristan's discussion of the question of identity, particularly in his most recent novel, *Stéphanie Phanistée* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

the mask's role to see that the line between the two remains ambiguous and elusive. There is clear water between modernism's preoccupation with subjectivity and unreliability as a problem, almost as a defect of language and narrative, and this exposition of the unstable narrative voice as a cause for literary celebration, a restatement of it as an emblem of fiction's power over reality.

CHAPTER 10

MISE EN ABYME

The Uses of the Mirror in Marc Petit's Le Montreur et ses masques

Dällenbach's theory

In *Le récit spéculaire,*[1] Dällenbach sets out his theory of the phenomenon of *mise en abyme,* focusing particularly on the *nouveau roman* for examples of the highly reflexive modern text. After identifying the origins of the term with Gide's use of a term from heraldry to describe an effect in his own work, Dällenbach goes on to note the narcissism inherent in Gide's conception of the phenomenon and seeks to classify it as a 'réalité structurée malgré la variété et l'accidentalité apparente de ses manifestations effectives'.[2] His basic definition is that it is 'tout miroir interne réfléchissant l'ensemble du récit par réduplication simple, répétée ou spécieuse'.[3] He sees it therefore as essentially a trinitary creature, consisting of the following sub-sections:

> 1. Simple Reflection, represented by the shield within the shield, the microcosm and the monad (literary examples being *Ulysses* and 'Swann in love')
> 2. Infinite Reflection, symbolised by two parallel mirrors, the Quaker Oats packet

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[1]Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes, as *The Mirror in the Text* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989).
[2]Ibid., p. 210.
[3]He is happier with the metaphor of the mirror to describe the phenomenon than the heraldic metaphor - see his Appendix A.

3. Paradoxical Reflection, e.g. the endless spiral created by a sentence like the endless spiral created by a sentence like the endless spiral... etc.[4]

He notes that the more subtle *mises en abyme* do not slavishly link the mirror with the embedding narrative through explicit intrusion into it but make use of the following signposts:

a) homonymy between characters of inserted and enclosing narratives

b) virtual homonymy between character and author

c) homonymy between the titles of the inserted and enclosing narratives

d) repetition of an evocative setting or combination of characters

e) textual repetition of one or more expressions relating to the primary narrative within the reflexive passage.[5]

The reflexive intrusion is also typically sponsored by one of the following archetypal characters:

novelist

artist

librarian

bookseller

madman

dreamer

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[4]Ibid., p. 37-8.

[5] See Ibid., p. 65.

He then characterises the effect of *mise en abyme* in the following two ways:

> Type 1. It acts as an internal summary, interpreting the work as a whole, structuring by embedding, stylising what it copies, thus making it more comprehensible, and restricting the reader's freedom of interpretation.
> Type 2. It pluralises meaning, that is, it adds something to the frame narrative, has a two-way relationship with it. Dällenbach cites 'Cupid and Psyche' in *The Golden Ass* as an example - it adds a religious reading to an adventure story.[6]

Dällenbach makes a particular study of the *nouveau roman*'s use of *mise en abyme* and sees in highly reflexive texts of the late *nouveau roman* a desire to deride 'l'idéologie réaliste et se coupe[r] du monde' as well as 'un exemple de très vive modernité s'il est vrai que "la modernité commence avec la recherche d'une littérature impossible."'[7] He also states that

> Dès lors qu'il muait la représentation en auto-représentation, le premier accomplissait un geste certes décisif, mais qui ne l'empêchait pas, pour l'essentiel, de demeurer captif de la *mimesis* platonicienne ou métaphysique; en abolissant la hiérarchie entre contenant et contenu, et la préséance de l'oeuvre réfléchie sur l'oeuvre réfléchissante, le seconde, lui, parvient à s'arracher à son emprise - c'est-à-dire au lieu de l'ontologie et de la vérité - et à promouvoir cette époque de réflexion et de production du langage dont Mallarmé, avec Roussel, avait préparé les voies.[8]

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[6]See Ibid., pp. 78-80.
[7]Ibid., p. 201.
[8]Ibid., p. 208.

Petit's practice

Petit consistently uses both the technique of *mise en abyme* and images of reflection to parody the linguistic hermeticism apparently espoused by the *nouveau roman* as described by Dällenbach. Whilst in both Petit and in the *nouveaux romans* that Dällenbach chooses to illustrate his point the distinction between the mirror and the text reflected becomes blurred as the two become interdependent, this occurs with radically different results. For instance Dällenbach picks on Ricardou's *Les lieux-dits* as an example of a text that is 'sujet en soi est pour soi et exclusivement occupé à se dire'[9] and suggests that

> Insister, comme il le fait, sur la propriété commune au miroir et au blason d'*inverser* symétriquement ce qu'ils représentent, n'est-ce pas suggérer que la réduplication est providentielle, en ce qu'elle permet de *retourner* la fonction représentative et de souligner que le texte n'a de rapport qu'avec lui-même?[10]

Petit on the other hand, whilst repeatedly blurring the distinction between the embedded and the embedding narratives, does so in order to foreground the relationship between the world and the language we use to describe it, thereby suggesting that narrative, rather than simply a self-perpetuating abstraction, is the actual substance of reality. The old arguments over representational and non-representational language thus become irrelevant to Petit: when his narratives turn in on themselves they simultaneously turn out towards a reality they form themselves.

I hope to go on to show that the stories can be convincingly read to support this theory, but first it would be helpful to look briefly at 'Contrepoint'[11] which, though hardly a story in itself, gives

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[9]Ibid., p. 184.
[10]Ibid., p. 183.
[11]In Petit, *Le montreur et ses masques.*

explicit voice to Petit's irritation with the state of modern fiction, particularly in France. Although he does not specifically name the *nouveau roman* but chooses instead to make Beckett and especially Sartre the targets of his rage and jokes, his remarks imply a frustration with the preponderance of code over message that characterizes the *nouveau roman* as much as Sartre.

The text starts as a description of the Paris *faubourgs*, but quickly starts a tongue-in-cheek debate about its own processes:

> Tu continues sur le boulevard - pourquoi ai-je commencé ainsi, je peux aussi bien dire je continue, puisque c'est moi, ou bien dire lui, il continue, si c'est un personnage, mais qui? De toute manière, il n'ira pas bien loin, voilà qui est sûr, ce n'est pas comme ça qu'on va bien loin, ce n'est pas ici.[12]

The narrative proceeds from this point on through constant discussion of itself in terms of the constraints the narrator feels are imposed on him by the conventions of avant-garde French writing since Sartre's Roquentin was first overcome with nausea. The text is suffused with a sense of the coming and going of a solid objective reality continually being washed away by the deceptive linguistic tricks of Modernism. For instance, after carefully describing his character's actions that morning he sweeps it all away with 'le coup de café, maintenant je peux vous le dire, c'était bidon. Quel coup de théâtre!'[13] But he goes on to try to communicate a kind of mystical return to the concretely real experienced comically in a hamburger bar; perception through taste wins against philosophical sophistication:

> ...tu distilles béatement le goût des frites inqualifiables et tu dis merde à Sartre une fois pour toutes...c'est là qu'une phrase t'a traversé, une phrase en trois mots: Tout Est Bien... dis que vois-tu? Tout est exactement pareil mais à l'envers, non,

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[12]Ibid., p. 73.
[13]Ibid., p. 75.

> clarifié, tout transparent et à sa place, pure évidence, dur, incréé. Le monde comme une diapositive inversée remise à l'endroit, comme un texte écrit en miroir devient visible dans la glace.[14]

The musical reference of the text's title becomes clear: by providing at once a parody of *La Nausée* and a critique of it, he develops two 'themes', one the inversion of the other, like in a fugue, weaving in and out of each other. Here, however, the notion of reflection is used to convey a sense of order and calm: the mirror reflects otherwise meaningless writing back to us in a meaningful way. In other words reality is itself that incomprehensible text that it is the artist's duty to hold a mirror to in order to turn it the right way around: Petit is returning to the Stendhalian mirror, and thus, as the end of the 'story' indicates, is hoping to escape the 'espèce de mort' suffered by 'l'auteur français d'avant-garde (inutile de parler des autres).' There remains a note of frustration and self-doubt to the end, however: 'arriverai-je jamais un jour raconter une histoire simple...?'[15]

'Contrepoint', then, while not an example of *mise en abyme* proper - it does not contain an image of itself although it is a product of self-reflection - is significant as the text in which Petit is the most explicit about his aspirations for literature and his views on the contemporary French novel, as well as offering hints as to the purpose of the *mises en abyme* proper in the other stories in the collection.

Around the theme of *mise en abyme* the stories that make up *Le Montreur...* can be divided into three groups:

1. Those in which reflection as an image or as a device does not occur:

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[14]Ibid., p. 77.
[15]Ibid., p. 78.

'L'histoire du Nègre blanc'

'Un souvenir d'enfance de Guarnerius'

2. Those that use the image of reflection without actually providing an internal mirror on themselves:

'Contrepoint'

'Quoi?'

'Elvira'

'Le régisseur'

3. Those that use real *mise en abyme* at some level:

'La vie et l'oeuvre de Ni Ts'an'

'Rue de la Mort'

'Schéhérazade'

'Le Montreur et ses masques'

'La nuit du sorcier'

Since I am concerned here with *mise en abyme* I shall concentrate on examples from the latter two categories:

1. 'Quoi?'

This first-person narrative is an autobiographical account of an at-first unidentified creature, from its first moments of consciousness to its emergence from its pond into the world and the clarification of what it is: a frog. The title refers to the existential questioning that is the frog's only cry - a perpetual expression of surprise at the world. It is, of course, an allegory of the human condition; this is made clear in the narrator's last words:

> Qui somme-nous pour que le seul fait de respirer nous étonne? Pour sentir comme au premier jour cet air qui nous brûle? Tout être commence par voir le jour, y fait son gîte, y

> est chez lui. Serions-nous seuls à n'en finir jamais de naître? Seuls - avec quoi?[16]

The story offers a number of possible interpretations. First, the pond could be seen as representing childhood, and the narrator's increasing awareness of the the limitations of something that had once seemed an infinite universe illustrates his gradual maturation. Adulthood comes with the loss of innocence, as the pond is no longer able to sustain his needs and he is launched into the pain of adult life - here equated with the pain of the first breath ('Quoi m'écriai-je, tandis qu'une douleur subite, cuisante, atroce, déchirait pour la première fois mes poumons').[17]

Beyond this reading, there lies however the question of the particular imagery used: the lives of the tadpoles become increasingly dominated by the roof of their universe, which the narrator repeatedly refers to as a mirror. Philosophical enquiry and geographical exploration lead only to headaches ('J'ai mal à la tête, donc je suis' he remarks[18]) and increasing self-obsession that manifests itself in self-contemplation in the 'grand miroir', and anxious observation of the changes going on in his body. Thus self-reflection here seems to be presented as a sterile activity, frustrating and anxious-making, ultimately a facet of adolescence, of narcissistic immaturity. Next, 'caresser l'abîme' becomes a 'drogue collective' for the community as they experiment with disrupting their reflections. But it is only by going through the looking-glass, by making subject and object of reflection one, that the narrator reaches intellectual maturity, though this too brings its own pains. The idea is thus a mirror image of the myth of Narcissus: whilst Narcissus

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[16]Ibid., p. 161.
[17]Ibid., p. 160.
[18]Ibid., p. 157.

peers into the pool and plunges into it to his death, the frog gazes up and passes through it to find life. Beyond the straight-forward allegory, then, it is possible to see a more complex symbol of Petit's attitude to reflection in art, and Gidean narcissism (cf Dällenbach's description of Gide describing himself looking at himself while writing) is rejected as immature and consigned to the bottom of the pond. The mirror is only useful if simple reflection can be in some sense transcended or turned to therapeutic effect.

So Petit provides in 'Quoi?' an image that communicates among other things his attitude to the mirror; but how does this transfer into practice when the mirror is actually present in his own texts? This is best illustrated with reference to the two stories at the centre of the collection, 'Rue de la Mort' and 'Schéhérazade'.

2. 'Rue de la Mort'

This story does not fit easily into any of Dällenbach's categories of *mise en abyme*, nor does it clearly satisfy his basic requirement that the mirror should reflect 'the whole of the narrative'. It is not even clear until the very end of the narrative that *mise en abyme* is present, nor what its nature is.

The text at first presents itself as an uncomplicated third-person narrative about a rich young *fin-de-siècle* Englishman, Jonathan Ellis, who affects a world-weariness and travels to the Orient in search of an experience of death to distract him from his ennui. Having read in his Baedeker about the existence in all Chinese cities of the 'Rue de la Mort', the street where people go when they feel death is near, he sets off for Singapore 'pour constater de ses yeux que tout ce qu'il lisait dans les livres n'était qu'un tissu d'illusions, l'effet d'une habile mise en scène des regards

crédules'. When he arrives at the Raffles hotel, however, the narrative starts to become complicated by his meeting with Kipling and the introduction of embedded stories. Kipling starts to tell him the story of 'le jeune homme qui fuyait la mort'. It is left unfinished but it is implied that he encounters the very thing he was fleeing. This in fact is the true mirror image of Ellis's story: he is a young man *looking* for death who *fails* to find it, as we discover by the end of the narrative. Like the mirror writing referred to in 'Contrepoint', Kipling is holding up the reverse in art in order to interpret reality.

Despite the unconventionality of this *mise en abyme* it is introduced in a manner absolutely recognised by Dällenbach - it is essentially simple duplication (1) and is signposted and authenticated by a classic 'sponsor' of the phenomenon, that is, the novelist. Moreover it can be characterised, despite its being in the negative, as a stylization of the thing it copies. It serves to 'structure by embedding', to paraphrase Dällenbach, and so conforms to type 1 as described above.

After his encounter in Sago Street, which he is assured is the 'Rue de la Mort', with Yn, a young dying virgin given to him ostensibly by her father, Hun-hsiao, who wanted her to know love before she died, he awakes back in the hotel unsure of his own reality: 'il ne put s'assurer vraiment qui'il était bien Mr Ellis et non point quelque Ali Baba victime de Schéhérazade.'[19] This reference to the Arabian Nights is significant: Sheherazade's story is the classical example of *mise en abyme* par excellence, and it evokes Borges' famous remark on the subject - 'Why does it disturb us that... the thousand and one nights [be] included in the book of *The*

[19]Ibid., p. 96.

Thousand and One Nights?... I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fiction can be readers ... we its readers... can be fictitious.'[20] This is precisely what turns out to be the case for Ellis, as we shall see.

But first Kipling tells another story, more conventionally *en abyme* (it is not the reverse image) though more cryptic. It is what Dällenbach calls anticipatory in that its structuring or enlightening effect can only be appreciated in retrospect, although at the time it passes for a comment on Ellis's uncertainty about his own presence. Briefly, it tells the story of a drunken bailiff upon whom a joke is played: he is placed in his carriage, but his horse is hidden. Upon awakening he addresses himself thus:

> La question, maintenant, est de savoir qui je suis. De deux choses l'une: ou bien je suis le bailli de Hang-tchou, et alors j'ai perdu mon cheval, ce qui est bien triste; ou bien je ne suis pas le bailli de Hang-tchou, et dans ce cas j'ai trouvé une calèche... que vaut-il mieux?[21]

The point being that underlying reality remains the same while it is our attitude towards it that is important. Just such a choice is to face Ellis when he learns that a trick has been played on him: Yn is a prostitute bought by Hun-hsiao and is not dying at all - the Rue de la Mort is a street like any other. They have grown to love each other but Ellis fails to play his role correctly: after a terrible scene he abandons the house forever, but is to regret his decision for the rest of his life.

It is only after this denouement that the paradoxical *mise en abyme* (3) unfolds: on two occasions Ellis had remarked on Kipling's light being on late in the night - he was writing a story. Part IX of the narrative reveals that this was Ellis's story: in the gloom of the

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[20]Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, trans. James E. Irby (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 231.
[21]Petit, p. 97.

Raffles Hotel Hun-hsiao's mask is dropped as the Chinese merges into Kipling's form, and the author laments the failure of his characters - 'avec de tels énergumènes, même Shakespeare aurait fait chou blanc.'[22] The narrative ends ambiguously; on the one hand Kipling is saddened by a sense of impotence: the story-teller is the victim of his characters - he can only recount their story but cannot change it; but at the same time he is fired by the power of narrative over reality and recalls how Sheherazade was saved by narrative. The precise meaning of this reference is however only clarified in the next story. The *mise en abyme* is thus difficult to see clearly in Dällenbach's terms: invisible for most of the narrative, it only emerges at the end to swallow the whole text, leaving the reader with a disturbing sense of textual instability that seems to provide another answer to Dällenbach's analysis of the problem with *mises en abyme*, namely that they essentially '... masquent l'aventure de l'écriture et ... désignent un objet fini quand il eût fallu montrer, *en acte*, un travail imprévisible et, sans doute, non métabolisable.'[23] On the contrary, *mise en abyme* here reveals precisely the adventure of writing in progress, *en acte*, and leaves the way clear for a demonstration of the power of narrative in the story that follows.

2. 'Schéhérazade'

If *mise en abyme* seems confusing in 'Rue de la Mort' then 'Schéhérazade' offers by contrast a perfect example of the phenomenon that fits Dällenbach's classification exactly, while still performing a similar trick to the preceding story in that mirror and

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[22]Ibid., p. 114.
[23]Dällenbach, p. 206.

mirrored become one at the end. As the title suggests, the narrative, in good postmodern style, relies on the recycling of ancient forms: here, clearly, *The Thousand and One Nights*, itself the classic source of aporetic *mises en abyme*. It contains within itself its own image in miniature and therefore the possibility of infinite regression (Schéhérazade could thus be saved by a story that never ends - paradoxical reflection - this principle is used by Petit in 'La Nuit du Sorcier') but also numerous simple reflections (Dällenbach's first category).

In Petit's story, as we have seen, the frame narrative is set in the Jewish cemetery in Prague during the war, when it was used, we are told, by the Nazis as a temporary camp for Jews, Gypsies and other 'undesirables'. The characterisation of the camp commander, the sinister professeur Achab, something of a grotesque proto-deconstructionalist in caricature, was discussed in Chapter 6 where it becomes clear that the religious significance with which he invests literature heralds a battle between narrative and its would-be destroyer. But how does the book of *The Thousand and One Nights* fit into this? After summoning the philosophers and the rabbis in the camp and offering them the chance of freedom if they can convince him that their reasons for hope are valid, he remains unconvinced and sends them to their deaths.[24] He takes a fancy to a mute gypsy girl, however, whose sister, Tilka, though illiterate, is famed for her ability as a storyteller. He offers her a challenge: if she can tell him a story that entertains him he will grant both girls their freedom; if she fails they face death. Thus a modern Schéhérazade is created.

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[24]See Chapter 6 for a fuller account of the philosphers' and theologians' arguments.

The story she tells is of course that of Schéhérazade herself. This has a number of advantages: first, it is a trick, since Achab had permitted her only one story, but although the *Nights* are made up of many stories they are all contained within one frame narrative - Achab is therefore obliged to wait a thousand and one nights for satisfaction. Secondly Tilka has the pleasure of telling her own story in stylised form, and thus makes Achab a character in her own narrative - the storyteller thus becomes God and the 'king' (in this case Achab) a puppet in the hands of the *conteur*. Thirdly the narrative contains its own *mises en abyme* (aside from the frame narrative in miniature that Borges comments on, potentially allowing for infinite regression, which would certainly have saved Tilka). These comment on and structure further the embedding narrative. Indeed Tilka starts with one of them: the story of an angry Djinn who allows the life of a merchant he holds in his power to be bought in return for three stories. Achab falls asleep and only wakes up at the end; he attempts to resist the fictionalisation of his character:

> - Ce n'était pas un mauvais Djinn. Il ne s'est pas endormi, lui. Il s'ennuyait un peu, seulement, il avait besoin de distraction [dit Tilka].
> - S'il n'était pas mauvais, ce n'était pas un vrai Djinn. Les vrais Djinns n'écoutent pas les contes, dit Achab.[25]

The same situation recurs a thousand nights later (the narrative time advances through the war, the German successes then the Allies' advances; all the while Tilka is telling her stories while Achab sleeps through them in the cemetery) when Tilka reaches the end of the frame narrative: Schéhérazade is spared and the story finishes with 'Ainsi le roi et ses sujets vécurent-ils désormais en

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[25]Ibid., p. 140.

paix, dans la prospérité et la justice.'[26] Achab has remained deaf to the story's message - it is after all the story he hates most as it affirms the life-restoring power of narrative. Like a deconstructionalist he is more interested in dismissing his opponent because of her position than in responding to her argument. His own argument nevertheless evaporates into violence as Tilka's recitation of the denouement forces the mirror in front of him and he sees himself *en abyme* in a form he cannot bear: 'Ton histoire! Ton histoire! Nous y voilà! rugit Achab. Demain, tu seras morte et ton histoire sera fausse!'[27] But Tilka insists that whatever happens to her, her story will be remembered and his will be forgotten.

At this point the narrative breaks off and the until now impersonal narrator intervenes: no more is known about the two he says, but 'dans l'histoire comme je la raconte' Achab is found shot in the cemetery with a pistol in his hand.

> Cette conclusion est-elle vraisemblable? Je n'en sais rien. Peut-être que convaincu par les paroles de la jeune fille, le professeur Achab avait voulu par ce dernier geste rejoindre l'histoire qui jusque-là lui avait toujours échappé; ou que l'histoire, magnanime, lui a donné ce coup de grâce, qu'elle prenne en pitié même les rois ou qu'elle craigne leurs revenants.[28]

The play on the meaning of *histoire* (ironically just the kind of *jeu de mots* deconstuctionalists adore) allows for multiple interpretation: literally Achab is overtaken by history - the camp is liberated - but more interestingly from the literary point of view, the story kills him, the fictional mirror proves stronger than reality and fictionalises its listener - hence presumably the narrator's appearance in order to emphasise that Achab has become a

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[26]Ibid., p. 144.
[27]Ibid., p. 146.
[28]Ibid., p. 147.

storyteller's character. These alternative endings can happily co-exist, as has already been discussed. The sense of Borges' remarks about the *mise en abyme* now becomes clear; the mirror in the text represents art's narrativisation of reality - it structures by embedding, to use Dällenbach's terms - and as such *becomes* reality since the human world is made up of narratives in which we are all characters. Thus in narrating the world around us we are all in a sense telling our own stories like Tilka and Schéhérazade; those like Achab who seek to break the mirror are simply destroying themselves.

Dällenbach's classification of *mise en abyme* holds good as far as Petit's fiction is concerned; his conclusion in 1977 that 'l'avenir appartient à ce "Narcisse d'un genre nouveau" ... un Narcisse aveugle, en quête de ses membres épars, et irrémédiablement voué à la désagrégation'[29] thankfully does not. The 'disparition [de la *mise en abyme*] par suite de la généralisation' in the new narrative circumstances engendered by the late *nouveau roman* he diagnoses as 'l'indexe d'une rupture avec la pensée représentative qui domine la grande tradition littéraire occidentale et dont le premier Nouveau Roman n'avait pas réussi à s'affranchir entièrement.'[30] But what Petit's fictions show is that classic rather than generalised reflection continues to play a very active part in the French avant-garde - *mise en abyme* has been rescued from the icily cerebral stratosphere of Dällenbach's new *nouveau roman*, and is alive and well,

[29]Dällenbach, p. 211.
[30]Ibid., p. 210.

contributing to the literary revival of language's relationship with reality in the playfully postmodern world of the *Nouvelle Fiction*.[31]

[31]Hubert Haddad discusses his own use of *mise en abyme* in Appendix 4, with reference to one of his more recent books, *Meurtre sur l'île des marins fidèles* (Paris: Zulma, 1994), which makes use of Stevenson's *Teasure Island*.

PART III

READING, PLEASURE AND THE WORLD

CHAPTER 11

PLAISIR AND *JOUISSANCE*

In *Le plaisir du texte*,[1] Barthes elaborates a theory of textual pleasure that addresses the problematic area of the emotional responses a text elicits from its readers. Here I propose to apply Barthes's theory to a variety of texts with the intention of identifying useful similarities between the *Nouvelle Fiction* and its mentors, and equally, helpful differences between the *Nouvelle Fiction* and its immediate predecessors.

Barthes distinguishes the kinds of pleasure we derive from a text in the following way:

Lisible, or 'readerly' texts are texts of pleasure, texts we know how to read. They are texts that content, fill, grant euphoria, come from a culture and do not break with it; they are linked to a comfortable practice of reading.

Scriptible, or 'writerly' texts, texts of bliss or *jouissance*, impose a state of loss, discomfort (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettle the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, bring to a crisis his relation with language.[2]

In fact, Barthes's separation of the *lisible* and the *scriptible* is artificial, as he later admits. Both are usually present in the same text to a greater or lesser degree, and the balance of the two is one way of defining the kind of work we are reading. A text that is almost entirely *lisible* risks becoming dull and predictable; an overwhelmingly *scriptible*

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[1]Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).
[2]Ibid., pp. 25-6. (See also Johnathan Culler, *Barthes*, (London: Fontana Press, 1983), p98).

text, like some examples of the later *nouveau nouveau roman*,[3] might go so far away from readability that only the most dedicated academic enthusiast will be willing to invest the time and energy necessary to find any meaning in them at all. Thus these two aspects of pleasure depend on each other: *jouissance* can only be experienced through the disruption of *plaisir*, so that we need a readable, comfortable illusion in order to have something to shatter. As Culler puts it,

> [Barthes] explores the relations... between these two sorts of texts and aspects of texts and, while maintaining the importance of a distinction, seems to suggest that textual effects depend upon the possibility of finding ecstatic moments in the comfortable texts of pleasure or of making post-modern writing sufficiently readable that its disruptive, violent, orgasmic effect can be generated.[4]

Jouissance, Barthes states, is to be found in the apprehension of the gap or seam, the gash in the cloak that lets the reader peep, voyeur-like, not at culture itself or its destruction but at the moment of disruption. Nakedness, he suggests, is most erotic when it is understood as something hidden.[5] In the same way the text is a source of bliss or ecstasy when we perceive the gap between the code and the content. But can we be more specific about the kind of 'gaps' or seams which might be the source of this ecstasy? Rather than trawling texts for moments which might give this or that reader some form of emotional rush, we might be on surer methodological ground if we were to identify the range of possible seams which Barthes's description implies, and look at their implications for interpretation in different texts.

What Barthes seems to be describing when he speaks of a 'seam' in the text is perhaps more ordinarily understood as an example of textual self-consciousness, or as the text 'distancing' the reader from

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[3] Some of the more impenetrable works of Sollers, for instance.
[4] Culler, (see note 2), p. 98.
[5] Barthes, p. 19.

the fiction. Attention is suddenly drawn to our suspension of disbelief, and our pact with the text is perhaps renegotiated or reappraised. Such rifts, however, can be achieved in a number of different ways, as outlined below. To illustrate these different seams I propose to draw examples from the work of Cervantes in the first instance, before looking for comparisons in the *Nouvelle Fiction*. Perhaps there is a need, however, to justify this procedure. The *Nouvelle Fiction* is a movement that has a relationship with narrative tradition that is at once parodic and affectionate, and as such has much in common with the narrative world of Cervantes. Moreover, one *Nouvelle Fiction* text, Jean Levi's *Acclimatation*, was conceived specifically as a parody of the fantastic following Cervantes's example.[6] As *Don Quixote* is much concerned with the significance of narrative distance and much of the delight of the book is a product of the games played by the narrator with his masks, it seems appropriate to draw examples from this acknowledged master of narratorial intrusion, and from a work so rich in such effects. My immediate intention, therefore, is to identify examples of the kind of disjuncture Barthes describes in literary history, indeed from literatures other than French. One could equally find examples of such techniques from the French tradition: *Jacques le fataliste* is also rich in such effects, from the teasing dialogue between narrator and reader to the continually interrupted narratives of Jacques and his master. I choose Cervantes, however, because *Don Quixote* is an outstanding example of a text born of a dependence on the literature of the past, no matter how much this may be in the form of parody.

1. The 'Dear reader' seam or seam of authorial intervention: our immersion in the plot is arrested by a reference to the narrative as

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[6]See Moreau, pp. 398-420.

narrative, or by a direct appeal to us as readers. It draws attention to the artificiality of the text, to the illusion of narrative.

In *Don Quixote* Cervantes constantly plays with the extent of our surrender to the fiction and our perception of it as such. One example among many is Don Quixote's battle with the Basque that straddles Chapter 8 and 9 in Part I. There is a tremendous build-up of suspense, aided by the slowing of the *temps du récit* or discourse time in relation to the *temps de l'histoire* or story time: it takes a whole page or, say, forty-five seconds of the average reader's time to describe the action of two or three seconds.[7] We see both foes with swords raised above each other's heads, and know that a dreadful fate awaits at least one of them. Then narrative time hovers tantalisingly over the same moment: 'Venía, pues, como se ha dicho, Don Quijote contra el cauto vizcaíno,...'[8] That 'como se ha dicho' is the sound of the fabric of narrative ripping, though. For the story now breaks off altogether, and Cervantes slips on the mask of the pedantic researcher of the Quixote manuscript, frustrated in his investigations. There follow several pages of interruption, which introduce for the first time the reputed Arab historian of the knight, Cide Hamete Benengeli, as Cervantes the narrator eventually tracks down the rest of the manuscript by chance in a market stall, has it translated, and resumes the story where he had left off. To use the distinction arrived at by the Russian formalists, there is a rift between *fabula* and *sjuzet*, commonly translated as story

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7El decir esto, y el apretar la espada, y el cubrirse bien de su rodela, y el arremeter al vizcaíno, todo fue en un tiempo, llevando determinación de aventurarlo todo a la de un golpe solo. Miguel de Cervantes, *El Ingenioso don Quijote de la Mancha* (Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, vol. 1, p.137.)
This excerpt alone demonstrates the technique Cervantes employs to stretch his narrative and so our suspense through the listing of simultaneous actions while at the same time conveying through the breathless urgency of his anaphora the dramatic tension of the moment.

8 'Don Quixote, as we have said, rushed at the wary Basque ...'. Trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 74.

and plot. Or, in Genette's narratology, between *histoire* and *récit*. The narrative rattles on leaving the main story behind while it starts a new story about its own production. One might say that the *récit* and the *histoire* slide out of synchronisation with each other. It is as if the clutch had been disengaged whilst the driver's foot was still on the accelerator: the engine roars on but it ceases to drive the car. Cervantes's narrative rattles away, but it leaves his plot behind. Just as a thoughtful driver might then become aware of the miracle of engineering operating beneath him and how certain conventional movements are required of his feet to keep things working in the way he expects, the reader is similarly suddenly reminded of the mechanisms he has being enjoying for their effect.

But this kind of description does not help us to understand what the effect of such a device is. Its significance is to be found not in an analysis of the texture of the narrative but in the implications of its disintegration. The text before the rift is what Barthes would call *lisible*, that is, it is a text of pleasure, one that 'grants euphoria'. It demands of its model reader absorption in the illusion spun by the narrative: we see before us the raised swords of the combatants, and enjoy the thrill of the fight, the violence and the valour of the two enemies. But as the narrative starts to grind to a halt, our attention to the comedy of the scene is renewed: the hovering of the discourse time is perpetuated, we notice, by a clumsiness in the story-teller's art. 'Como se ha dicho' tips the balance of our attention away from the story and towards the narrator: to use the metaphor of realism, our desire to look through the window of narrative is suddenly frustrated by a fault in the glass. As a result we reconsider the *plaisir* of what has gone before: the illusion may be shattered, and this might be considered a source of a sensation of 'loss', but it releases a new kind of fictional delight: we are suddenly

free to enjoy the violence and the tension, knowing that all is the invention of Cervantes. It is slapstick, nobody is really hurt, none of it is *real.* The following interruption is a necessary textual boredom, a sort of post-coital narrative depression. Without it there would be no *jouissance;* 'L'ennui n'est pas loin de la jouissance: il est la jouissance vue des rives du plaisir.'[9]

2. The rhetorical seam: a similar effect to that described above can be achieved with a shift in rhetoric, which also has the effect of drawing our attention to the narrator and away from the action he describes. A sudden surge of hyperbole, a movement from description of actions to eulogy, anything that forces the reader to shift his mode of reading will have this effect. Cervantes does so in another interruption of dramatic tension when Don Quixote prepares to do battle with the lion in Part II Chapter 17. Terse description of Don Quixote's arming himself, his shrewd decision to fight on foot in case Rocinante should take fright, convey an image of a resourceful and brave man of action, until Cervantes bursts in with a cloud of gushing irony, praising the valour of the knight, and attributing the interruption to the 'author', or historian, Cide Hamete.[10]

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[9] Roland Barthes, p 43.

10...a este paso, el autor de esta verdadera historia exclama y dice: ¡Oh fuerte y sobre todo encarecimiento animoso don Quijote de la Mancha, espejo donde se puede ver todos los valientes del mundo...! ¿Con qué palabras contaré esta tan espantosa hazaña, o con qué razones la haré creíble a los siglos venideros, o qué alabanzas habrá que no te convengan y cuadren, aunque sean hipérboles sobre todo los hipérboles? (Cervantes, *op cit,* vol. 2, p. 163)

In case we had forgotten, this intervention firmly reminds of the comedy of the scene: Quixote is not being brave, but plain stupid. He is a mad old fool, and what's more, has cream cheese running down his face. We then go on to enjoy his comic deflation: when the cage is opened, the lion yawns, turns round and goes to sleep. On either side of the seam, then, there is 'plaisir': on the one hand, immersion in the drama and enjoyment of the action, as in the battle with the Basque, and on the other, enjoyment of the comedy. But the seam itself is where we as readers are forced into a renewed awareness of our patterns of reading at the moment when they are changing.

3. **The generic or structural seam**, where the text hovers between different genres, for instance the tragic and the comic, realism and fantasy. Such hovering is intrinsic to the fantastic: the narrative necessarily hesitates between the uncanny and the marvellous. The examples already cited arguably provide instances of this seam too: the battle with the Basque and with the lion stretch from a sort of realism to slapstick, as the authorial intrusion achieves a sudden shift in reader distance. Such shifts, however, need not be effected by so direct a method. The shift can also be effected contextually, without a material change in the narrator's tone. Language can remain the same but modified circumstances alter our perception of that tone.

Of course, if there is no narrator at all, as is usually the case in the theatre, such a seam is necessarily structural. Take Molière's *L'École des femmes* for instance. Sometimes criticised for its contrived ending in which Agnès and Horace are improbably brought together, this is regarded as a weakness in a play where comedy is elevated from mere farce by the acute observation of character and study of obsession. Critical attention is lavished on Act V scene viii, where Arnolphe reaches his moment of anagnorisis, realises Agnès will never

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Sometimes a single word is enough to focus our attention on the cracks in the surface of the narrative. This is demonstrated in Quixote's encounter with Roque Guinart, a historical robber chief and something of a popular hero in his time. Cervantes goes to some length to set him up as a 'gentleman thief'. We are already familiar with the high-flown rhetoric and noble sentiments of Quixote, and instinctively draw comparisons when Roque matches our hero's style. There *is* a difference between Quixote's fantasy and Roque's reality, however: the knight and his squire have just walked through a wood where the bandit's victims are hanging dead in trees, and he will soon murder a member of his own gang. Roque is not quite the genial gentleman that the surface of the narrative presents, and Cervantes slyly pricks the idealized balloon he had inflated by having Roque utter a clumsy malapropism, recalling a similar bogus gentility apparent in Monopodio's gang in 'Rinconete y Cortadillo' , one of the *Novelas Exemplares*. We are reminded that beyond the picturesque lies the grimly picaresque, and are pleased to enjoy the romanticised criminal so long as he remains firmly fictional. The malapropism has the effect of the camera being suddenly brought into focus. The picture we see is the same, but our understanding of it is broadened: we see not just the representation but the brushstrokes and the frame too.

love him, that all his plans have failed, and that he has made himself a laughing-stock. The scene is firmly comic and Arnolphe remains a fool, never more ridiculous and laughable than when, too late, he plays the pleading lover ('Je te bouchonnerai, baiserai, mangerai'), and yet we are unavoidably made aware of the pain of his realisation. The psychological tension is at its most acute at the end of this scene, whereupon the play lapses into convention. Yet the perception, inherent in the contrived ending, of the theatricality of what we are watching reminds us also that the real world is not so kind: Agnès would have been sent to a convent as Arnolphe threatens at the end of scene viii, and two men would have been heartbroken instead of one. The convention of the *Deus ex Machina* is thus double-edged in its implications: yes, it offers reassuring confirmation of a divine order, but in Molière's hands, as we also see in *Tartuffe*, the convention paradoxically unsettles as well as comforts. We are released to enjoy the comedy as comedy, as a theatrical product, knowing that our pleasure is safe and harmless within the delight of Molière's illusion.

4. The seam of reader disorientation: so far we have looked at seams that unsettle by forcing the reader or audience to modify its interpretation or perception of the text by means of a narrative device. There is, however, another kind of textual 'gap', perhaps more common in modern texts, which aims, at first anyway, not so much to alter perception as to resist understanding. Rather than moving to a new plane of understanding, we are left wondering how to make *any* sense of the text. The effect is achieved through the suppression of the usual narrative markers used to signal, say, changes in time or in consciousness. Such a technique approaches the problem of textual ecstasy from a diametrical point of view. The narrative gaps so far

examined have been generated by the parting of segments of *readable* narrative: to continue Barthes's metaphor, the gaping garment momentarily flashes a vision of nakedness which is then covered. But this other kind of seam calls for a new metaphor from the imagery of the voyeur: rather than leering hopefully at our clothed victim, we glimpse her naked but shrouded in thick clouds of steam from a Turkish bath. From the mist emerge corners of significance - an ankle, perhaps the suggestion of a thigh - and we desperately attempt to reconstitute an image of the whole in our minds. On the one hand we see clearly, but wish to see beneath the visible; on the other we see nakedness, but the thrill of the peep is provided by its indistinctness. But in both cases there is the tension between the perceived and the imagined.

Such an effect provided by temporal imprecision is exemplified by Nerval's *Sylvie*: the narrator's account breaks between different moments of his past remembered unchronologically, oscillating between analepses and prolepses. We can never quite unravel the twists in the narrative and are left with an impression of a dream. The narrative disorientates the reader, mimicking the dreamy haze with which the narrator experiences his memories during his journey to Loisy.

Other examples of essentially the same process might include the suppression of markers like 'that night he dreamt...' to indicate that what follows belongs to the unconscious world of nocturnal fantasy, and is to be assigned a different order of importance, or read in a different way, from what has gone before. Thus we unsuspectingly enter a dream world, and are left to try and relate it to the 'real' world within the narrative until the author sees fit to relieve us.

Seams in the 'Nouvelle Fiction'

Is this discussion relevant to the *Nouvelle Fiction* though? Can such seams be identified in the works of any of the authors under discussion? Since the *Nouvelle Fiction* project seems to include a desire to revisit the delight of fictional illusion, indeed the concept of the postmodern relies on the ludic reuse of old fictional forms, it would be surprising if it did not.

Petit's 'Schéhérazade', for instance, provides an example of the seam of authorial intervention. The frame story from *The Thousand and One Nights* is applied to Tilka and her Nazi tyrant Achab, in which Tilka tells her tormentor the story of Schéhérazade, thus telling her own story to him. Whilst the story of the *Nights* is completed, however, Tilka's own story breaks off and the, until now, impersonal narrator intervenes: no more is known about the two, he says, but 'dans l'histoire comme je la raconte' Achab is found shot in the cemetery with a pistol in his hand (See Chapters 6 and 10). He wants to be acknowledged as the narrator of a story, but a narrator who, in a similar vein to Cervantes's elaborate games with editors and Moorish copiers, wishes to be seen, not as definitive author but as propagator of one possible version. Cervantes's spurious protestations of fusty academic accuracy which he subsequently undermines himself are neatly suggested in that phrase 'comme je la raconte'. The implications of it are considerable: in this understated way we are reminded of all the delight of fictional satisfaction, the profound escape offered by the civilised fantasies of art from the harsh and dangerous world outside. Our narrator knows what the real world has to offer, what Achab would probably have done next, and reminds us, by giving us what the fiction *en abyme* demands of its frame narrative, of the distance between reality and the ideal. The scene is analogous to the end of Mozart's *The*

Marriage of Figaro: we perhaps know that such miraculous reconciliations are improbable in the real world, yet wouldn't it be nice if they *did* happen? This isn't just escapism, since the seam provides its own critique; we momentarily glimpse the real and the ideal at once and see both for what they are. The effect relies on the proper appreciation of the narrative that precedes it: the text 'intends' its model reader to desire the same ending to Tilka's story as to Schéhérazade's, whilst realising that the contrary is expected. When the *unexpected* is delivered, it does not quite satisfy, because our attention is refocused on the self-conscious presentation of it. Our desire is sated and yet we suffer a loss, that of the comfort of unreflecting illusion.

Jean Levi's *Acclimatation* provides examples of a variety of seams, although technically different from those examined so far. It is a first-person account, so an intervention of the kind so far described would have to be from an 'editor' or fictionalised author, speaking over his narrator's head. But this does not happen. The first-person narrative is in any case partial by definition, and is characteristically used to throw into question the validity of what is narrated, or the reliability of the narrator. It is conceived as a parody of the fantastic just as *Don Quixote* is a parody of the romances of chivalry, and it is therefore unsurprising to find narrative strategies that emphasise the unreliability of what we are reading. As we have already seen, doubt over the possible explanation for events is central to the fantastic, but here where it is parodied, the good faith of the narrator is also thrown into doubt. In the opening pages, for instance, in which the spectral atmosphere of the *Jardin d'Acclimatation* is conjured up and the persecution of the cats described, the narrator remains impersonal. Only on page 14 does he reveal himself as a first-person participant,

and thereby ironically robs all that we had just read of its authority with Cervantine self-mockery:

> Je n'ai pas assisté à ces scènes; il se peut que l'animosité m'ait fait déformer un récit écouté d'une oreille distraite. J'ai toujours détesté le Jardin d'acclimatation où me conduisaient parfois mes parents, persuadés de m'offrir la suprême récompense... Il se peut aussi que la destruction des chats ne fût jamais qu'une menace brandie par le directeur.[11]

Levi mimics the authoritative narrative only to undermine it with a narratorial intervention which becomes the new standard for the rest of the work.

At the end of the book, however, the essential seam that illuminates all that we have read is a kind of rhetorical seam. When our narrator tells us 'Un jour ma femme revint',[12] we are suddenly confronted with previously suppressed information: this is the first mention of the narrator's wife. Her appearance heralds a turn in events - all is now firmly a matter of the 'real' rather than the supernatural, whatever may be doubtful in what has gone before. This shift also brings with it a change in tone: the narrator spends some time on almost unsignalled explanations to his wife, a kind of first-person *style indirect libre* .

> Je tentais de me justifier en parlant de ma découverte. On pourrait gagner beaucoup de place - cinq mètres carrés - en mordant sur le mur qui recelait une caverne, et peut-être même acquérir le studio mitoyen. Je mentionnai aussi mes liens avec le directeur du Jardin d'acclimatation, presque un ami et un très proche parent de nos voisins. C'était important quand on a des enfants de connaître quelqu'un comme lui. Peut-être pas pour tout de suite, mais pour après.[13]

The vague menace of the supernatural, the tone of paranoia in the face of the unexplained is gone, and in its place is the voice of a husband trying to explain why the flat is *still* in such a mess, even though the

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[11]Levi, pp. 14-15.
[12]Ibid., p. 91.
[13]Ibid., pp. 91-2.

baby is nearly on the way. We look back at events and characterisation that led, because of the context and the omissions, to an atmosphere suffused with the supernatural, which is now undermined by the more mundanely domestic. The Rabelaisian feasting on the heaviest gourmandise, the odd hours he keeps, all are suggested by the narrator as a possible sign of a malign supernatural influence:

> Je crus même un moment être la proie d'un vampire. J'avais maigri et pourtant je mangeai comme un ogre. D'affreux cauchemars traversaient mes nuits et me laissaient au réveil brisé, moulu, anéanti. Une fois je me surpris à scruter devant la glace une rougeur à mon cou, probablement laissée par le rasoir, pour vérifier si ce n'était pas une morsure. J'avais beau me raisonner, des réminiscences de contes fantastiques m'assaillaient et faisaient dans ma tête la sarabande de tous les êtres invisibles et angoissants du grand théâtre de l'effroi.[14]

Why indeed shouldn't an unusual appetite, disturbed nights and worst of all, strangely bloodied marks on the neck all be signs of a feline vampire in the circumstances? With the information given by the narrator, and his fanciful memories of 'des contes fantastiques', we are led to believe that this is indeed a possible solution. The phrase 'probablement laissée par le rasoir', which does maintain the balance of hesitancy, is submerged by the imagery of the fantastic. Once we know all this happened during his wife's absence, however, it might be given a more prosaic explanation. Our narrator is not a neurotically solitary male, wrapped in his own psychosis, but rather, a lonely husband, temporarily returning to his bachelor habits while his wife is away. What could be more natural than to sleep badly without one's accustomed bed-fellow, particularly after eating and probably drinking so richly?

His increased appetite also invites more mundane explanation, possibly in Balzacian terms: we might say that his *énergie vitale* has

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[14]Ibid., p. 58

transferred itself from sexual to gastronomic interests. We can now unpack in more prosaic terms the significance of the diet itself: the narrator's alarming bestial obsession with the heaviest meat feasts, in their least refined forms (for example 'Je revins de ma promenade les mains endolories par le poids des sacs de charcuterie juive, de saucissons hongrois et de lard au paprika.'[15]) might have suggested a supernatural feline posession of his appetite. Now, we see it as another symptom of a temporarily solitary husband, gorging on his favourite gourmandise which perhaps he rarely gets when his wife is at home. One might extend the Balzacian-Freudian insight further: the rough charm and immediacy of the charcuterie is itself an expression of a sort of machismo, an undisciplined male sexuality deprived of feminine refinement. Barthes has something to say elsewhere on the subject of literary food: he even believes that works can be classified according to their attitude to gastronomic classification. With reference to Sade, as well as Proust and Flaubert *en passant*, he suggests that the listing of gastronomic details provides an essential addition and elaboration of meaning; Sade's feasts serve to introduce pleasure to a moral lexicon that had only contained transgression.[16] In Levi, the

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[15]Ibid., p. 41

[16]"La nourriture sadienne est fonctionnelle, systématique. Cela ne suffirait pas à la rendre romanesque. Sade y ajoute un supplément d'énonciation: l'invention du détail, la nomination des plats. Victorine, l'intendante de Sainte-Marie-des-Bois, mange à son repas une dinde aux truffes, un pâté de Périgueux, une mortadelle de Bologne et boit six bouteilles de vin de Champagne; Sade note ailleurs le menu d'un ‹‹dîner fort irritant: potage au bouillon de 24 petits moineaux au riz et au safran, tourte dont les boulettes sont de viande de pigeon hachée et garnie de culs d'artichauts, oeufs au jus, compote à l'ambre››. Le passage de la notation générique (‹‹ils se restaurèrent››) au menu détaillé (‹‹à la poitrine du jour on leur servit des oeufs brouillés, chincara, potage à l'oignon et omelettes››) constitue la marque même du romanesque: on pourrait classer les romans selon la franchise de l'allusion alimentaire: avec Proust, Zola, Flaubert, on sait toujours ce que mangent les personnages; avec Fromentin, Laclos ou même Stendhal, non. Le détail alimentaire excède la signification, il est le supplément énigmatique du sens (de l'idéologie); dans l'oie dont s'empiffre le vieux Galilée, il n'y a pas seulement un symbole actif de sa situation (Galilée est hors de la course; il mange; ses livres agiront pour lui), mais aussi comme une tendresse brechtienne pour la jouissance. De même les menus de Sade ont pour fonction (infonctionnelle) d'introduire le plaisir (et non plus seulement

gastronomic details also provide a sign of pleasure, not merely physical, but retrospectively intellectual, as the enigma of the feasting is revealed. Their multiple *significations*, just like the other duplicitous elements of the text, hide their underlying *sens*.

There is a suggestion of ironic complicity between the participants in the narrative deception: he and Esther do not refer to their 'adventure' in front of the narrator's wife. 'Nous nous séparâmes sans un mot, sans un regard comme des malfaiteurs leur forfait accompli.'[17] But perhaps there was nothing to refer to anyway: was all a mere shadow of the text, a sort of mist spirited up between the words? It is through this radical shift in our perception of the text brought about by the appearance of the wife that we are made aware to what extent our perception has been a construction of the textual strategy. We are shown the importance of context: I said earlier that the narrator's tone changes; this is not quite true. It is our relationship with it that changes with the new context we learn of. The words remain the same, but their significance changes as our contextual horizon broadens. The wife operates as a kind of *Deus ex machina*, although very different from Molière's, assuring us of a wider world beyond that of the narrative, into which that narrative can be assimilated, or acclimatised. One might also compare her appearance to the effect of the *tierce de picardie* in music: just as the expected climax in a minor key shifts unexpectedly into the major, the narrative, which leads one to anticipate something horrific or at least uncanny, shifts unexpectedly towards realism. The comparison with the musical effect is apt, since there is not actually a modulation in genre, just as there is no modulation in key. The shift is slight, yet profound. We are not

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la transgression) dans le monde libertin." Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier,Loyola* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), pp128-129.
[17]Levi, p93.

offered a rational explanation of all that would place the whole narrative in the mode of detective-style fiction, that is, in a world where what is apparently inexplicable suddenly proves to be utterly reasonable when viewed in the right way, when the right connections between events are made. Here, on the contrary, nothing material changes, and we can be no more certain as to how best to explain the events described, but the balance of probability has shifted towards realism. We remain, nevertheless, in the hesistant world of the fantastic. The seam marked by 'Un jour ma femme revint' divides once again two alternatively *lisible* aspects of the same text from each other. But through the gash we glimpse the deceit of narrative, and are invited to share a moment of *jouissance* as we contemplate the way our own more tangible *plaisir* was created.

In what sense, however, is the reader's disorientation affected in the *Nouvelle Fiction*? In fact our authors do not seem to approach this issue with abrupt textual rifts at all. In the *Nouvelle Fiction*, the reader is generally disorientated progressively: an apparently straightforward narrative discomforts not by a sudden disjunction, the sudden destruction of the reader's confidence, but by a gradual, seamless slide from readerly comfort to anxiety. Thus the narrative trick of suppressing the markers that signal different levels of reality (the unconscious from the conscious), or different moments in time, is largely neglected by the *Nouvelle Fiction*. That is not to say that such differentiation between alternative levels of reality does not have any relevance; dreams, for instance, make frequent appearances[18] in *Nouvelle Fiction* texts. The way they are treated, however, has its own implications for interpretation.

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[18] See, for example, *Le fou dans la chaloupe, Mathieu Chain, Acclimatation.*

In *Acclimatation*, for instance, the dream on pages 31-34 is clearly flagged as such beforehand ('Cette nuit-là, moi qui ne rêve jamais, je sombrai immédiatement dans un profond sommeil et fis un rêve.'). As is characteristic of dreams, people from the real world invade the narrator's dream, including Esther, the spinster who got the narrator involved in the whole bizarre world of the *Jardin d'Acclimatation* and the cats. The dream itself introduces in more explicit terms themes that had remained more or less covered up until this point: Esther is associated for the first time with her Biblical counterpart; we begin to see a comic comparison between her mission to save the cats and the salvation of the Jews.

Some pages later when the narrator returns from the shops he discerns that the building four doors down from his own flat is besieged by fire engines. In an increasingly bizarre scene, in which the narrator watches Esther rescuing cats from a fireman's ladder, causing chaos in the streets, his description deliberately colours everything in as unworldly a light as possible:

> La masse luisante des dos gainés de cuir s'ouvrit et je la vis. Elle portait un ensemble rouge, comme dans mon rêve, peut-être un peu plus clair (il tirait sur le poupre et non sur le grenat) dont les reflets carminés accusaient les colorations roses du visage et attisaient l'éclat métallique de sa chevelure. Avec le feu sombre de son costume, la flamme pâle et luminescente de son teint, le casque empanaché d'argent de ses cheveux et les gestes décidés de ses mains gantées de chevreau cramoisi qui semblaient donner des ordres à un bataillon de sapeurs, on eût dit qu'elle posait pour une allégorie des gardiens du feu.[19]

The imagery of the dream is recalled as if it were a memory of reality, and the unreal and real worlds are casually compared, as if they both enjoyed the same status. The attention to the comparison of colour gently makes this point: the narrator does not express surprise, but seems calmly to accommodate the intrusion of his subconscious into

[19] Jean Levi, p. 43.

reality. The details of the precise shade provide an example of narrative excess, of 'superfluous' fussing over trivia to mild comic effect.

More importantly though, the passage encourages an association between the dream and the real world: the narrator's experiences have become nearly as strange as his dreams. The reader could be excused for anxiously flipping back a few pages to be sure that he has not missed another dream marker. By *not* suppressing the dream markers, by insisting on the physical difference between dream and reality, Levi makes us all the more aware of their similarities. In a sense, it is a device that leaves the narrator in the background for once: the suppression of markers draws attention to the tricks of narrative and away from the experience of the content - once the trick is revealed the reader consigns the preceding section of text to another order of significance, and focuses on the narrative strategy itself. With the markers in place, instead of trying to unscramble the meaning of a disjointed passage, we concentrate on the gradual discomforting effect the device has on the narrative. Reality, in *Acclimatation*, is slowly made to seem like a dream, from which the reader is sharply awoken, as we have seen.

Châteaureynaud also make extensive use of dreams in his work, but these too are generally flagged in the conventional way. *Mathieu Chain*, for instance, traces the breakdown of its eponymous hero, and is much concerned with the intrusion of the unreal into the real (Chain spends most of the novel obsessed by the search for a book listed in a bibliography as his own but which he knows he did not write). One way in which the world of the unconscious intrudes is through the juxtaposition of dream sequences with the increasingly frenzied events of reality. Reality starts to break down as if it were a nightmare, and

although nothing supernatural or anti-realist occurs, the association of the unconscious with the conscious world becomes uncomfortably close, reflecting the state of mind of the protagonist. In one instance, Châteaureynaud plays a different kind of game with the reader by placing the suggestion of a dream marker at the end of one chapter before starting the story of Chain's visit to the bookseller:

> Depuis quelques instants déjà, il bâillait et dodelinait, sans trouver le courage de se traîner jusqu'à son lit. Enfin le sommeil eut raison de lui, et il piqua du nez sur la bibliographie. Il s'endormit là, sur le bureau, la tête dans les bras entre les livres épars. Et jusqu'à l'aube, la lampe du bureau resta allumée sur sa nuque.[20]

Strictly speaking, this is not Châteaureynaud's usual dream marker; on page 62, for example, the narrator states openly '...et de sa rêverie il avait insensiblement glissé au songe'. We cannot accuse him of really misleading us, but the continuation of the story in Chapter Five makes no mention of awakening: we have slipped from profound sleep to action, and the reader cannot be sure for some pages what significance he should assign to the latest events. We are not disorientated by an abrupt disjunction, but rather slowly made to feel that the narrative world is shifting without clearly being able to pin it down to a precise moment of textual rupture.

Equally, in *Le fou dans la chaloupe*, Châteaureynaud does not seek to disorientate the reader with a sudden break, but uses dream sequences to establish a correspondence between the two worlds: the dreams work as a 'structuration par enchâssement', to use Dällenbach's description of *mise en abyme*. The narrator of 'Là-bas dans le sud', for instance, experiences three clearly flagged dreams that prefigure events in the real world: by marking the dreams as dreams, he makes the

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[20]George-Olivier Châteaureynaud, *Mathieu Chain* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1978), pp. 120-1.

relationship all the more disturbing; we focus on how the unconscious actually structures reality, on how the stories we write for ourselves in our minds come to be made real. The world comes to seem increasingly like the projection of our imagination, and yet remains beyond our control.

So the reader is disorientated 'seamlessly' in the *Nouvelle Fiction*. If the disorientation is seamless, are we now discussing mere *plaisir* though, since *jouissance* demands a definite rupture according to Barthes? Yet it is nevertheless reasonable to speak of 'discomfort' in the contexts we have been looking at. Perhaps this too might be characterised as a kind of Barthesian 'textual boredom': the loss of readerly security serves precisely to keep us reading, as we anticipate the next true seam that will restore interpretability to us by giving us a new interpretative context with which we can attempt to acclimatise the *scriptible* elements of the text.

'Jouissance' and the 'nouveau roman'

According to Culler, Barthes suggests that

> Avant-garde techniques, or disruptions of traditional expectations are more pleasurably startling as gaps in a readable discourse: Flaubert, for example, has 'a way of perforating discourse, without rendering it meaningless'. 'The text needs its shadow, *a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own *chiaroscuro*.'[21]

This remark seems profound in its implications for much modernist fiction: to recognise that *jouissance* depends on *plaisir*, that breaks in meaning are only meaningful in themselves as gaps in

[21]Culler, p. 99.

something else is to recognise a potential flaw in some modernist writing: the gash in the garment has opened so wide as literally to leave nothing to the imagination. To pursue Barthes's analogy between textual pleasure and sexual perversion to its limits, poor voyeurs that we are, we, the readers, are left sadly impotent as our would-be prey stands unashamedly naked before us, no longer teasing with glimpses through the luxuriant silks of invention and illusion, but brashly denuding herself, demanding that we examine under the harshest light her every spot and wrinkle.

If we look at the *nouveau roman* in the light of the seams discussed, it becomes clear just how different the *Nouvelle Fiction* is as regards the pleasure of rupture from its immediate predecessor. First, the seam of authorial intervention. As we have seen, this depends on a rift in the narrative that draws attention to the text as a crafted object. But in the *nouveau roman*, the narrator is not an issue: absolute subjectivity is a given, so we are not invited to question the 'level' of the narrative relative to its other parts. In Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*, for example, there is no question of the narrative voice addressing us as readers; the *nouveau roman* disposes of the storyteller as such, and aspires to the Flaubertian depersonalised voice. The storyteller is not a character in his own fiction.

That is not to say that the issue of narrative reliability is abandoned, but it is approached in a radically different way. Rather than make reference to the world beyond the text through an appeal to the reader's manner of reception, the *nouveau roman* encodes images of the fallibility of the text within itself, in symbolic form. The most often repeated example from *La Jalousie* is that of the image of the crushed centipede imprinted on the wall. In Ann Jefferson's words,

> As an image of the nature of representation, the squashing of the centipede on the wall constitutes a near ideal. The representation is not mediated by an artist or by materials alien to its nature (paint, words, etc.). The trace of the animal is as near to being the thing itself as any realist could dream of. Nevertheless, however faithful and direct a representation, it is not complete, but fragmented.[22]

The presence of this image, and the return of the narrative voice to its contemplation, is among other things a symbol of the nature of narrative. Thus, although in his theoretical writings Robbe-Grillet insists on the opacity of things, their failure to indicate meaning, *La Jalousie* does, as Morrissette convincingly argues, allow a universe where things are endowed with meaning, if not through themselves then through the mediating influence of the jealous eye that sees them. In Barthesian terms:

> ...one can draw the picture of a Robbe-Grillet No. 2, not 'chosiste,' not a devotee of material things, but 'humaniste,' since his objects - without, however, again becoming symbols - acquire once more a mediating function in relationship to 'something else.'[23]

Nor does the rhetorical seam exist as we understand it in the fiction discussed so far. Since in the *nouveau roman* we cannot generally speak of a narrator as such, but rather of a depersonalised voice, there can be no rhetorical shift in the sense that it is understood in Cervantes or Levi, since no one is addressed as such: the reader is not appealed to as the silent partner in a conversation; we are not persuaded, teased, or surprised. In the *nouveau roman*, the narrative voice is either the voice of self-obsession, addressed to itself (*La Jalousie, La Modification*) or a collection of disparate voices in a vacuum (Sarraute). Once again, however, the effect of the rhetorical seam in 'traditional' literature, its

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[22] Ann Jefferson, *The nouveau roman and the poetics of fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 140.
[23] Bruce Morrissette, *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet* trans. by the author, with a forward by Roland Barthes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 13.

power to shift our attention from content to code, is not alien to the *nouveau roman*. It is of course central to the theoretical aspirations of all associated with it. But rather than achieving it with an abrupt tear in the narrative, what seems to be more characteristic is the progressive increase of a narrative emblem or device that forces itself with greater and greater insistence on the reader.

To turn again to *La Jalousie*, the growing significance of the image of the crushed centipede is an example of how different Robbe-Grillet's practice is in this respect. Its association with A...'s infidelity and the husband's jealousy is woven with increasing complexity as the novel progresses, through juxtaposition with events or recollections that thread a deeper meaning into the fabric of an otherwise meaningless description of the insect. The object *is* meaningless, and yet the roving consciousness that narrates endows the brute reality with sense in spite of itself. Thus balance of the *scriptible* versus the *lisible* is reversed: the reader proceeds through the 'boredom' (I use the term not pejoratively but in the sense Barthes uses it, referring to those parts of the text that resist our *plaisir*) of the descriptions themselves in order to interpret their juxtapositions, to make judgements about the husband into whose mind we are voyeuristically peeping. *Jouissance* comes as a break in boredom, then, rather than in *plaisir*. It is a product, not of disillusion but instead of a sudden intuitive leap that is soon submerged in more of the *scriptible*.

In the same way, the generic seam is not really relevant to the *nouveau roman*. In 'traditional' literature, this kind of seam throws the reader's perspective into flux: should we laugh because it is comedy or cry because it is tragedy? Realising that something we had seen moments before in one light can be perceived in a contradictory way, we gain a sudden insight into the way our responses are manipulated

by the narrative choices made by the author. In the *nouveau roman*, the genre is generally not questioned: there is instead an essential tension between the invitation to depth and the refusal of it. The text constantly shows us how it is built, in *La Jalousie* for instance, through the juxtaposed insect descriptions with other scenes or memories. As we have seen, the intrinsically meaningless becomes a focus of associations which create interdependent links between images. But the reader is not prompted to reappraise the description of the centipede as anything other than a description. The mark on the wall is never anything more than a squashed centipede: we do not suddenly leap into a world of allegory.

The seam that *is*, however, particularly important to the *nouveau roman* is that of reader disorientation. This is the effect that has really been described in all the examples from *nouveaux romans* so far. Yet in this respect too, the *nouveau roman* generally approaches the seam from quite a different angle to the *Nouvelle Fiction*. Again it is a question of the balance of the *scriptible* and the *lisible*. Whilst the *Nouvelle Fiction* typically offers sections of *plaisir* grinding uncomfortably against one another to produce an extended sensation of unease, which one could only call *jouissance* with difficulty, the *nouveau roman* breaks the 'boredom' of the uninterpretable with orgasmic moments of clarity. To pursue Barthes's sexual analogy, reading a *nouveau roman*, or any modernist text where the balance of pleasure tips in that direction, is something like a masochistic act, a kind of readerly perversion beyond mere voyeurism.

An element of masochism is perhaps essential to any work that purports to be anything beyond commercial entertainment: it is just a question of how far it goes. Petit in particular insists on the notion of a self-critical *plaisir* that achieves a balance between 'l'ordre et la

rupture'.[24] The model reader of the *nouveau roman* is thus necessarily inclined to suffer more than other model readers for his pleasure: we are not offered a 'comfortable practice of reading' broken by moments of disjunction, but a profound sense of 'ennui' interrupted by orgasmic glimpses of sense, islands of significance in a sea of *chosisme.* The distance we have to swim between these islands, and the difficulty of the journey, will depend on just how *nouveau* the text is. The examples I have taken have all been from the most 'reader-friendly' of the *nouveaux romans,* which offer relatively easy navigation between islands. They have preserved, to use Barthes's phrase, *'a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subject'.[25] Indeed it is really only those *nouveaux romans* that have done so that are still read. *La Modification, La Jalousie, Les Gommes* remain *lisibles* because of their simple psychological interest: the travelling businessman with a wife in Paris and a mistress in Milan; the jealous husband obsessed with his uncertainty; the detective who accidently commits the crime he was trying to solve, thereby closing an Oedipal circle. No matter what other intellectual interests may occupy us, questions about the nature of language etc., it is engagement with the 'bit of subject' that wakes our desire, that keeps us reading. If Robbe-Grillet's practice had not lagged behind his theory, he would, perhaps, hardly have been read at all.

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[24]'On écrit pour le plaisir: on n'est quand même pas masochiste. Le plaisir, pas la jouissance, mais le plaisir distancié, c'est-à-dire un plaisir qui est en même temps l'analyse du plaisir. Un plaisir qui n'est pas consommation, n'est pas dévoration. La littérature c'est une façon de prendre plaisir à la vie en inventant quelque chose qui n'est pas destiné à être consommé mais regardé, goûté. L'art nous apprend à goûter sans détruire, sans posséder. ...Le plaisir ... c'est un dosage de musique et de silence, de rythme et d'arythmie. Un grand écrivain sait faire jouer le rythme et la rupture. Les grands écrivains sont ceux qui maîtrisent la dialectique entre l'ordre et la rupture. ...L'être et le néant sont partenaires dans un jeu.' See Appendix 2.

[25] See note 21.

It is clear, then, that the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s relationship with *jouissance* and *plaisir* is dramatically different from that of its predecessor. Whilst the *nouveau roman* abandons most of the seams of literary tradition, namely, that of authorial intervention, the rhetorical, and the generic, but relies heavily on the disorientation of the reader to create a texture resistant to interpretation that gives way periodically to meaning, the *Nouvelle Fiction* typically seeks to disorientate from within the security of the *lisible*. The shifting texture of multiple aspects of the *lisible* generates a picture of an uncertain moral universe which is disturbing in its own way.

I have attempted here to analyse how, on yet another level, the relationship that the *Nouvelle Fiction* has with its readers is generally quite different from that of the 'orthodox' avant-garde in France. By means of comparison particularly with Cervantes, it becomes clear to what extent the *Nouvelle Fiction* attempts to operate within literary tradition, to place itself within the world of books already written rather than attempting to create a new order. The 'new' in the *Nouvelle Fiction* is simply the *re*newal of tradition; it does not seek to be new *per se*.[26]

[26]Tristan, Petit and Châteaureynaud stated as much in interview. See Appendix 2 for Petit's own idiosyncratic way of distinguishing 'good' from 'bad' literature using an oral diagnostic test: he suggests, in essence that if a book cannot be comfortably appreciated orally, then we should seriously question its value.

CHAPTER 12

CHARACTER, SELF AND IDENTITY

What with the death of the author, the subversion of narrative, the unreliable narrator, it is hardly surprising that character has suffered too. The bedrock of old-fashioned realism, it has since been subject to the same kind of theoretical demolition job as so many other aspects of the novel. The identity of Balzacian protagonists is called into question with the thought that their cohesion is no more than a sign of the organising will of their author, his desire to shape an explainable fictional world of action and reaction. Gide's *acte gratuit* moves us closer to a chaotic world view, but it is only with the *noveau roman* that the notion of character is systematically challenged. Few authors since have been tempted to go so far, but nevertheless since the character has not generally held such importance in comparison to linguistic concerns, for instance.

Ann Jefferson distinguishes between the polemical Robbe-Grillet's 'otiose and rather invidious distinction implied ...between naïve or deceitful fiction on the one hand, and modernist fiction on the other' and Butor's more careful statement that

> Narrative gives us the world but it is doomed to be the false world... Exploration of different novelistic forms reveals what is contingent in the form that we are used to, unmasks it, frees us from it, and allows us to discover beyond this fixed narrative everything which it camouflages or passes over in silence, all the fundamental narrative in which our whole life is steeped.[1]

This statement is closer to a *Nouvelle Fiction* view in apparently embracing the multiplicity offered by intertextuality, if this is what Butor means by revealing 'what is contingent in the form that we are

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[1]Ann Jefferson, *The nouveau roman and the poetics of fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.17.

used to',[2] but Butor seems to remain fundamentally suspicious of the failure or deceit of narrative. The *Nouvelle Fiction* text never quite wishes us to be free from the narratives upon which it bases itself: such freedom to a New Fictionist would seem fraught with the dangers of meaninglessness. If *everything* is unmasked, we are confronted with nothing but the objective world of science, of no interest to us as moral agents. To encounter this brute, un-narrativised world is to experience the Sartrian nausea of *le visqueux*. In fact the world of narrative is the 'real' world, the only one that can be of interest to us, even if it always remains provisional. It does not matter that sense comes from the narrator or from the reader, since it is only from a rational language-user that sense *can* come. The world of inanimate objects comes to life through us, and for the *Nouvelle Fiction*, this is primarily a source of pleasure rather than for despair, an aspect of reality to be ironically observed rather than a hard truth to be uncovered. The human world is seen as a soup of competing narratives, jostling for attention in an objective world that offers no judgement on them. It is up to the reader to sort the narratives, to find the story or stories he wishes to be a part of.

If narrative is called into question in varying degrees by the *nouveau roman* then so too is the notion of character. Just as plot acts as an organising force on the 'real' world, so too does what can be seen as the imposition of globalising explanations provided by clearly defined characters with motives that explain actions. Whereas the scorned realist novel concentrated on individual psychology as a fulcrum for plot, the *nouveau roman* reduces character as a catalyst for action to almost nothing. Jefferson comments on the realist mechanism that operates through the character of Bette to produce the action of *La*

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[2]Ibid.

Cousine Bette and compares it with the procedures implicit in the *nouveau roman*:

> The convention of this kind of character-based interpretation has become so deeply ingrained in our reading habits, that it often continues to operate whether or not it is appropriate to the text in question. But a novel whose characters are relatively anonymous cannot articulate its semantic material through character, since the differences which are so essential to this procedure do not exist, or are not great enough to support a thematic reading at this level of the text. Where characters are anonymous, we must change the whole hierarchy of our expectations concerning the operations of texts.[3]

Sarraute offers the most radical examples of how the self is perceived as threatened by the outside world, at war with it, permanently struggling to resist the restricting definitions of others, to resist being imprisoned as the object of another's discourse. Jefferson states that '[her] novels always represent the attempt to classify and categorise as both inauthentic and futile.'[4] In *Les Fruits d'Or*, for example, authoritative voices make contradictory assertions about the book: it is tragic and comic, human, pitiless, light, dark, icy, burning, etc. The constant attempts at definitions rob the words of meaning; they are reduced to their performative function, they become weapons in games of power. In this book, characters are themselves indistinguishable. Jefferson also describes how, in *Entre la vie et la mort*, the 'larger-than-life character' of the writer at the centre of the book (it is not appropriate to speak of a 'hero') is generated from the clichés that constitute our world: wherever he goes he is instantly embalmed by his admirers' ready-made ideas.[5]

The *Nouvelle Fiction*, on the other hand, does not reject character, but approaches the question in a similar manner to that adopted with narrative. Both appear unstable in the modern disenchanted world,

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[3]Ibid., p. 62.
[4]Ibid., p. 64, (note).
[5]Ibid., pp86-7.

and both offer rival versions of themselves for the reader's judgement. Multiplicity is extended to identity, and the paradigm of the *Nouvelle Fiction* character is one on a quest for a lost self, or one who either reinvents himself or is reinvented by the narrator. In the latter case, the modernist fragmentation of identity is embraced and transposed into a post-modern image of fertile rather than destructive multiplicity. Coupry is foremost in flaunting a schematic fragmentation of character as a source of textual fun in his experimental novelistic cycle, in which protagonists enjoy multiple personalities in distinct times (for instance, David Bloom is at once a 19th-century German baron, a Parisian terrorist, and a woman journalist). The extent to which a serious purpose emerges from these science-fiction style games is arguable, but in his interview with Moreau and in his theoretical articles in *Roman*, Coupry makes clear his ideas about identity, expressed through his recurring theatrical metaphor: there are a plethora of possible identities waiting in *les coulisses* of the theatre of life or of the imagination, a sort of imaginary treasure trove of character in the unconscious, whether part of personal memory, or some sort of Jungian collective unconscious. Thus the fictional forever attacks the 'real', but in so doing, brings interpretation to what is dead without it, offering 'la projection imaginaire d'une explication possible'[6]:

> En somme, l'univers de la fiction s'est construit peu à peu comme un cancer, une prolifération de cellules autour de l'humanité: ça la mange du dedans, ça la mange du dehors, mais ça lui donne sens.[7]

The playfully positive aspect of Coupry's approach is not always there in the *Nouvelle Fiction* treatment of the fragmented character: Henri Césarée, the demented protagonist of Tristan's *Le Fils de Babel*, for instance, is a victim of the multiplication of personalities as his

[6]Jean-Luc Moreau, *La Nouvelle Fiction* (Paris: Criterion, 1992), p. 146.
[7]Ibid., p. 145.

schizophrenia pulls him into a complex of Oedipal violence and mystical raving. Haddad's characters too often find the end to their quest in death or some mystical revelation that comes too late. In Petit, on the other hand, individual identity is not usually an issue: the question of role-playing in the story 'Le montreur et ses masques', for instance, is used as a metaphor for exploring metaphysical issues; it is not a vehicle for personal self-discovery.

In Châteaureynaud, however, playful multiplicity gives way to anxiety and loss: characters suffer in their search for the scattered fragments of sense that constituted their selves, and the reader is witness to the painful struggle of individual psychologies against the world of modernist disenchantment. Of course Châteaureynaud is not alone in expressing this sense of anxiety: other authors such as Modiano from beyond the *Nouvelle Fiction* have made a crisis of identity a key issue in their work, indeed Modiano's work on the occupation turns precisely on the search for Jewish identity. It would be wrong, however, to characterise such fiction as purely caught up in a personal psychology: Tristan's treatment of identity has little of the anguished personal nature of Châteaureynaud's torments about it, as we shall see, and such themes can be seen not merely as personal struggles but reflections of a more general literary depiction of postmodern, fin-de-siècle questioning of time, memory and our relationship with the past.

Typically the garden is used as an image of the way the meaninglessness of the natural world is endowed with moral and personal significance through human agency. A number of Châteaureynaud's short stories use this horticultural symbolism, but it is in *La Faculté des Songes*[8] that we see how the garden is a focus for the

[8]G-O Châteaureynaud, *La Faculté des Songes* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1982).

elaboration of a personal identity: the significantly named Manoir has been deprived of his childhood home and his life henceforth is lacking the emotional landscape that endows the objective world with meaning. The novel charts his quest to re-interpret the frightening world of the *visqueux*, to rediscover significance in brute things.

In search of a lost self; freedom from the past

La Faculté des Songes follows the quest for self of three protagonists drawn together as three outcasts of different kinds who have all suffered a crisis of identity, and whose lives intersect briefly whilst they all live together and become friends through their individual crises in a derelict mansion they christen 'la Faculté des Songes'. Quentin suffered from a deprived childhood, which the narrator significantly barely enlarges on: it is as if there is nothing there to speak of, merely an absence. The two other protagonists have, however, known the security represented by the bourgeois home, though they emerge from radically different circumstances and suffer from distinct relations with their pasts. Châteaureynaud depicts the struggle of Manoir on one hand to re-enchant the world of objects, and of Hugo on the other to free himself from a place overburdened with the weight of personal memory.

Manoir, an official in the 'administration des Finances', tormented by dreams of loss, inhabits, despite the status of being 'presque un haut fonctionnaire',[9] a miserable *deux-pièces*. For he carries deep in his unconscious an image of his childhood home, lost along with his mother (his father was already dead), destroyed by a wartime bomb. The loss of personal space is inextricably associated with the beginning of a new and uncertain existence as an orphan deprived of a

[9]Ibid., p. 24.

physical site for the founding of an identity. In the orphanage Manoir experiences for the first time the world deprived of the significant structure offered by the privileged places of childhood.

> Sans doute, le dernier matin, les avait-il regardées machinalement en déjeunant avant de partir pour l'école. Tout l'âge d'or tenait dans la vision de ces assiettes intactes. Une voisine était venue l'attendre à la sortie pour le mener directement à la mairie ; il n'était plus jamais rentré chez lui. Chez lui n'existait plus nulle part. On le lui avait dit, il l'avait admis, il s'était montré très raisonnable. Et quand, dans le pénombre de son premier dortoir, il avait essayé de se représenter ce lieu rayé du monde, ne lui était apparu qu'un fragment d'assiette sur un plan de mur immaculé. Il n'avait pas pensé aux flammes ni à la fumée. Non, la bombe avait simplement tout cassé: les murs, les assiettes, les gens; sa mère s'était brisée sans saigner, ainsi qu'une statue. Il finit par s'endormir, ce premier soir, et rêva qu'il errait solitaire dans un univers en morceaux.[10]

People and things (mother and plates) merge into one image of the shattered, and engender a sense of fragmented existence and self which Manoir is to seek progressively to rebuild in the novel.

Châteaureynaud elaborates this quest around the motif of the home, starting with the symbolic resonance of Manoir's name: 'Il s'appelait Jean-Jacques Manoir, et jusqu'à l'âge de huit ans il s'était cru à l'abri dans son nom.'[11] He is, as it were, cast out of his name as well as from his home. Manoir preserves one relic from his childhood, his father's signet ring, which bears 'le hiéroglyphe de son nom, un petit manoir flanqué de deux tours pointues.'[12] While there is no explicit suggestion that Manoir is of noble lineage, the significance of this coincidence of names and objects is best explained by unpacking the associations with aristocratic identity. The French for signet ring, *chevalière*, makes the relationship with its chivalric roots clearer than the English. Its purpose was originally to seal with the emblem of its

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[10]Ibid., pp. 18-19.
[11]Ibid., p. 18.
[12]Ibid., p. 20.

bearer. This emblem represented not so much an individual as the title and land that went with it. The bearer of the ring and of the name associated with its emblem obtains his identity from his land. Balzac depicts the disintegration of this relationship in novels where the old aristocracy are forced to sell the country estates on which their titles are based in order to keep up with the fashions of the new rich in Paris. In *La Cousine Bette*, for instance, we witness the dissipation of the old aristocracy exemplified by Hulot through the inability to control its spending and its passions. Excess is sanctioned when it is tempered by the odious but sensible bourgeois penny-pinching of Crevel who over-indulges only to the extent that he can afford it.

Manoir's name bears an image of home as does his ring, but the home is no longer there. We are not talking here of a grand estate handed down for generations, indeed there is no hint that this is anything other than a modest house with no particular family attachment, but in the psychological landscape of Manoir, his humble home is just as much the seat of his identity as some grand château is the basis for the 'moi' of its noble lord.

Balzac's territorially deprived aristocrats are symptoms of a changing class structure, but Châteaureynaud's character is involved in a psychological wrench from personal rather than general history. 'A huit ans donc, la guerre, sous l'espèce d'une bombe perdue, lui avait donné un passé.'[13] This choice of words is important: the bomb actually creates history, a personal past for Manoir. What had been the present tense of childhood is abruptly and violently thrown into the past: it is no more than a memory. Viewed as a lost domaine, a world that can never be revisited, it becomes 'ce lieu rayé', while as part of the present, Manoir viewed it 'machinalement'. Châteaureynaud's

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[13]Ibid., p. 18.

pathetic hero suffers a loss of personal space, and thereby more generally represents the moral development of man from childhood. The literary history of the garden is obviously a long one, beginning with the biblical garden of Eden. The significance of Eden is not merely that it is a paradise but Paradise Lost, that is, an image of an age of lost innocence associated with moral development, growth toward adulthood, departure from childhood. Moreover, the *hortus conclusus* of the *Song of Solomon*, the walled garden, offers an image of the security and cultivation required by love. Cultivation is a key image: the man-made garden is a powerful symbol of man's dominance over nature, over living yet 'meaningless' vegetation, in the interests of human sense-making. A wild rose is meaningless, yet planted in a garden to form a part of a particular arrangement, it becomes invested with the significance the gardener associates with it. For Châteaureynaud, as for many writers from Gabrielle Miró to A.A. Milne, the complex symbolism of the garden offers enormous scope for literary cultivation: when Christopher Robin leaves the enchanted world of Pooh, it is to start school, that is to eat from the tree of knowledge and thereby leave Paradise for ever, but he keeps something of it within him; when Miró's characters walk through a garden, they are reminded of the lost innocence of childhood, a time free from notions of sin and guilt with which their worlds are poisoned, and sense something of the promise of Paradise to come. Châteaureynaud's tortured character has been cut off from both the memory and the promise, and his quest represents a reconquering of this 'lieu rayé', lost psychological territory. The symbolism of the garden seems to be almost an obsession for Châteaureynaud, and the psychological and moral aspects of the garden image are particularly

exploited in two short stories: 'Le jardin dans l'île'[14] and 'Le verger'.[15] In the former, the narrator's erotic encounter with a young artist is elevated to a poetical and magical experience simply by means of the narrative association with the imagery of the Bible, indeed specifically that of the *Song of Solomon*:

> Ce que j'avais imaginé ressemblait à la réalité comme des graffiti de cours des garçons aux versets du Cantique des cantiques...Elle ouvrit pour moi son jardin fermé et j'y restai trois jours entiers, dans les senteurs des troènes et du nard, du safran et du cinnamome.[16]

The sense of security offered by the 'jardin fermé' is heightened by the image of the woman's isolated island home: the lovers are protected from the outside world not only by the wall that encloses the garden but also by the sea. During the three days a storm rages, providing a symbol most obviously of passion, but also marking the sense of security even more sharply (the delight offered by the order and cultivation of the garden within is all the greater for comparison with the natural chaos without). The sea also heightens the sense of inaccessibility and of the privileged nature of the lovers' happiness: most of the story is taken up with comic details of the narrator's difficult journey to the island (sea-sickness, bad weather etc.) whilst the moments in the 'garden of delight' are only minimally alluded to. Such happiness, it seems, is fleeting and the road to it is paved with difficulty.

In 'Le Verger', the garden as Paradise Lost elaborates a tale of moral development. The notion of an Earthly paradise is juxtaposed with that of hell on Earth, just as the Hanging Gardens of Aloss are compared with the fantastic prison of Nasterberg in 'Zinzolins et

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[14]In *Le Jardin dans l'île* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1989).
[15]In *Le Héros blessé au bras* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1987).
[16]*Le Jardin dans l'île*, p. 68.

Nacarats'.[17] A child about to enter the Nazi gas chambers escapes from his guards and runs towards the camp's perimeter fence. Just as he is about to be shot he disappears. In fact he has entered a miraculous Eden on a hillock, invisible to the soldiers, where a pond provides him with two fish a day and a tree, with two apples, from where he can observe the events in the camp beneath him. The warmth and lush greenery of his paradise are juxtaposed with the ice and mud of the camp, which itself represents a travesty of the *hortus conclusus*: electric fences and barbed wire take the place of a secure wall and oppress rather than protect; the cultivation of pain and death replaces that of love and pleasure. At first, the child is content to play games with imaginary friends, but after a time he matures and comes to take an interest in the camp. He does not realise that the showers into which the prisoners are herded are in fact gas chambers, but understands that his former companions are suffering. Attempts to alleviate their misery by throwing food reward him only with disillusionment: the prisoners squabble over these miraculous gifts, only to be further maltreated by the guards. The story ends with the boy slipping back into the column of Jews unnoticed and abandoning his paradise. Eden is voluntarily left behind, with maturity, understanding and knowledge of the reality outside the *verger*: the child has become a man and must join his fellow men, leaving his Eden to become a memory. Couched in the poetry of Christian mythology, Châteaureynaud elaborates a modern fairy tale of disenchantment and moral growth that transcends the details of its setting.

La Faculté des Songes evokes the noble lineage of the garden as a literary symbol while allowing Manoir to find these heightened moments of Proustian reminiscence through the most banal and

[17]In *Le Jardin dans l'île*. See chapter 13.

'unpoetic' of objects. Again, this practice recalls Proust's famous madeleine, but Châteaureynaud forces the reader to observe the struggling Manoir from a certain distance. Manoir does finally recreate a little Eden, a *hortus conclusus* of his own, although the garden is more suburban than biblical, while the final manifestations of his reconstituted self are almost scornfully dismissed:

> Dans une salle des ventes des environs, il a déniché d'assez vilains meubles, du Lévitan d'avant-guerre que le vendeur désesperait de voir jamais partir. Une dame du voisinage vient chaque vendredi astiquer ces horreurs.[18]

Yet we realise the significance of this humble bric-a-brac as a part of the new suburban home he has found when we compare it to the denuded bedsit, without furniture let alone a walled garden, where we first met him.

Châteaureynaud revisits the character of Manoir in a short story, 'Le gouffre des années', exploring further the precise moment of loss, and alternative solutions to it. The adult Manoir mysteriously returns to his own childhood, a few hours before his home is destroyed by British bombers. The story is structured by the anticipation and fulfilment of this event, but Manoir's relationship with it is unclear until the last line: paradoxically he seems to wish them well, to be anxious not to miss the event that shattered his life:

> Loin d'ici, de jeunes hommes s'éveillent dans leur chambrée...Ou bien sont-ils déjà sur pied, réunis en tenue de vol face à un tableau noir, autour de leur *wing commander*? Écoliers tôt levés de la mort et du feu. Ils ont vingt ans. Ils sont chaussés de bottes fourrées, casqués de cuir, vêtus de gros drap bleu et de peaux de mouton. Ils boivent du thé et fument des cigarettes blondes. Les voeux de Manoir les accompagnent. Pourtant, dans quelques heures, l'un d'eux tuera sa mère.[19]

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[18] *La Faculté des Songes*, p. 254.

[19] "Le gouffre des années", in *Nouvelles 1972-1988* (Paris: Julliard, 1993), p. 259. Originally published in *Le Héro blessé au bras* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1987).

Manoir does not conceive of them as an enemy; rather, the details of their dress, cigarettes and drink serve to humanise them, in spite of the nature of their mission and its consequences. In fact, they are to become in a very personal way *his* allies, as we shall see. Nevertheless, the promise of death hangs over the story from this moment on: the first moments Manoir spends with his mother remind us that there is to be no miraculous salvation:

> Sa mère est dans son dernier âge: elle a trente ans. La bombe écrasera une petite femme aux traits réguliers, à la peau sans éclat. Le deuil et les soucis l'ont éteinte, déjà. Elle n'a plus qu'une heure à vivre, et elle se tient bien droit dans sa blouse de couturière en chambre par-dessus laquelle elle a enfilé un gilet d'homme beaucoup trop grand pour elle.[20]

Manoir has not come to save her, indeed death is presented almost as a deliverance here.

Manoir intercepts himself as a six-year old child, passing himself off as a long-lost cousin of his father with the help of the same signet ring referred to in *La Faculté des Songes*. Instead of going to school, the young Jean-Jacques is persuaded to return home with his new-found 'tonton Jean-Pierre'. The reader glimpses the significance of the home itself, and if its special psychological and moral significance, far beyond the humble reality of bricks and mortar:

> Son coeur bat. Sa bouche s'assèche. Quelques pas encore. Ils tournent le coin de la rue.
>
> - Qu'est-ce que t'as? T'es malade?
>
> - Non, non.
>
> Sous cet angle, la grille verdâtre, çà et là piquée de points de rouille, masque à demi la façade de pierres meulières et de crépi. Il conservait le souvenir d'un bâtiment plus haut, plus vaste, percé de larges fenêtres comme autant d'yeux grands ouverts sur le jardin d'Éden. C'est tout petit en vérité: la plus humble bâtisse de la rue, blottie sur quelques arpents entre deux villas ventrues qui la noient dans leur ombre.[21]

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[20]Ibid., p. 265.
[21]Ibid., p. 264.

The house is anthropomorphised, and of course it looks out over Eden, which is represented for Manoir by time, or rather time past, as much as place.

Manoir enjoys once again a few moments in this paradise: in a fantastic inversion of the Proustian experience, he returns to childhood in order to rediscover its smells and flavours - quince jelly, the canary cage, vegetable soup and polish. This was, of course, precisely what had always remained inaccessible to the adult Manoir of *La Faculté des Songes*: the recreation of things past through sensual experience in the present was closed off to him.

Then the air-raid sirens sound, and the purpose behind Manoir's return becomes clear. The neighbour who had brought Manoir the news of his mother's death at school is paying a call on Manoir's mother, curious about the visiting stranger. This time, though, the young Manoir is at home: all the members of the family are present in the doomed house as they seek scant shelter in its inadequate cellar. Yet Manoir is calm: 'Une grande paix l'habite. Le cours des choses autrefois dévoyé va rentrer dans l'ordre bientôt.'[22] He seeks not to save his mother but to annihilate himself with her, to end his life in and with the personal paradise that was destroyed. The solution is all the more formally satisfying for him in that all the players in his happiness and misery are doomed together: 'Dans la cave, la voisine, la mauvaise messagère, ouvre la bouche pour crier.'[23]

The status of the narrative is never clarified: is it a dream, a fantasy, or the work of magic or science? We are not told, but it does not matter: the interest of the story lies firstly in the privileged confrontation Manoir has with his lost past, and second, in the twist

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[22]Ibid., p. 270.
[23] Ibid.

with which the story ends, which provides us with the more profound reason for Manoir's return, and a more direct, though naturally non-realist, solution to the problem of loss he faces in *La Faculté des Songes.*

A character very like Manoir appears in the quite different story, 'L'enclos'. It centres on the love-affair a middle-aged man has with a house and its elderly owners. He is about to buy their house, but the old couple cannot understand his embarrassment, shyness and anxiety over the deal. He makes it clear to them that he is willing to match any offer from a third party. The narrative alternates between third person and first, where the man explains in a form of stream-of-consciousness the root of his fears and hopes. As with Manoir, the man describes the couple and their house in the vocabulary of Genesis: they are Adam and Eve, and their home and particularly their garden is an Eden. The similarity between the man and Manoir extends beyond this, though: the reason for his special relationship with this couple, which remains hidden from them to the end, might be considered another alternative history for the 'Manoir' type, this time a realist one. Not explicitly the same as Manoir, he is nevertheless a 'pensionnaire à Sainte-Croix' from at least the age of eight, and is apparently estranged from his parents. Hence his secret adoption of the old couple as honorary parents.

> Car je les ai choisis, il y a maintenant trente-deux ans. J'ai choisi leur jardin, leur petite maison basse, perdue au milieu des arbres, dans ce merveilleux, cet harmonieux fouillis de fleurs et de feuilles, de branches où pépient des mésanges.[24]

Over the next thirty-two years the man nurtures a fictitious past built around the dream of the childhood he never had with his 'parents d'élection', providing an inner life that reality had deprived him of:

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[24]"L'enclos", in *Nouvelles 1972-1988* (Paris: Julliard, 1993), p. 475. Orignially published in *Le Jardin dans l'île* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1989).

> Des années durant, j'ai bercé ma solitude de ces rêveries répétitives. J'en étais presque arrivé à croire à la fable que j'avais forgée pour les étayer: j'étais vraiment le fils de ces gens, kidnappé à ma naissance pour des raisons obscures et confié à des étrangers. Je n'avais gardé de mes parents selon l'état civil qu'un souvenir imprécis, nauséeux, impossible à chérir. Des visages hébétés, des bruits de bouteilles entrechoquées, des cris, des larmes, du vin vomi sur un lino usé. Tout valait mieux que cette vérité-là.[25]

The man, with a trembling hand, signs the documents, and the house changes hands. He never manages to express in words the significance of this moment, but does his best through the gift of a magnum of an unspecified but clearly very expensive wine. Again it is a symbol of the inadequacy of the empirical world to convey the personal significance of certain events or things in the *Lebenswelt*.[26] Just as we cannot be sure that the extravagant tip we give a waiter as an expression of gratitude for the privileged moments of happiness that he has helped to bring about at a meal where atmosphere, taste, and company combine in a special way, will not be misinterpreted as a foolish misunderstanding of foreign currency, Manoir's effort at expression is in danger of seeming inappropriate or inadequate. We as readers with a privileged access to the whole story, however, understand this gap between intention and reality, and realise that the world is full of such moments when one's gestures are either missed or misinterpreted.

Both these short texts, using essentially the same problem faced by the Manoir of *La Faculté des Songes*, explore alternative solutions and facets of the situation. 'L'enclos' shows the reinvention of character that Manoir eventually and painfully achieves, and once again this

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[25]Ibid., pp. 477 - 478.
[26]See Chapter 13, note 2.

reinvention is closely associated with the world, but a world endowed with meaning through a very personal act of the imagination. 'Le gouffre des années' on the other hand, shows the other side to the quest for the self, one that ends in oblivion.

The relationship between identity and place in the other two principal characters in *La Faculté des Songes* is dealt with elsewhere;[27] I dwell here on Manoir in order to illustrate Châteaureynaud's approach to the problem of the self in a world of objects. For him, a posture of rejection towards the world of objects is unfruitful. If the self is limited by its relation with things, and by the inadequacy of the language that describes them, then it must seek to create a higher meaning through the weaving of personal connections between past and present; negation merely risks oblivion. Although the final achievement of Manoir might be seen as a comic parody of the aspirations of his name and thereby a betrayal of his self, we are invited to sympathise beyond the immediate physical reality of Manoir's world, and appreciate the picture of a man at peace in a world transformed from its previously fragmented, meaningless state into an image of himself.

Multiple selves and multiple texts

In Tristan, by contrast, anguished personal experience is not typically in the foreground, but rather the quest for the self as the subject of a sometimes sensational adventure, which perhaps explains best Moreau's identification of the 'roman d'aventure' as an important ingredient in the New Fictionist's literary heritage.

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[27]Julian Károlyi, "Jardin, Maison, Opéra: l'enchantement du moi dans *Le fils du concierge de l'Opéra* et *La Faculté des Songes*", in *Le moi et ses espaces*, ed. David Gascoigne (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 1997).

Tristan's Goncourt prize winner, *Les égarés*, centres on the pre-war career of a celebrated English novelist, one Gilbert Keith Chesterfield. Chesterfield, however, is a fictional creation himself, formed by the writing of one man and the public persona of another. The real writer of the novels that make the face of the other famous under the name of Chesterfield, his mind, as it were, has before creating Chesterfield already recreated himself. As the first person narrator, he introduces himself as Cyril N. Pumpermaker, a name he has loathed since his childhood, and associated with the pompous bourgeois pride of his father. After their death he seeks escape from his ridiculous forebears on his mother's old estate through the pursuit of a novelistic career under the name of Chesterfield, one of his childhood alter egos:

> Chesterfield naquit sous le préau de ma deuxième année de collège, alors que j'avais douze ans. Très vite il supplanta tous les autres, hormis une certaine fillette prénommée Alicia à laquelle je confiais mes secrets les moins avouables et que, chaque soir, j'emmenais avec moi dans le lit de fer du dortoir où je la violais de toutes façons, ce dont elle ne semblait souffrir que s'il me plaisait de jouir de ses larmes. Chesterfield, lui, partageait mes rêves philosophiques.[28]

His work does not receive the attention it deserves: Pumpermaker's unassuming personality fails to awake the interest of publishers. So he enlists the help of Jonathan Absalon Varlet, a strikingly charismatic young man with no other ties in the world. He evinces an engagingly dandyish self-confidence and learning while admitting that he is only really interested in reading, and cannot bring himself to be creative. The two form a pact, from which emerges the public persona of G.K. Chesterfield.

As usual in Tristan, the reader is left pondering various questions from this beginning: is this to be a Faustian pact of sorts, for

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[28]Tristan, *Les égarés* (Paris: Balland, 1983), p. 14.

which Pumpermaker is going to have to pay in the end? Whose identity is really in question now, Pumpermaker's or Varlet's? What is the secret of Varlet's past?

The focus of attention shifts from Pumpermaker to Varlet during the course of the novel as the public persona of Chesterfield begins to outshine the writer, or at least, as the one becomes increasingly dependent on the other. The final secret of Varlet's identity proves to be that he is a royal bastard, although the first-born, so arguably the more legitimate heir, like the *Carlin* from *Le théâtre de Mme Berthe*, whose physical size grows with every new identity he acquires until he expires from obesity. Varlet also flees from the truth about his past and ultimately finds oblivion in a hero's death in the Spanish civil war. On route to this end, Varlet, with Pumpermaker in tow, experiences something of all the great events and moments of their era: gangsterism in America, the golden age of Hollywood, the rise of Nazism, the decay of the old order. The two men propel Chesterfield into these worlds in a number of uncertain roles, as victim, as businessman, as public speaker, as adventure hero. To what extent is Varlet playing himself, and to what extent is that self the borrowed identity of Pumpermaker, or the 'model author' of his works? We never quite find out, nor is the ground we tread made any firmer by the knowledge that our narrator, Pumpermaker, has portrayed himself in his own text as a bumbling side-kick to the charismatic Varlet, something akin to an early screen version of Conan Doyle's Dr Watson. Is he another unreliable narrator? He is at any rate unsure of himself, of his interpretations, of the extent of his understanding: only the reader can judge from the perspective of history how accurate his assessment was of the struggles of the century. Ultimately the personalities of Varlet and of the hybrid Chesterfield elude us; the closest we get is the

voice of Pumpermaker, who ends by changing his name to Charmer, his mother's maiden name, to escape the odious memory of his father, so even the collection of sounds and letters we thought we knew where to place is shifted from under us. Charmer nevertheless finishes the book with a characteristically impassioned New Fictionist plea:

> Nous sommes saturés de significations, et nous avons perdu le sens. Apprenons modestement à perdre ces significations multiples qui nous étouffent et nous recouvrerons le sens, c'est-à-dire le *à quoi ça sert*. A quoi sert l'homme? A quoi sert le monde? C'est la seule question qui soit digne d'être posée. En effet, l'homme n'est peut-être pas fait pour le bonheur, mais il importe que, de toute sa foi et de tout son courage, il affirme son refus de l'absurde, sa croyance en un destin.[29]

In the face of the historical disintegration of the world about him, Charmer/Pumpermaker offers the strongest image of his identity to date: he finds himself in the act of metaphysical questioning. But, lest we be carried away by so much earnestness, the final question Pumpermaker poses is: 'Mais est-il vrai que je me trompe toujours?'

Problematic identity is not just confined to character in *Nouvelle Fiction* texts: as we have seen, the texts themselves frequently manifest uncertainty about their own status. The central theme of *L'énigme du Vatican*, the discovery and deciphering of the *Basophon* manuscript depicts *en abyme* the reader's relationship with the whole text. The coterie of Vatican officials and academics who attend to the manuscript are constantly forced to reappraise their readings while the translation continues and the diverse provenance of the text comes to light. Salvat's investigation of the manuscript's identity uncovers a palimpsestic creature, the product of at least three different ages, numerous authorships and a range of authorial 'intentions', one being to use the story as a post-box for the purposes of espionage. There can

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[29]Ibid., p. 438.

be no final verdict: it is a thing of fragmented identity, open to diverse readings, and the text remains unfinished at the end of the book. The frame narrative, then, depicted by the uncertain identity of the manuscript, cannot escape a similar instability. *L'énigme du Vatican* is rich in intertextual layers, each lending a temporary familiarity to the text which is there only to be subverted. Their intertextuality suggests avenues of interpretation that it later emerges are not as helpful as we at first thought. Reference to the detective genre, to Gide's *sotie*, to Borgesian labyrinths are all of interest in passing but do not ultimately provide a key to the text of *L'énigme du Vatican*. Equally, Tristan's hero Salvat, is not quite Hercule Poirot, not quite the eccentric academic, not quite a romantic lover, but we and he cling temporarily to all these passing identities in our effort to grasp the significance or uncover the lack thereof of the man and the text he inhabits. He has already appeared as an authorial mask in a number of guises in *Le théâtre de Mme Berthe*. Character *is* approached though the scorned processes of realism, but the upshot of showing that these processes are inadequate is to give us back the mystery of the human self. The characters of the *Nouvelle Fiction* do not quite fit any of the worn shells of past characters that the narrators attempt to thrust on them, but this does not suggest Dällenbach's alarming image of 'un Narcisse aveugle, en quête de ses membres épars, et irrémédiablement voué à la désagrégation';[30] it does not, in other words insist on the fragmentation of the human identity and the impossibility of communication, but rather celebrates an unfathomable richness that can only be touched provisionally. The truth is not something to be unveiled by modernist disenchantment: when the veil is torn away entirely, the sight is meaningless in its vastness; the postmodern narrative allows different shades of cloth to

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[30]Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), p. 211.

play in the wind, as it were, so conjuring multiple visions of what might be behind them.

CHAPTER 13

ENGAGEMENT AND THE OPEN TEXT

In Part I I discussed the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s attempt to renew our relationship with the world outside the text, with particular reference to Petit, in terms of the rejection of the 'posture of negation' that the existentialist view of the self in the world arguably dictates. By establishing a parallel between the way the reader negotiates the text and the way we negotiate the world an equivalence is suggested between readerly and moral competence. This renewal of an interest in the world outside the text is established only through a return to narrative, however. In comparing the degrees of the *lisible* and *scriptible* in the *nouveau roman* and the *Nouvelle Fiction*, it has become clear that the route chosen by the *Nouvelle Fiction* is not that of the pursuit of realism through extreme subjectivity. Although there is arguably much that is similar in the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s preoccupations and in those of their contemporaries such as Modiano or Le Clezio, the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s distrusts realism and rejects the psychology of sentiment, for instance what its members see as the 'kitchen-sink' personal dramas of Annie Ernaud.[1] It is the *Nouvelle Fiction*'s

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[1]Petit in particular is vitriolic on the subject of the French literary establishment and its taste for 'une tradition intimiste, psychologique, sociologisante, de description des moeurs, de description des milieux, et d'autobiographie, des gens qui parlent de leurs familles, de leurs rapports à leurs parents, à leurs frères et soeurs.' He claims an alternative ancestry for the *Nouvelle Fiction*, a literary current that has been unjustly neglected:

> Nous ne nous intéressons pas à ce que les réalistes considèrent comme la réalité. Nos ancêtres dans la littérature française ne sont quand même pas des clochards et des marginaux absolus. Si je dis Rabelais, Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, on n'est déjà plus dans la marginalité. Ils sont centraux, mais nous ne les voyons pas comme centraux. ...Ils sont centraux mais ils ne correspondent pas à l'image que les Français cherchent à donner d'eux-mêmes. ... On trouve formidable quand un Sud-américain, un Hongrois, un Albanais, un Russe, un je ne sais quoi fait des livres étonnants, ébouriffants, décoiffants, ça c'est normal, ce sont des étrangers. Et nous, les Français, il faudrait qu'éternellement on raconte nos émois, nos premiers émois dans la sacristie, quand le curé nous a fait des gouzi-gouzi. Toujours

insistence on the role of the reader in pursuing the contradictions in perception presented by a narrative world that seems either fantastic or even marvellous in nature that ultimately set the movement apart from Modiano's more personally psycological novelistic practice which remains routed more firmly in the real. Paradoxically, then, the *Nouvelle Fiction* usually speaks of the real just as Borges does, through what Nash calls 'anti-realism', that is, the use of imaginary universes. These might parallel our own, allowing for an allegorical exploration of a world that is not ours but one that operates under the same rules. Such is the case in science fiction, or in certain kinds of fantasy fiction, like Tolkien, where despite dragons and goblins, notions of good and evil, power and control are essentially the same. Or they might be alternative, experimental worlds which allow us to explore all that cannot form part of the real world, even if it is part of our subconscious, that 'territoire de l'imaginaire', of which a number of the group's members speak. Haddad experiments for instance with the erotic imagination in *L'Âme de Buridan*.[2] Both kinds of anti-realism appear in the *Nouvelle Fiction*, as well as much that is formally closer to plain realism, particularly in Châteaureynaud and Haddad. In all these cases, the balance is tipped toward the readerly, specifically toward narrative. This should be seen not simply as a formal choice of procedure: it represents the radical difference between the *nouveau roman* and the *Nouvelle Fiction*. The former broadly views narrative as an interference between the real and the individual; the latter sees narrative as constituting the only meaningful reality there is.

The consequences of this shift in perception are considerable: fiction, even so-called anti-realist fiction, need no longer seem to be a

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les mêmes histoires de sexe, d'enfance, de rapports aux parents, de rapports à la bourgeoisie. (See Appendix 2).

[2]Hubert Haddad, *L'Âme de Buridan* (Cadeihan: Zulma), 1992.

closed, narcissistic literary activity, written by and for an elite of authors and intellectuals contemplating polished or tortured representations of non-representation. I also suggested in Part I that the fantastic might be considered a model for the typical *Nouvelle Fiction* textual strategy: unlike in the detective story, we are not allowed to sit back and await the comfortably rational unveiling of strange reality by the detective; the fantastic leaves us pondering two or more contradictory possibilities. While several of the members of the group resist too close an identification of their movement with the fantastic, the essential model of readerly hesitation and hence of reader involvement in the production of meaning or the suspension of closure is at the heart of the *Nouvelle Fiction*. By allowing the reader to suspend judgement and imaginatively explore rival accounts of the world, the fantastic is a model of the open text to which the *Nouvelle Fiction* aspires.

What effect does this strategy of openness have on the reader? This was a question I avoided earlier on, because the practice of imagining the inner life of a notional reader can result in the woolliest kind of literary criticism. Eco's terms of analysis avoid this danger, but to what extent do they help to characterise the typical *Nouvelle Fiction* model reader?

The openness of many texts is a deliberate strategy, as we have seen, to generate multiple meanings, multiple accounts of the real, which vie with each other to give an impression, not of partial accounts of an empirical reality that can be selectively assembled to find a compromise whole picture, but of rival accounts that suggest a vacuum beneath. This is the case in Petit's story 'Le Montreur et ses masques' for instance: the last mask is torn away to reveal nothing, and the reader must live with this tension between knowledge of the void and

the need for authority. The empirical is shown to be comprehensible only through such accounts; only through attempting representation whether personally or publicly does the chaos become solid. Indeed, without representation, however imperfect it may be, there can be nothing that is meaningful to us, no *Lebenswelt*.[3] The text thus intends its model reader to respect this essential tension between an awareness of the void and appreciation of the attempts to fill it. But what are we to do with these multiple possibilities? Are they all of equal value?

It is in judging the value of the fictions offered to us that the more active role of the fantastic's model reader comes into its own. Although there may be division in the group over the fantastic, the essential requirement of hesitation, hesitation not over whether events can be explained as realist or supernatural, but over how to understand their significance to us as moral agents, remains a central requirement of the text. The model reader of a typical *Nouvelle Fiction* text is not allowed to sit back and await any neat solutions. On the contrary, the text forces its reader to perform an active role in formulating implicit moral choices and in attempting to reconcile what might be contradictory or paradoxical. We have already seen how the reader is asked to live with the paradox of a meaningless void revealed as such and simultaneously endowed with sense. In offering an ambiguous and open text, the *Nouvelle Fiction* generates a model reader who wants to pursue the implications of the moral alternatives. Here the model reader has to engage with an empirical reader's judgement: the

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[3]A phenomenological coinage, used in this context by Roger Scruton in *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986, new edition, London: Phoenix, 1994). Scruton states "The *Lebenswelt* is not a world separate from the world of natural science, but a world differently described - described with the concepts that designate the intentional objects of human experience" (p. 8). He goes on to establish an essential tension between "the surface [where] we live and act" (i.e. the *Lebenswelt*) and the "depth" of scientific understanding that describes the empirical world but not that of human experience.

notional textual creation is necessarily made flesh as the interpretative exercise becomes part of the reader's life. The new fiction that has entered into the empirical reader's mind is a new grid through which to view the world. Interpretation ends with the recognition of the openness of the text, and its implications. So much is merely a description of the model reader, but then the empirical reader must take over, to muse on the choices that are left to him. In this way anti-realist fiction succeeds in speaking of reality and the moral world. Although realism as an end in itself is avoided, this does not mean that moral engagement is lost. The authors are all reluctant to view themselves as *écrivains engagés*, given the Sartrian overtones of the term; nevertheless, it was Tristan who brought up the question of *engagement* in conversation and Petit who put the cases most explicitly for the role of fiction in offering an order to shape the chaotic world. The exercise of fiction is an effort to shape or to experiment with the infinite possibilities of the real, and to recognise the imagination as the ordering force in a chaotic universe.

As I suggested in Part I, however, this generation of meaning is not entirely free. At least, such freedom as there is brings with it if not an obligation, an invitation to make wise rather than foolish choices so far as we can. The stories which we choose to follow in life, the fictions with which we endow the chaos with meaning, represent moral choices that colour the reality they describe.

An illustration of the textual openness which nevertheless invites moral scrutiny, even if this must remain unresolved, and of the creative and destructive powers of the imagination, is Châteaureynaud's long *nouvelle*, 'Zinzolins et Nacarats', which tells the story of the conflict of two peoples in an imaginary world. The ruling

Zinzolins suffer terrible losses during a long civil war, but eventually triumph and restore their supremacy over the empire. Most of their enemies are slaughtered but a small number of younger Nacarats are kept alive for a more formal process of retribution. The ancient fortress of Nasterburg, isolated and inaccessible on a pinnacle of rock high above a plain in a distant and desolate realm of the empire, is selected to serve as a special kind of prison. The fortress is modified: no view of the outside is possible, the only sky to be seen from within its walls is above. Vegetable gardens are painstakingly created, carefully calculated to allow the castle to be entirely self-sufficient. The only access via a ramp is to be dismantled once the prisoners are within, and descent of the sheer rock face is impossible. Nevertheless, the prisoners require supervision to ensure no escape is attempted. Their guards, therefore, are to be prisoners themselves, and the emperor sought out only those so dedicated to the empire, so twisted by hatred yet so self-controlled that they could follow their duty to the end:

> Il était en quête de demi-fous maîtres d'eux-mêmes. Demi-fous, car il fallait l'être pour consentir à partager le sort des accusés; maîtres d'eux-mêmes, car la tentation serait forte, là-haut, d'égorger une bonne fois l'adversaire.[4]

The implications of such a punishment are horrific: since the reason for living becomes punishment, the guards are obliged to keep their prisoners alive as long as possible, for without them, their own existence becomes meaningless.

Châteaureynaud characteristically uses the symbol of the garden to achieve a complex elaboration of good and evil, happiness and despair, and the relationship between each. The delights of the Hanging Gardens of Aloss are to be replicated in negative by the terrible utilitarianism of the garden of Nasterburg. This symmetry

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[4]G-O Châteaureynaud, "Zinzolins et Nacarats", in *Le Jardin dans l'Île*, (Paris: Presses de Renaissance, 1989). All quotes from Librio edition, 1995, here, p. 86.

seduces the designer of the second, Élian d'Offel, whose ancestor had designed the Hanging Gardens three centuries earlier. He allows himself to be persuaded that his presence is necessary at Nasterburg, to ensure the proper cultivation of the crops: if anything were to threaten the food supply, the punishment would be brought to an unacceptably early end.

> En réalité, au-delà de ces explications rationnelles, il lui semblait percevoir entre Aloss, l'oeuvre de Bram d'Offel, et la nouvelle Nasterburg, qui serait en partie celle d'Élian, une symétrie ou une complémentarité mystérieuse. À des siècles de distance, c'étaient deux membres d'une même lignée que la maison de Hay avait chargés de créer d'abord le jardin des délices, puis celui des supplices.[5]

The Gardens of Aloss are described as a tribute to the power of art and invention over nature, generating a dreamlike paradise for its visitors reminiscent of Watteau or indeed Verlaine's Watteau-inspired *fêtes galantes*:

> Si, de sa branche, un oiseau sifflait quelques notes heureuses, des musiciens cachés improvisaient aussitôt sur son thème. Au détour d'un sentier on découvrait un bal, ou un banquet. Sur les bassins se déroulaient des joutes nautiques. On vivait comme bohémiens d'opéra; on n'avait pas de chambre attitrée, on s'endormait où la fatigue vous avait saisi, sous un kiosque ou sur un lit de mousse, auprès d'une compagne de hasard.[6]

Those lucky enough to have known its pleasures emerge with a new perpective on life:

> Ceux qui avaient eu cette chance regardaient ensuite la simple, l'authentique nature, comme les pièces dispersées d'un puzzle que seul le Jardinier était parvenu à reconstituer pour l'agrément de l'Empereur. Ils se reconnaissaient tout au long de leur existence à une certaine manière d'être, faite de gravité souriante, d'indulgence et de sérénité. [7]

Meaning, for those who have glimpsed the perfect order of Aloss, is to be created through artifice for our delight: nature is no more than raw

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[5]Ibid., p. 95.
[6]Ibid., p. 93.
[7]Ibid., p. 92.

material for the artist to fashion, whether for good or for evil. Aloss effects its delight and achieves that serenity by setting contentment as its raison d'être. These gardens also effected their own reconciliation between the emperor who commissioned them and their architect, who had been in disgrace since he refused his sovereign's generosity, accepting as reward for his work only permission to live as a gardener within his creation. Twenty years later, when both are old men, they cross by chance in the gardens, and their meeting prefigures the last scene described between the prisoner and his guard:

> À la vue de son souverain, il voulut s'enfuir, mais comme il se redressait précipitamment ses vieux genoux le trahirent. Il chancela. L'Empereur lui tendit la main et lui vint en aide. Après vingt ans de brouille, ils se réconcilièrent au seuil de la mort. Ce qu'ils se dirent à ce moment, nul en vérité n'en sut jamais rien. Ils moururent peu après l'un et l'autre, à quelques jours d'intervalle. Dès lors leur ultime entretien devint un des thèmes favoris des poètes. À l'âge classique, l'anecdote donna matière à une polémique fameuse entre deux écoles farouchement opposées, la première voyant dans l'attitude du Jardinier le comble de l'orgueil et de l'aveuglement, la seconde au contraire le symbole de la plus haute sagesse.[8]

Reconciliation takes place, but its nature remains opaque. This opacity is greater in the resolution achieved by Mathias and Anselin. Their equivalent encounter is in some ways a travesty of that between the emperor and his gardener: Mathias, perceiving his tormentor's weakness, snatches the rifle from his hands and pushes him to the ground. Yet he goes on to help him to sit down, as they share the spirits thrown to them by the pilot. He laughingly appropriates his new captor's glasses, but takes care of him to the end. What happened between the two enemies during this period? We are never told, and whether this represented a reconciliation or not, we can only guess. Does Mathias's death resolve the forgotten civil war? Or is the switch

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[8]Ibid., p. 94.

of identity another twist in the plot, a final bid for victory of the Nacarats? To be mistaken for his enemy, Mathias swaps Anselin's 'croix de Gélin' to his own neck. When he finally throws himself from the wall, what does this achieve? He ensures that he will be properly buried, his remaining preoccupation. But he does so by taking on in death the identity of his life-long enemy. In death the two foes are united, and the last Nacarat is honoured as a victor. The war which had continued within the ghastly walls of the fortress of Nasterburg has been ironically concluded by rendering Zinzolin indistinguishable from Nacarat. In fact, this is precisely what the terrible punishment was bound to achieve from the start, even if the emperor did not realise it, although one of the Zinzolin guards driven mad by over forty years of incarceration had sensed something of the sort:

> Il pensait que toute l'entreprise, l'aménagement de Nasterburg et l'incarcération à vie des assassins sous la garde des parents de leurs victimes, n'avait jamais eu d'autre but que la conclusion de cette alliance. En trahissant les siens, en faisant cause commune avec les condamnés, il imaginait se conformer au dessein secret d'Anton de Hay. Dès l'origine, celui-ci aurait conçu Nasterburg comme le lieu où, d'un mouvement nécessaire et inéluctable, l'expiation entraînerait le pardon.[9]

No such reconciliation was ever intended, nor does it take place in any meaningful sense. The prisoners and guards are bound together in their 'jardin de supplices' not by forgiveness but by hatred, and their mutual reliance is based on the relationship of master and slave: until the last pair, Anselin and Mathias, are left, this relationship remains the same. Anselin needs Mathias to work the miserable plot of land for their food, and Mathias needs Anselin to release him each day from his cell. And yet, when Anselin goes blind and Mathias at last overcomes him, he is unable to truly overcome this lifelong bond: he continues to care for his former master to the end. After all, since the age of

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[9]Ibid., pp. 115-6.

seventeen, his life has had no other purpose, and at eighty-two, it is too late to start again. It is this aspect of the conception of the punishment that is so terrible: the inclusion of every aspect of the guards' and prisoners' lives in the penance. Beyond the process of retribution there is nothing. There can be no resolution in life as dreamt of by the raving guard: such 'reconciliation' as there is comes only in death. After Mathias has seen the aeroplane fly overhead and spied the world that has grown up around the fortress during his incarceration, there can be no doubt that the old quarrels of the civil war have been long forgotten. When he flings himself to his death, what do 'les badauds' in the 'jardin public' now established beneath the terrible fortress make of this old man who has fallen from the sky and from another world, Anselin's 'croix de Gélin' about his neck? His pyhrric victory would seem doubly meaningless to them. Nothingness is the product of evil and the 'jardin des supplices' is forgotten amid a new public park, created for pleasure instead of torture. Once again, the two kinds of garden are set in juxtaposition.

Or does the symmetry that seduced Élian propose to us too some kind of 'happy ending'? Perhaps we should return to the question of the quality of any such resolution: while the uncertainty associated with the emperor and the gardener is itself a source of creative production, can the death of Mathias be anything more than a source of horror, as a new machine age is made aware of the cruelty of its terrible past? Such reconciliation as may have been achieved will remain forever a secret, private affair, hidden behind the walls of the fortress. Does a private resolution have any value? The question is left unanswered and the model reader can do no more than respect this ambiguity; the empirical reader can question the problematic resolution and the poetics of the different gardens at leisure.

Haddad often eschews the anti-realist approach, in that his narratives are based in the known world, and tests notions of good and evil, of our ideas of morality, by probing their origins in the depths of the human psyche. For Haddad, this often involves the exploration of extremes, of the limits of human behaviour and of the taboos that provide those limits. In an early work, *La Cène*,[10] he tells a disturbing tale of one man's fight to maintain his identity and concept of the human in the face of almost irresistible pressure to indulge in cannibalism. The story takes its cue from reality: Haddad was inspired by a much reported air crash in the Andes, where survivors, given up for dead, subsist for weeks in the mountains by devouring their dead companions. When the survivors are eventually rescued, their actions are given widespread support by the public. Haddad uses these bare facts as the basis for a fictional account of the ordeal of the crash victims. In Haddad's novel, the passengers are half made up of an amateur rugby team, accompanied by an alcoholic reporter. After the crash, only a handful of those still alive and not injured are 'civilians', that is, not members of the team, among them the reporter. The young and athletic members of the team quickly take charge of the survival effort, and provisions salvaged from the crash are scrupulously divided between those that remain. Spirits remain high as the survivors reassure themselves that rescue is at hand. Nevertheless, tensions emerge from the start between the organising leader of the group and Marquez, the reporter. First, the co-pilot, horribly injured in the crash, begs to be delivered from his suffering, but is refused by the group, morally dominated by the catholic sensibilities of a seminarist, who insists on the sinfulness of suicide and anyone who facilitates it.

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[10]Hubert Haddad, *La Cène*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1975.

The reporter disagrees, and is on the point of dispatching the co-pilot when he dies anyway, thus postponing a confrontation between Marquez and the majority.

There is continuing friction, however, over the agreed strategy for survival: Marquez tries to persuade the others that an attempt should be made to descend the mountain in search of help; the rest of the group are convinced rescue is at hand, and that they should simply wait by the wreckage. The mood of the group prevails, and nothing is attempted, while the progress of the rescuers is monitored on a fading radio set with growing unease. After a week, the news that the search has been abandoned brings despair to the company. A half-hearted attempt is made at descent, but this is abandoned at the first obstacle. Marquez, the only one who realises the importance of this effort to reach the outside world, begins to sense an agenda hidden from him by the team. Thus far, we have witnessed a study of the dynamics of the herd versus the individual, a not unusual modern preoccupation from Sartre to Ionesco. The individuals of the team with whom Marquez had spoken on the plane gradually merge into one single identity, held together by the discipline of their sport. A gulf opens between Marquez and the others, while the reason remains unspoken for some time.

It is not that the solution proposed by the team, to eat the bodies of the dead passengers, offends the reporter's religious sensibilities. He has none, and indeed had mocked the intense catholicism of the seminarist before the crash. Nor is he physiologically disgusted: before the end he is reduced to devouring excrement. What, then, is the problem? Why does he resist the obvious solution to a terrible situation?

> Ni la répulsion ni la morale ne le retenaient de toucher aux morts. L'horreur ne résiste jamais longtemps à l'horreur, mais il ne voulait pas oublier le monde! Isabelle l'attendait au-delà des montagnes, il ne voulait échanger sa liberté contre un tas d'os. Il avait besoin de cette jeune femme à la poitrine défoncée plus que de la force des athlètes. Il ne voulait pas oublier le monde![11]

Marquez has formed an attachment to a wounded young woman, whose name he never learns, but through her similarity with the lover awaiting him in Buenos Aires, he maintains a notion of identity lost by the others. This identity is founded on his insistence on a correspondence with the world outside the society which has so quickly evolved in the isolation of the mountains. The group turns inward, establishing its own government and rituals, founded on necessity and distorted Catholicism. The disgust that all feel to begin with at eating human flesh is soon overcome by habit and by the catholic ceremony developed to excuse it. The cross intended at first as a signal becomes a focus for religious observance, and tending it daily is more an act of faith than a pragmatic effort to aid rescuers who no one believes will come. The consumption of human flesh is rationalised first of all scientistically. Parts of the human body are used in medicine for the treatment of the sick: the survivors are simply effecting a form of transplant, and this is indeed the justification used by the Vatican after their eventual delivery: 'Une dépêche émanant de la Cité du Vatican nie la version du cannibalisme et compare cet acte de survie à une greffe, une greffe qui utiliserait tout le corps.'[12] Beyond the scientistic, the rugbymen persuade themselves to see it as a supreme act of faith: in avoiding the sin of suicide in this way, they are celebrating the Eucharist.

> - Dieu était au centre de toutes nos décisions.
> - Refuser cette solution eût été un suicide!

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[11]Ibid., p. 146.
[12]Ibid., p. 214.

- Maintenant nous sommes aussi les enfants des parents endeuillés.
- C'est comme si le professeur Barnard avait greffé à chacun de nous le coeur d'un mort.
- C'est aussi une transplantation spirituelle. Le sacrement de la Communion Catholique.
- La Sainte Cène!
- La communion des vivants et des morts.[13]

Thus the breaking of the taboo is rationalised before and here after the event. Yet habit and hunger dull the niceties established at the beginning, just as the reporter had feared: only those male victims unrelated to any of the living are to be consumed at first, but soon this restriction is lifted. The wounded are not told where their food is coming from, but as the remaining 'civilians' join their ranks, the horror of becoming the next meal takes hold of them. Marquez suspects the respect shown the wounded, the lack of attention shown to the wounded: none are explicitly killed, but after an avalanche, he is the only non-team member to survive. Has the team allowed their larder to be selectively filled? Have they helped the hand of God? We never know. The etiquette established to maintain some decency evaporates as the rugby men abandon cooking for lack of fuel and soon feast happily on all internal organs, even boiling heads and extracting the marrow from bones to get the most from each carcass. At the start of the 'feasts', Marquez had observed in the graveyard the stripped body of a young man he had watched on the plane, only head, hands and feet now intact, the heavy golden crucifix he had seen swinging across a broad hairy chest now resting on bare ribs. By the end, this place is no more than a scrap heap.

Marquez quietly refuses to eat, resolutely burying each of his allotted portions, in defiance of the rules established by the majority.

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[13]Ibid., p. 216.

He wastes away as the others recover their full strength, laughing and playing rugby in the snow. At one point he even places a spot of human grease on his lips, admitting the taste is not unpleasant, but cannot bring himself to swallow it. Ultimately Marquez forgoes survival as a result: he dies with a vision of salvation just after the news that help is at hand is broadcast on the radio. Haddad sets Marquez's degeneration against the brimming health, spirit and athleticism of the team. We are offered not a critique of Christianity, which is travestied by the sanctification of the rugby men's *cène*, but an exploration of the psychology of the group and the myth of the hero. Readers might recall Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, but in Haddad, questions of right and wrong are more ambiguous. Is Marquez right to resist? He does after all pay with his life, and is reduced to what some might consider greater indignities to survive as long as he does. His position is not logical in that he is more nauseated by the filth he eats than by the taste of human flesh. Nor does he have any explicitly religious objections. For the atheist reporter, though, the sanctity of the dead is in some mystical sense a guarantee of the humanity of the living. While there is no doubt that he wishes passionately to live, the nature of his desire puts him at the opposite pole to the team. The rugby men are preoccupied with existence in the present, and have ceased to live for the future, their lives being given over to the sanctification of their ongoing survival; Marquez measures his life by the past and the future, by memory of autumns in Buenos Aires, and hopes that he can still make that appointment with Isabelle in the future. For Marquez, this future would be put in question if he were to transgress certain boundaries in the present. The cannibalism of the team is for him a rejection of the world outside. We are invited to question the value of the athletes' survival, to ask what has been

sacrificed. Is it merely the saintly justification that makes us uneasy? Or is it the transgression of the taboo itself that disturbs us, no matter how extreme the circumstances? To what extent are we invited to sympathise with Marquez's choice, and how are we to understand the paradox of his affirmation of life through death? These questions are never resolved, and the reader is left contemplating the unease of the survivors while remaining aware of Marquez's failure. Haddad attempts to explain part of this unease to Moreau:

> Il y a au départ l'abomination, le monde peslagien des titans, où des créatures se battent dans l'argile première, essaient de créer un ordre dans le chaos, et c'est l'avènement du tragique. Dans *La Cène*, il y a un personnage qui tente de préserver sa mémoire au milieu des cannibales, en refusant de manger la chair humaine. Je me suis donc abandonné, au présent, au XX^{e} siècle, dans la vie, à quelque chose de primitif et d'occulté mais qui est là, absolument là, pour tout le monde. Car les titans, et toute la barbarie génésiaque, chaque individu porte cela en lui.[14]

The question is ultimately unresolvable because Haddad has separated the savage from the civilised in all of us, and while we might fear the primitive urge of the cannibals, and condemn their hypocritical self-justification, we recognise it as part of ourselves.

It would be a mistake to see in the *Nouvelle Fiction* any kind of political sense of engagement, in spite of any personal views of its members. Nor is there a theological commitment to be gleaned from the texts themselves, despite any leanings one way or another professed by the empirical authors. The reader is not exhorted, à la Sartre, to commit him or herself to political action. In abandoning the French preoccupation with realism, the *Nouvelle Fiction* apparently flies off into the world of the unreal, or at least, to a potentially escapist realm. As we have learnt from Borges, however, this can be the best

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[14] Jean-Luc Moreau, pp. 271 - 272.

way to speak of the real. It is unjust to dismiss Borges as an over-intellectual elitist literary gamesman, lost in the quirks of private metaphysical speculation. Similarly, the *Nouvelle Fiction*, by stepping back from an earnest preoccupation with realism, is not merely seeking escapism, but, through its radical conception of the contingency of reality, curiously achieves a far more sophisticated moral commentary than any mere *moralisateur* might hope for. Its sophistication lies in the new role that the reader is forced to play in the creation of meaning. The limited textual openness of the majority of *Nouvelle Fiction* texts is not an accident but a model of the uncertainty of the human condition. Such a heightened sense of the instability of meaning, and the desire to overcome it through the search for security could certainly be set within a broader 'millennial' context: the fragmentary narrative of Modiano's *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* might also be evoked for comparison here, part of an *oeuvre* that equally exposes a fin-de-siècle anxiety, as well as being based on detective fiction, something just as beloved by the *Nouvelle Fiction*, as we have seen. All the authors in their darker moments, perhaps Haddad most of all, express something of this anxiety at the chaos their narratives struggle with. Indeed Petit explicitly claims the purpose of writing is for him to assuage his sense of that chaos:

> La vie, l'existence en général, le monde, ça me paraît un chaos abominable. Et dans ce chaos je raconte des histoires ou des poèmes pour mettre de l'ordre. Pour essayer de m'entretenir dans l'idée que la vie n'est pas uniquement cette histoire pleine de bruit et de fureur racontée par un idiot. Mais je crains fort que la réalité, ce soit cela.[15]

Yet it is the peculiar demands made on us as readers and interpreters through the invasion, the contamination of the real by the imaginary and the implications this has for our 'reception' of the world as text

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[15]See Appendix 2.

that gives the *Nouvelle Fiction* its particular flavour. The fact that we are forced to entertain multiple interpretative possibilities simultaneously is a response to the undecidable. Yet while there may be a number of choices on offer, some may be comprehensively shown to be the wrong ones, like Achab's attempt to rewrite Schéhérazade's story, for instance. At other times, it is impossible to distinguish the value of alternative endings, as in the final chapter of Tristan's *L'énigme du Vatican*. As readers we must cultivate our own gardens, create the fictional landscapes which please us, aware that these can only be provisional attempts at representing the beauty and horror of the human condition.

In its conflation of reality and fiction, the *Nouvelle Fiction* invites its readers to experience reality as a product of the imagination, not to live life as a dream, hoping to wake up for something better, but to recognise the role we have in choosing the structures that order our existence. Fiction thereby liberates its readers, not from some spurious political oppression, but from pedestrian univocalism. The multiple world of the postmodern is at our feet, and we are left, as responsible readers, to enjoy it and to make our choice. Thus the *Nouvelle Fiction*, with its brand of 'fantastic realism', to use Brooke-Rose's phrase, represents the world in its own way and for its own age, just as Balzac or Robbe-Grillet did. Anything we do is an engagement with some fiction or other, and it is up to us to write a fruitful rather than destructive narrative for ourselves, to transform some of the din of chaos, to paraphrase Petit,[16] into music.

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[16]'Le raconteur des histoires, il donne l'idée qu'il y a un chemin dans le paysage, que d'abord le chaos s'organise en paysage et puis qu'il y a un chemin. C'est un chemin qui mène quelque part. C'est comme une ligne mélodique. Au fond c'est le même rapport qu'entre le bruit et la musique. C'est-à-dire que nous vivons dans un univers de bruit et moi je voudrais faire partie de ceux qui y mettent un peu de musique. ... Ce chaos transformé en musique'.(See Appendix 2).

APPENDICES

NOTE

The following interviews took place at various locations in Paris in the spring of 1997. Since several were recorded in less than ideal conditions, there are a number of lacunae in the transcriptions, but I have also edited what were essentially informal discussions in order to keep the material reproduced here as relevant as possible to my thesis.

APPENDIX 1

ENTRETIEN AVEC FRÉDÉRICK TRISTAN

À *La Coupole*, Paris, le 20 mars 1997

J.K.: Quelles sont les origines de la Nouvelle Fiction?

F.T.: Oui, en effet. Nous étions tous des auteurs différents qui ne nous connaissions pas tous et qui, sans trop le savoir, travaillaient dans le même sens. Alors, mon premier roman, parce que je suis le plus âgé de la troupe (ce n'est pas une qualité, il se trouve que c'est comme ça! C'est plutôt un défaut même.),... j'ai commencé *Le Dieu des Mouches* en 58 et ça a été édité en 59, chez Grasset, et puis republié plusieurs fois. Nos amis, donc, pensent que c'est le premier de la Nouvelle Fiction. C'est eux qui le disent; peut-être que c'est ça. Alors on pourrait dire que la Nouvelle Fiction commence en 59, c'est-à-dire au moment où *Les Gommes* de Robbe-Grillet fait rage et que le nouveau roman prend son essor. C'était une telle mode en France que tous ceux qui écrivaient autrement n'existaient pas. Aux yeux de la critique, naturellement; les lecteurs, eux, continuaient à nous lire sans aucun problème! Mais c'est vrai que l'université à ce moment-là s'est tournée vers le nouveau roman, parce qu'elle a trouvé des choses effectivement très intéressantes, qui le sont, bien sûr. Moi-même j'étais très intéressé par beaucoup des éléments du nouveau roman. Je ne critique pas le nouveau roman; personne d'ailleurs de chez nous, de la Nouvelle Fiction, ne critique le nouveau roman. Seulement, si nous avons nous-mêmes utilisé des moyens théoriques du nouveau roman, comme par exemple la mise en abyme - et ça vous le verrez dans mon nouveau roman [*Stéphanie Phanistée*], par exemple - eh bien même si nous avons fait ça il se trouve que quand même nous sommes... Dès le départ, nous n'étions pas branchés sur cela, ce n'était pas ce que nous ressentions. Parce que nous étions beaucoup plus des gens de terrain, c'est-à-dire des écrivains de romans, et, au fur et à mesure, on écrivait sans trop savoir où nous allions; alors que les gens du nouveau roman étaient davantage des théoriciens. Donc il a fallu attendre qu'arrive un théoricien, à savoir Jean-Luc Moreau, d'une part pour nous réunir, car il estimait que nous avions des points en commun suffisamment importants pour que nous puissions nous reconnaître comme faisant partie d'un même mouvement. Et deuxièmement pour qu'il puisse tirer de cet ensemble des dénominateurs communs, et puis les mettre dans ce livre que vous connaissez, *La Nouvelle Fiction.* Le titre 'La Nouvelle Fiction' étant d'ailleurs, je crois, de Moreau; il me semble bien que c'est lui. Un jour, on s'est réuni pour donner un nom à ça et on a cherché, on était dans un petit restaurant et puis il a dit, pourquoi pas 'La Nouvelle Fiction'? Et un peu par amusement, par humour, on s'est dit qu'on appellerait ça "La Nouvelle Fiction".

C'est vrai que les sept qui en ont fait partie à la base sont des gens qui avaient déjà beaucoup écrit au moment où le mouvement s'est constitué. Donc c'est *a posteriori* qu'on y a pensé, alors que le nouveau roman s'est construit par la théorie; et ensuite on a écrit à partir de cette théorie: c'est un mouvement inverse.

J.K.: Est-ce qu'il y a un consensus dans le groupe sur ce que sont les éléments essentiels de la Nouvelle Fiction? Est-ce que vous considérez l'article de Moreau comme un manifeste en quelque sorte?

F.T.: On n'aime pas trop le mot manifeste; nous sommes plus libres que ça. Nous ne sommes pas du tout des théoriciens en fait, même si j'ai écrit des articles là-dessus, et il y en a d'autres qui ont écrit d'autres choses aussi. Nous avons tous un côté essayiste. Enfin, il se trouve que je suis en même temps professeur d'iconologie paléochrétienne, donc je suis surtout un homme de l'image, et en tant qu'homme de l'image, surtout de comment étudier les images, j'ai beaucoup étudié les poèmes de l'imaginaire. Qui dit image dit imaginaire, naturellement, répertoire d'images etc... Ce qui n'est pas loin de certaines idées de la Nouvelle Fiction. Et on pourrait étudier là encore des parentés avec quelqu'un comme Gilbert Durand, par exemple *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*. Lequel Gilbert Durand est un de mes amis depuis longtemps. Donc il peut y avoir là aussi des rapports. De même avec Gaston Bachelard, par exemple. Et donc il y a toute une nuance qui existe quand même là. Avec des limites: moi je ne suis pas Jungien, pas du tout Jungien, alors que certains parmis nous sont Freudiens. Je ne suis pas non plus Freudien. Donc l'inconscient existe sans aucun doute mais je ne veux pas y toucher, parce que je sais que si je commence à toucher l'inconscient je ne peux plus écrire, et je laisse la part d'ombre, celle qui est créatrice enfin. Et c'est justement un des points essentiels sur lesquels nous nous reconnaissions, les uns et les autres; c'est en fait de faire une fiction en progression, en progrès, *in progress* en anglais, c'est plus net! Au fur et à mesure que les personnages fabriquent eux-mêmes les décors, les décors rejaillissent sur les personnages, l'histoire rentre dans une espèce de labyrinthe qui est en fait donnée par l'imaginaire lui-même, dans la mesure où on le reçoit plutôt que de le fabriquer. Nous croyons davantage, et ça je crois que c'est très important, à la croissance qu'à la construction. C'est-à-dire qu'au déclenchement on fait un plan, ... Nous démarrons, et passe ce qui se passe. C'est une volonté de laisser en quelque sorte la fiction libre de s'organiser par elle-même, avec ses propres moyens, qui sont souvent les moyens que la théorie détruit.

J.K.: Est-ce que vous acceptez, donc, la caractérisation polémique et peut-être ludique de Moreau de la plupart de la littérature française contemporaine? Est-ce que c'est utile pour comprendre ce que La Nouvelle Fiction n'est pas?

F.T.: Du ludisme, je crois qu'il y en a énormément dans la Nouvelle Fiction, ça c'est certain. Polémique, je ne crois pas que nous soyons de grands polémistes, de même que de petits polémistes, dans la mesure où on s'entend très différemment de ce qui se passe actuellement dans la littérature française, et nous ne trouvons pas "d'adversaires", mais pour jouer à la balle, il faut un mur pour renvoyer la balle. Là on ne voit pas de mur. Par exemple, il a y une perte de critique en France, considérable, depuis que le nouveau roman existe; il y a énormément de théorie, de critique etc. Il y a eu un dessèchement, et ils n'arrivent plus, les critiques, à faire quoi que ce soit. Alors nous sommes devant des chroniqueurs, devant des gens qui regardent toujours un livre, celui qui vient de sortir, mais ne se rattachent pas du tout à l'idée de l'oeuvre. Alors que les gens de la Nouvelle Fiction ont un sentiment de l'oeuvre très important, avec des références d'un livre à l'autre etc... de façon, donc, à créer un tissu, une textualité. Donc c'est cette textualité qui nous intéresse, à travers une oeuvre et non seulement à travers un bouquin. Ça, c'est complètement à l'encontre de la critique contemporaine française. ... C'est curieux à dire, ça peut paraître peut-être même prétentieux, mais ce n'est pas ça, c'est que le reste c'est les Éditions Minuit, le minimalisme, non, c'est pas du tout nous, ça ne nous intéresse pas! Que nos lecteurs et lectrices s'intéressent à ça, c'est indépendant de nos travaux.

J.K.: Est-ce que vous vous considérez comme post-modernes, et qu'est-que vous entendez par ce terme?

F.T.: Oui, on pourrait si on voulait nous classer assez facilement parmi les post-modernes, naturellement. ...Moi je crois que la Nouvelle Fiction remplit au moins un rôle important, c'est le rôle de donner des possibilités au récit; mais non pas un récit aseptisé, qui ne fait que traduire le gestuel ou des pensées très simples, ce qu'on pourrait appeler le quotidien ou le social comme c'est effectivement toujours le cas dans les kiosques à nouvelles des gares, (à part les policiers que nous aimons beaucoup; c'est dans les gares mais là, c'est bien!) Il faut que le récit retrouve sa véritable fonction, qui est une fonction de libération, de découverte de soi par le lecteur par des moyens analogiques aux contes de fées. Vous savez, toujours dire quelque chose, comme disait Jarré, 'cela ne veut plus rien dire'. Je crois que là il est possible de retrouver une réintériorisation du récit. Justement l'humour, il me semble, est une des dernières possibilités qui reste entre nos mains, dans un moment où nous sommes totalement accablés de significations contradictoires: par la télévision, par les publicités, un amas de significations qui en soi ne découvrent qu'un sens. Alors que ce type de récit se faufile constamment à la recherche d'un sens, serait-il absent? Mais le seul fait déjà qu'il vient dans un parcours, un parcours qui peut mener à certaines connaissances a un sens. Alors je crois que tous les gens de la Nouvelle Fiction sont convaincus de ça. Des textes qui réfèrent à une mémoire, à une imagination qui sont comprises dans ce réservoir d'images et de l'imaginaire. Puiser dans le

réservoir même d'avant, puisqu'on a tellement conceptualisé, on a tellement théorisé pour arriver à des significations disparates et à un faux ludisme qui n'est qu'une parcellisation de tout, du quotidien. ...

J.K.: Quels sont les éléments essentiels de la fiction à part le récit? Quel est le rôle du personnage par exemple?

F.T.: ... Il me semble que la psychologie du personnage n'est pas donnée pour en quelque sorte analyser. Par exemple 'tu as un type là à décrire, voilà Eugénie Grandet'. Il y a une géographie psychologique en quelque sorte, et lorsqu'un personnage se promène, il se promène en lui-même. Ce qui veut dire que la géographie apparente du récit - il se trouve à Paris ou à Londres, etc.: en réalité c'est en lui-même qu'il se promène. Et donc il y a une analogie entre le décor soi-disant extérieur et son intérieur. Ça se trouve en particulier chez Marc Petit et Jean Levi, je crois que nous en sommes les plus proches. Il y a l'autre petit groupe Châteaureynaud - Haddad, qui utilise différemment la psychologie. Mais la psychologie n'est jamais démontée pour savoir quels sont les sentiments, quels sont les désirs; c'est pas du tout ça notre projet. Le projet, c'est qu'il y ait une rencontre entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur au fur et à mesure que le personnage avance dans son trajet, que ce soit trajet extérieur ou intérieur. Par exemple *Balthasar Kober*, qui est peut-être un des mes livres les plus fétiches: Balthasar est un petit garçon qui est orphelin et qui traverse toute l'Allemagne à la fin du 16e siècle au moment où il y a des luttes religieuses. Il part d'une ville où on croit qu'il est catholique, et il se fait attraper par des catholiques qui croient qu'il est protestant; il se fait ami des juifs qui l'aident à sortir de l'embarras. Donc, il y a là un affront dans cette Allemagne troublée de l'époque qui est en proie au dualisme: une fiction sur Balthasar lui-même mais également sur nous aujourd'hui. C'est tout un jeu de miroirs qui est mis en place, de façon que le lecteur, lui, le ressente. Ça fait partie d'un certain but peut-être du récit qui recouvre par là les anciens récits mythiques qui n'étaient pas seulement faits pour raconter une histoire mais aussi pour redonner une cohérence, tenter de retrouver une cohérence à la tribu. C'était l'idée de Mallarmé. On peut l'imaginer très bien aussi sous l'aspect de ces récits, c'est-à-dire qu'on a trop laissé en jachère cet aspect du récit et, devenant uniquement technicien on ne travaille que sur le mot lui-même: chaque mot est surtout organisé de telle façon que l'on emporte toute magie, tout sens, toute direction.

J.K.: Donc vous recherchez des formes anciennes au lieu de vouloir créer des innovations techniques?

F.T.: On peut avoir des innovations techniques dans la mesure où elles appartiennent à cette croissance dont nous parlions, et pas du tout pour faire une construction technique. Nous favorisons la croissance, c'est-à-dire une progression, plutôt q'une étude qui finirait par devenir stagnante. Un livre peut être très intéressant du point de vue

historique parce qu'il a marqué une époque, mais il est mort dans le sens que son texte est momifié. C'est peut-être le sort qui nous attend aussi un jour. Mais on essaie de se raccrocher à toute une tradition européenne, mais qui n'est pas spécifiquement une tradition française depuis le début du siècle.

J.K.: La Nouvelle Fiction est écrite pour les lecteurs et pas uniquement pour ses auteurs, ce qui n'est peut-être pas toujours le cas avec les derniers nouveaux romans. Où faut-il trouver l'équilibre entre ce que Barthes appelle le lisible et le scriptible?

F.T.: C'est vrai, ça devait mener à un cul-de-sac. D'autant plus qu'ils prétendaient que l'écrivain devait se désengager de son écriture. Alors que nous prétendons exactement le contraire. Il doit s'engager complètement dans son écriture mais avec cette particularité de laisser ses personnages agir par eux-mêmes. C'est une délégation. Par exemple, *La naissance d'un spectre*: il y a un certain Frédérick Tristan qui écrit, mais ce n'est pas lui qui va écrire, c'est un personnage qui s'appelle Frédérick, qui va conter l'histoire d'un écrivain qui était son ami, et cet écrivain va écrire une oeuvre. Et dans l'oeuvre de cet homme on va voir des personnages qui existent et eux-mêmes écrivent, etc. Donc mise en abyme, mais pas seulement ça, c'est surtout une délégation de plus en plus éloignée du personnage qui était au début Frédérick Tristan. Donc, délégation qui pourrait avoir tendance à se diluer. Pas du tout. On aperçoit au contraire qu'il y a un approfondissement chaque fois que ça se produit. En fait ce genre de récit a permis d'approfondir plus que tout historien le phénomène qui peut mener quelqu'un à une perdition, comme par exemple le fascisme ou le nazisme.

J.K.: Qu'est-ce que c'est pour vous le rapport entre réel et fiction? Est-ce que les auteurs ont des responsabilités?

J.K.: Depuis que Moreau a eu l'idée de réunir les gens de la Nouvelle Fiction, j'ai peut-être pris conscience davantage d'une certaine responsabilité. Responsabilité vis-à-vis de tout ce qui se passe dans le monde actuel qui peut devenir dangereux. Donc, la réflexion sur la fiction est devenue pour moi quelque chose qui n'est plus seulement littéraire, qui est devenue de plus en plus ancrée dans cette réalité historique. Quand on regarde les politiciens, la manière dont ils parlent et la manière dont c'est rapporté par les soi-disant informations, on voit bien qu'on nage dans la fiction; pas la même fiction que nous. Donc il se peut que la responsabilité d'un écrivain, ce soit, à travers la fiction littéraire, de désamorcer, pas seulement de dénoncer, la fiction existentielle. On a cru à des religions, on a cru à des philosophies, on a cru à des systèmes sociaux, et la fiction est devenue tellement grande qu'aujourd'hui on ne croit plus à aucune idéologie. Ça, c'est peut-être bien, mais il n'y a rien d'autre à quoi se rattacher, puisque seule la fiction va apparaître. Alors, le rôle de l'art

est aussi de jouer, de façon à montrer par ces sortes de marionnettes que sont les personnages, ce que nous sommes réellement. Est-ce que cela pourrait servir à un 'engagement'? Je crois avoir dit assez souvent que nous ne pouvons pas être autrement qu'engagés. Gide, Sartre ont dit 'il faut s'engager': on est engagé!

J.K.: Et le rapport entre le réel et la fiction, c'est où exactement?

F.T.: C'est obligatoire parce qu'il n'y a plus d'idéologie possible. Ce que disait Sartre, ce que disait Gide c'est qu'il faut s'engager dans une idéologie. Justement la dissolution de l'idéologie fait que l'engagement est tout à fait d'un autre ordre. Plus subtil, plus difficile pour l'homme de lettres.

J.K.: Vous ne croyez pas à 'la mort de l'auteur'?

F.T.: Un écrivain n'est jamais un auteur. C'est le lecteur qui le voit comme un auteur. C'est l'autre côté de la barrière. Mais dans la mesure où l'écrivain croit à une oeuvre, ce qui est le cas dans la Nouvelle Fiction, il s'admet comme auteur. Ça va à l'encontre de tout ce que Sartre pensait, parce qu'il refuse le mot comme si le mot était un mot réactionnaire. Mais on essaie qu'il y ait un lien entre tout ce qu'on écrit. On a la prétention de vouloir raccorder ce qu'on écrit dans un même parcours, un livre qui fait référence à l'autre. C'est pour cela que j'utilise souvent les mêmes personnages, par exemple Adrien Salvat qui apparaît un peut partout: dans *Les égarés...* . Dans *Stéphanie Phanistée*, tous les personnages sont des hétéronymes que j'ai utilisés. Et tous ces personnages ne sont qu'un, à la limite. C'est pourquoi quand l'auteur apparaît à la fin du livre, les personnages disent, 'mais expliquez-nous, vous avez connu Stéphanie?' Et il dit 'mais non, pas du tout, c'est vous qui m'en avez parlé, qui me l'avez fait découvrir, c'est vous, les personnages qui l'avez fait.' C'est une feinte, mais est-ce que c'est une feinte? À la fin, tous ces personnages sont mes maîtres. Moi j'ai obéi.

J.K.: Vous avez déjà parlé de l'engagement de l'auteur; est-ce qu'il y a engagement de la part du lecteur, est-ce que le lecteur a, lui-même, ses propres responsabilités envers le texte?

F.T.: Sûrement. Mais souvent un livre agit comme un piège. C'est bien d'ailleurs, que ça soit toujours le cas. Pas par méchanceté mais c'est bien qu'on sorte différent d'un livre. C'est ce qui est peut-être le plus important pour un livre. Et c'est le livre qu'on a envie d'écrire. Ce sont les deux choses les plus positives dans un livre, une sorte de transmission, entre l'écrit et le reçu, ce sont deux sacrements littéraires...C'est l'engagement dont on parlait tout à l'heure, engagement d'engager. Mais le ludisme y est pour beaucoup, il faut amuser aussi, il faut... une espèce 'd'ironie', que je mets entre guillemets... en français l'ironie a un côté méchant, moqueur. Je parle

d'une ironie technique, textuelle. Je la qualifie parce que c'est souvent mal reçu; on dira, l'auteur se moque de ses lecteurs. Mais mon humour a une plus grande plasticité; on joue ensemble. J'avais écrit une fois que c'était le confessional tarabiscoté. Mais il y a forcément un dialogue entre le lecteur, le lecteur potentiel et l'auteur, oui je crois beaucoup à cela.

J.K.: À propos des pièges pour les lecteurs, qu'est-ce que c'est que le fantastique pour vous?

F.T.: Le fantastique, je l'emploie parfois, parfois aussi le merveilleux, plutôt dans des contes, mais c'est plutôt les situations de mes personnages qui sont inattendues de façon à éveiller l'inconscient. J'utilise le fantastique dans *Le Vatican*, dans le texte ancien, parce que ce fantastique est possible dans un texte soi-disant de cette époque-là. Je n'utilise pas le fantastique comme dans un roman fantastique: le fantastique est toujours situé dans la mesure où il peut être fantastique. Pour le reste, c'est plutôt des situations inattendues, mais tout à fait possibles. Dans *Stéphanie*, il y a ces huit hommes qui racontent des histoires de leur jeunesse et qui, peut-être, affabulent, et la Stéphanie en question n'est pas du tout une femme réelle mais un fantasme. Mais ce n'est pas non plus le fantastique. C'est un jeu, des miroirs, du baroque. C'est peut-être ça la Nouvelle Fiction, une des qualités essentielles, cette possibilité de retournement de ce qu'on croit qu'on lisait au départ, et ensuite on s'aperçoit que c'est toute autre chose. Si on le lit comme *Les trois mousquetaires*, on va dire 'oh, cette Stéphanie, quelle putain', mais si on l'apprécie après des stratifications un peu plus poussées, on s'aperçoit ... qui ment là-dedans? Qui est le menteur? ...On tire le tapis au lecteur. ...C'est ça le paradoxe entre réalité et fiction.

APPENDIX 2

ENTRETIEN AVEC MARC PETIT

Chez lui, Paris, le 21 mars 1997

J.K.: Qu'est-ce que c'est que la Nouvelle Fiction?

M.P.: C'est plusieurs choses. C'était au début l'idée d'un livre, le livre de Jean-Luc Moreau, essentiellement une anthologie avec des entretiens. Jean-Luc a fait une préface où il essaie de faire ressortir l'existence d'un courant littéraire. On n'est pas nécéssairement tous d'accord ni avec ce qu'il a dit là, ni avec l'existence même de ce courant littéraire. C'est une des choses très particulières qui déroutent énormément les gens, c'est qu'on a des discours qui ne sont pas nécessairement toujours accordés, et qui sont parfois même franchement contradictoires. ... Les gens sont évidemment assez déroutés par un groupe où les membres ne sommes pas d'accord entre eux. Et c'est vrai que certains d'entre nous sont gênés par ce fait; Jean-Luc est assez profondément gêné par ce désaccord. Moi, beaucoup moins. Parce que je suis de tempérament beaucoup plus anarchiste, et ça ne me déplaît pas de faire partie d'un groupe où les gens ne sont pas d'accord entre eux. Et je trouve que ça donne à la notion de groupe une image tout à fait différente de celle à laquelle on est habitué depuis les avant-gardes du début du siècle, qui se sont plus ou moins formées en référence au modèle bolchevique. D'ailleurs Jean-Luc a tendance à penser qu'on peut nous associer deux par deux, trois par trois, sur tel ou tel point, mais on peut pas associer les dix ou douze sur tous les points. Et parfois même il y a des clivages à ce moment-là ... qui ne mettent pas en péril l'existence de quelque chose qui a commencé comme une amicale d'écrivains. ...Évidemment ça ne suffit pas de se rencontrer dans un restaurant pour dire qu'on est un groupe littéraire. Mais je pense que la vision bolchevique surréaliste, disons, d'un groupe dur, des espèces de militants avec un programme, c'est une vision qui n'est plus pour notre époque. ...Je ne sais pas si nous, nous sommes de notre époque; je crois qu'on est assez inactuel et que nous en sommes assez contents, mais ce qu'on veut imaginer c'est une sorte de réseau, une sorte de constellation, de configuration de types nébuleux. C'est-à-dire que chacun se définit d'une manière fluctuante, et perspectiviste, par la plus grande proximité sur tel ou tel point. C'est comme des étoiles dans le ciel; et on change de constellation; ce ne sont pas des choses qui sont des données dures. Moi je suis partisan d'un groupe qui soit fluctuant, ironique, qui fasse jouer une notion de l'humour qui se rapproche du sérieux. Parce que je ne suis pas du tout contre le sérieux mais je pense que ce n'est pas sérieux se prendre au sérieux. ...

Alors, les clivages entre nous: il y en a qui croient en Dieu, il y en a qui n'y croient pas. Il y en a qui croient dans le mythe comme

porteur d'un sens; il y en a qui utilisent le mythe comme matière première pour des variations, qui peuvent être anti-mythe. Ce ne sont pas nécessairement des clivages politiques, car globalement on n'est pas à droite. Il y a des gens dans notre groupe qui semblent attribuer au mythe une espèce de richesse de sens comme si au fond le mythe était une espèce de réservoir dans lequel on va puiser pour écrire. Certains d'entre nous seraient tout à fait contre cette image parce que le mythe est actuel, nous sommes dedans; quelqu'un qui se jette de la fenêtre c'est Icare, c'est ça que dit Hubert. Moi, j'ai une vision plus critique, par exemple je me rattache beaucoup plus à la tradition de Walter Benjamin, c'est-à-dire je vois dans le conteur quelqu'un qui ironise par rapport au mythe, qui s'approprie le domaine mythique par les hommes, il tire le mythe vers les hommes, une sorte de subversion dictatoriale.

Une autre ligne de partage entre nous, c'est que certains d'entre nous au fond sont assez proches d'une tradition de la littérature fantastique, ou du réalisme magique. Je pense par exemple à Châteaureynaud, Haddad. D'autres ne pratiquent pas du tout le fantastique: c'est le mode du récit, c'est la manière de raconter qui crée la désaccoutumance, qui crée le vertige. C'est pas dans le contenu de ce qui est raconté par rapport à la réalité des réalistes que ça se joue, c'est dans la narration elle-même. Et là je pense que Tristan, souvent, moi presque toujours, Jouty et Levi, sont du même côté, pas du côté fantastique, pas du côté réaliste finalement. Plutôt du côté 'tout est possible dès que quelqu'un commence à raconter'. Donc nous, nous sommes plus proches d'une tendance Borges-Calvino.

J.K.: Vos influences ne sont pas du tout françaises en général?

M.P.: On voit la reviviscence, ici et maintenant, d'un courant qui n'a pas été reconnu comme courant dominant dans l'histoire de la littérature française. C'est-à-dire que la vision dominante de la littérature française s'est faite: un, par rapport au classicisme de Louis XIV, c'est-à-dire une entreprise de pouvoir, de police culturelle; deux, à partir du 19e siècle, par la victoire du réalisme bourgeois, et ensuite du naturalisme. Si bien que, écrire comme un écrivain français, tout se passe comme si s'était nécessairement s'incrire dans la lignée de Flaubert, mais attention, Flaubert de *Madame Bovary* pas de *Salammbô*, Maupassant, mais attention, pas Maupassant de *Le Horla*, le Maupassant naturaliste, etc. Si on regarde qui sont les gens des jurys de Goncourt, si on regarde qui sont les gens couronnés par la plupart des prix littéraires en France, ce sont toujours des gens qui se rattachent à une tradition intimiste, psychologique, sociologisante, de description des moeurs, de description des milieux, et d'autobiographie, des gens qui parlent de leurs familles, de leurs rapports à leurs parents, à leurs frères et soeurs, et je crois que tous ces sujets nous indiffèrent profondément. Alors, c'est une pure provocation de dire cela parce que nous ne sommes pas français; finalement, nous ne nous intéressons pas à ce que les réalistes considèrent comme la réalité. Nos ancêtres

dans la littérature française ne sont quand même pas des clochards et des marginaux absolus. Si je dis Rabelais, Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, on n'est déjà plus dans la marginalité. Ils sont centraux, mais nous ne les voyons pas comme centraux. ...Ils sont centraux mais ils ne correspondent pas à l'image que les Français cherchent à donner d'eux-mêmes. ... On trouve formidable quand un Sud-américain, un Hongrois, un Albanais, un Russe, un je ne sais quoi fait des livres étonnants, ébouriffants, décoiffants, ça c'est normal, ce sont des étrangers. Et nous, les Français, il faudrait qu'éternellement on raconte nos émois, nos premiers émois dans la sacristie, quand le curé nous a fait des gouzi-gouzi. Toujours les mêmes histoires de sexe, d'enfance, de rapports aux parents, de rapports à la bourgeoisie.

Il y a eu la grande période de la littérature des profs. La littérature des profs, ça c'était le nouveau roman. Ça s'est terminé et puis alors est venue la littérature des journalistes. Mais il y a une grande différence: un journaliste écrit pour que le lendemain son article serve à emballer les salades. Tandis que nous, nous écrivons pour l'éternité. Une éternité sur laquelle nous n'avons aucune illusion. C'est une éternité de rêve: on sait très bien qu'on a très peu de chance de survivre cinquante ans voire un siècle, ...mais on n'écrit pas dans l'actualité... On s'inscrit dans l'urgence de l'inactuel. Ça ne veut pas dire qu'on est hostile à la vie, qu'on est réactionnaire, ça veut dire qu'on n'est pas dans cette logique-là.

Alors, si on prétend comme les réalistes, qu'on va dire le réel, on dira tout du réel sauf l'essentiel qui n'est pas dit, qui n'est pas avec les mots, qui précède les mots. Je ne dis pas que le réel n'existe pas, au contraire, je ne pense qu'à lui, mais en même temps c'est incompatible avec l'usage qu'en font les réalistes, qui pensent que quelque chose peut être décrit, peut être retenu, peut être communiqué. On construit des fictions de quelque chose qui, dès l'origine, nous aura échappé. Mais peu importe: on est dedans au même temps, c'est là-dedans qu'on naît, c'est là-dedans qu'on aime, et c'est là-dedans qu'on va mourir. Mais, le rôle de la littérature, c'est ailleurs. La littérature, c'est une interrogation sur cela. C'est une espèce de parcours où on essaie de voir plus clair. On n'est pas dans le simulacre. Je crois qu'on pourrait définir la Nouvelle Fiction, en tout cas ma manière de créer la fiction... Je ne suis pas un créateur du simulacre; je suis un interrogateur, un commentateur, et un projecteur de mondes possibles. Des mondes possibles qui acquièrent un effet de réel du seul fait qu'ils s'organisent dans ce quasi-monde qui est le monde du livre, le monde du roman. Mais en réalité, cet effet du réel ...c'est pas le réel, c'est la magie du théâtre. La Nouvelle Fiction, c'est peut-être aussi une littérature qui dit, 'attention, ceci est de la littérature', et à la fin qui dit 'ceci était de la littérature'. On donne trois coups et à la fin on vient saluer. Alors les auteurs des 'non-books' et les réalistes font semblant qu'il y a un continuum entre la réalité et les mots écrits. Évidemment, on vend plus quand on dit 'c'est la réalité, c'est mon expérience, c'est mon témoignage, c'est votre vie'. Ça marche auprès des masses. Évidemment quand on dit 'attention! Vous allez assister à un

spectacle', et, à la fin, 'ceci était un spectacle'; quand on dit ça, alors on s'adresse à ce qu'il y a de subtil dans l'être humain, on s'adresse à sa capacité à prendre une distance par rapport à lui-même, et de trouver une vérité à l'intérieur même de cette irréalité acquise par la mise en fiction.

J.K.: La théâtralité, c'est quelque chose d'important donc pour la Nouvelle Fiction?

M.P.: Le théâtre c'est le lieu où des gens qui ne sont pas des personnages jouent des rôles de personnages, jouent une histoire qui n'est pas réelle et qui est pourtant une espèce de réalité presque hallucinante. ... Quelque chose se passe qui ne se passe jamais dans la réalité. D'abord nous sommes émus alors que nous ne sommes pas émus par la réalité. Si on commence à être ému par la réalité on va mourir d'angoisse. Nous mettons une carapace entre nous et la réalité. On fait semblant d'être ému par les malheurs mais on ne l'est pas. Alors qu'au théâtre, ça marche, on est réellement ému. Terreur et pitié, et la catharsis qui est pour une cité grecque la condition même de la bonne santé de la cité. Purgation des passions, et l'acquisition d'un peu plus de savoir pour les uns et les autres. La difficulté, c'est que quand on lit un texte, on est seul; il n'y a pas ce phénomène du public face aux acteurs. Alors est-ce qu'une telle catharsis peut fonctionner au sens où l'entendaient les anciens? En réalité, j'ai l'impression qu'un malentendu est toujours là entre l'auteur et un lecteur. ... Au fond nous nous débarrassons de notre vie en écrivant des histoires impossibles. Pour essayer de nous libérer nous-mêmes. Mais le lecteur, il fait le chemin en sens inverse. Il s'identifie au personnage (à quoi pourrait-il donc s'identifier d'autre qu'au personnage? Il ne pourrait pas s'identifier à l'auteur). C'est normal que le lecteur de *Werther* s'identifie à Werther, mais il fait un contresens parce que Goethe a écrit *Werther* pour se débarrasser de Werther qui l'empêchait de vivre. Là, il y a une sorte de malentendu fondamental. Je n'accuse personne: c'est comme ça. Je ne vois pas comment ça pourrait être autrement. On a des succès toujours pours les mauvaises raisons.

J.K.: Est-ce que vous écrivez en pensant au lecteur?

M.P.: J'écris pour pouvoir lire les livres que j'aurais voulu lire et que les autres n'avaient pas écrits. On peut dire ça en sens inverse. J'écris pour en savoir plus sur la vie. Non parce que j'ai quelque chose à dire, (je pense que je n'ai rien à dire) mais j'ai quelque chose à trouver. J'aimerais bien y voir plus clair, parce que ma vie me paraît un chaos immonde. La vie, l'existence en général, le monde, ça me paraît un chaos abominable. Et dans ce chaos je raconte des histoires ou des poèmes pour mettre de l'ordre. Pour essayer de m'entretenir dans l'idée que la vie n'est pas uniquement cette histoire pleine de bruit et de fureur racontée par un idiot. Mais je crains fort que la réalité ce soit cela.

J.K.: Chercher l'ordre: est-ce que c'est aussi cela qui vous distingue des modernistes, qui voulaient plutôt dévoiler le chaos?

M.P.: C'est peut-être une des façons d'être post-moderne, ou post-post-moderne. Mais je crois que le néant, le néant de tout, est une évidence. De toute façon, le monde est ça: une espèce de chaos impossible et on le sait bien. On fait semblant de croire qu'il y a un dieu et l'amour, mais dieu et l'amour sont des fictions qui ont été inventées pour vendre des produits. [Il rit.] Le raconteur des histoires, il donne l'idée qu'il y a un chemin dans le paysage, que d'abord le chaos s'organise en paysage et puis qu'il y a un chemin. C'est un chemin qui mène quelque part. C'est comme une ligne mélodique. Au fond c'est le même rapport qu'entre le bruit et la musique. C'est-à-dire que nous vivons dans un univers de bruit et moi je voudrais faire partie de ceux qui y mettent un peu de musique. ... Ce chaos transformé en musique.

J.K.: D'où vient cette ordonnance: de l'extérieur ou de l'intérieur?

M.P.: C'est la nature en nous. Parce que je distingue tout à fait le monde et la nature. Le monde est un chaos, mais je crois qu'il y a une pulsation, un rythme à notre vie qui est marqué dans notre biologie, notre corps, par le mouvement de la respiration, du coeur, et qu'il y a un rythme; la poésie c'est le rythme, mais le rythme, c'est la pulsation même de l'organisme. Alors je crois que les malheurs du monde viennent de ce que nous ne savons pas écouter ça, nous n'écoutons pas la nature en nous. Là, je suis complètement goethéen. ... Je crois que nous sommes le lieu où la nature prend conscience d'elle-même, et puis ça c'est mal passé. Au lieu de reconnaître qu'on n'est pas cause de soi, on voudrait être cause de soi; au lieu de reconnaître qu'on n'est qu'un lieu de passage on voudrait être un point d'arrivée. On ne laisse pas la nature en nous suivre son rythme. Cette ordonnance, ça se donne par une juxtaposition discontinue d'instants. Ça se donne par les aperçus instantanés dans la poésie. Et ça peut se donner par la fiction d'une continuité, la fiction logique. Ça se constitue dans la fiction narrative. ... La fiction, c'est l'utopie d'une vie qui aura un sens. ...

J.K.: Qu'est-ce que c'est le rapport entre la réalité et le théâtre de la fiction dont vous avez parlé?

M.P.: Cet univers-là de projections, on le fabrique avec des éléments du réel, on le fabrique avec un récit qui attire des choses empruntées au réel, détournées du réel comme aussi détournées de la littérature, d'autres récits déjà faits par d'autres.

J.K.: Est-ce que vous croyez que la littérature peut être en quelque sorte 'utile'?

M.P.: C'est la seule chose qui compte, la seule justification... Non, il y a deux justifications, qui sont d'ailleurs les plus anciennes: pour moi écrire c'est distraire et instruire. Et instruire en distrayant. Mais le but c'est d'en savoir plus, mais pas au sens de la formation, d'en savoir plus sur qu'est-ce que c'est la bonne vie, qu'est-ce que c'est la sagesse. Le seul intérêt de la littérature est de fournir une approche subtile à la sagesse, qui ne soit pas des recettes, qui soit des ouvertures d'esprits pour les personnes singulières. ... On propose au lecteur des pistes. Maintenant le lecteur en fait ce qu'il veut. Il a le droit, il le traduit dans son langage à lui-même. C'est un dialogue, où une personne est présente et l'autre est curieusement présente dans l'écrit. C'est comme un voile, l'écriture.

J.K. : Vous parlez de distraire vos lecteurs: où est l'équilibre entre le lisible et le scriptible?

M.P.: La condition *sine qua non* c'est que, à la première lecture, on sera touché. Donc il y a une littérature qui est faite pour être lue à un rythme normal et à haute voix. Les preuves de l'oral sont formidables. Vous avez des auteurs qui ne passent pas à l'oral; vous avez des auteurs qui passent à l'oral. Or, passent à l'oral des auteurs qui sont considérés comme assez difficiles et on s'aperçoit que ça passe. Inversement des auteurs qui sont faciles ne passent pas du tout à l'oral. Pour moi il y a de bons écrivains et des mauvais: c'est une façon très empirique de les partager. On écrit pour le plaisir: on n'est quand même pas masochiste. Le plaisir, pas la jouissance, mais le plaisir distancié, c'est-à-dire un plaisir qui est en même temps l'analyse du plaisir. Un plaisir qui n'est pas consommation, n'est pas dévoration. La littérature c'est une façon de prendre plaisir à la vie en inventant quelque chose qui n'est pas destiné à être consommé mais regardé, goûtée. L'art nous apprend à goûter sans détruire, sans posséder. ...Le plaisir ... c'est un dosage de musique et de silence, de rythme et d'arythmie. Un grand écrivain sait faire jouer le rythme et la rupture. Les grands écrivains sont ceux qui maîtrisent la dialectique entre l'ordre et la rupture. ...L'être et le néant sont partenaires dans un jeu.

J.K.: Depuis le nouveau roman, on a vu un assèchement du récit dans la fiction. Quels sont les éléments essentiels de la fiction pour vous?

M.P.: Tenir la balance entre l'histoire et le personnage. La littérature occidentale, et française en particulier, a fait la part trop grande au personnage. Comme si c'était quelqu'un. Le personnage est un masque, ou un demi-masque qui permet à la fois de voir de l'intérieur à l'extérieur et de l'extérieur en lui. Un outil pour redistribuer l'espace. Le personnage ne doit pas acquérir la consistance d'un être véritable. Il ne faut pas qu'on sache tout dans un personnage. Il ne faut pas qu'il soit au centre de l'histoire véritablement, mais il ne faut pas non plus qu'il en soit exclu. C'est une mesure à trouver. Et c'est vrai que l'histoire a été négligée par la soi-disant grande littérature depuis je ne

sais quand. C'est cela que disait Karen Blixen, il faut redonner du poids à l'histoire contre l'envahissement, la prolifération de la psychologie. ... Un personnage n'est pas un être réel; ce n'est non plus pure fonction, c'est ce qui joue entre les deux. En tout cas, on peut dire que dans la littérature occidentale et surtout française il y a trop de psychologie et pas assez d'intérêt pour l'histoire. À la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, heureusement qu'il y a le roman populaire qui conserve le sens du mythe, le sens du conte, le sens de tout ce qui nous excite quand nous lisons. Heureusement qu'il y a eu ces auteurs si longtemps méprisés, parce que si on regarde ce qui est considéré comme la grande littérature dans le domaine du romanesque à la fin du dix-neuvième, au début du vingtième, c'est navrant. Le roman populaire, il a été le lieu où s'est réfugiée quelque chose qui a appartenu à la littérature, qui a cessé d'appartenir à la littérature, et que nous, gens de la Nouvelle Fiction, nous espérions faire rentrer de nouveau dans la littérature. ... Nous, quand nous parlons du roman populaire, on pense à Jules Verne ... qui sont au contraire pas du tout des produits jetables, ce sont les choses qui ont la plus grande durée de vie, presque, dans la littérature du dix-neuvième siècle. Toute la soi-disant littérature immortelle est devenue illisible, et cette littérature qui ne pourrait pas être littérature de conservation, elle est complètement vivante encore. Il faudrait s'interroger pourquoi. ... Ça touche à l'inconscient, ça touche à toute cette géographie de l'imaginaire dont parlait Bachelard. C'est une variation de toute cette géographie-là.

J.K.: Vous parlez là du roman d'aventures; le roman policier vous intéresse aussi?

M.P.: On a tous écrit des espèces de polars. ... Il y a le côté jeu dans le roman policier et puis il y a le côté découvrir, des sens, de l'explication. Évidemment, la naïveté du roman policier c'est que, en fin de compte on sait, tandis qu'en réalité, on ne sait pas. Mais on peut utiliser des structures. ... Et aussi, c'est la promesse d'un ordre, le détective est celui qui met l'ordre, et donc une figure du romancier.

APPENDIX 3

ENTRETIEN AVEC GEORGES-OLIVIER CHATEAUREYNAUD

À *La Rotonde*, Paris, le 24 mars 1997

J.K.: Qu'est-ce que c'est que la Nouvelle Fiction à votre avis?

G-O.C.: Pour simplifier, je crois que c'est le retour à l'imagination. Ce qui a réuni tous les gens de la Nouvelle Fiction ...c'est appliquer l'imagination. Tous ces écrivains sont des gens qui, dans leurs oeuvres littéraires, récusent le réalisme immédiat, la quotidienneté. ... On va toujours faire appel à ... l'expérience du lecteur, ... on doit toujours convaincre, on ne convainc qu'en mettant le vraisemblable ... Mais, au-delà de cette exigence de ressemblance à l'apparence, ce sont des imaginatifs. La grande différence entre eux et le courant dominant dans la littérature immédiatement contemporaine, c'est que les autres n'inventent pas. C'est très très bien fait, mais ils n'inventent pas: ils vont chercher leurs thèmes et leur univers ... c'est le nôtre, c'est celui-là. Alors que dans la Nouvelle Fiction on récuse l'immédiateté de la réalité, et ça oblige (ce n'est pas une obligation, c'est un plaisir) à faire des détours. Bien entendu les gens de la Nouvelle Fiction, nous ne sommes pas en dehors de la réalité, parce que c'est ça qui nous intéresse tous, mais on fait des détours, c'est-à-dire, on essaie de la prendre par l'arrière, on essaie de passer par le 'backyard'. Pour définir la Nouvelle Fiction ça pourrait être ça plutôt. ... C'est comme si on ne croyait pas vraiment en la réalité ... on essaie de ne pas trop s'en éloigner, et que le lecteur accepte de nous suivre, mais sur le fond il y a un doute profond. Tous les auteurs de la Nouvelle Fiction ont ce sentiment ... mon Dieu qu'est-ce qu'on fait là. ...

J.K.: Vous avez dit dans l'entretien avec Moreau que vous vous considériez comme post-moderne. Qu'est-ce que vous entendez par ce terme-là?

G-O.C.: C'était une boutade ...ce que je voulais dire c'est que, étant post-moderne, je voulais revenir en arrière. Le modernisme en soi ne m'intéresse pas beaucoup. J'ai l'impression qu'il y a une sorte de modernité automatique, sans réflexion, qui est une perte de temps, qui est une diminution dans l'air du temps. ... Comme de la musique qui n'en est pas vraiment parce qu'il n'y a pas de notion de plaisir dedans, il n'y a pas de concordance entre les progressions mathématiques qui constituent la musique et qui produisent chez l'être humain un plaisir esthétique. Je ne parle pas volontiers de tout cela parce que je sais que j'ai l'air d'une sorte d'homme de province, mais la musique comme ça n'est pas vraiment la musique ...c'est une manière d'occuper l'espace. ... C'est un peu ça que je voulais dire avec mon histoire de post-

moderne: c'est que le modernisme, à mon avis, c'est dépassé et désormais caduque.

J.K.: Donc vous n'acceptez pas le refus des formes de la littérature du passé.

G-O.C.: Les auteurs du passé ont vu que, à travers ces formes on pourrait dégager du sens, et de l'émotion ... Et puis les auteurs contemporains ont fait la même chose aussi, beaucoup aussi à travers ces formes, qui ont bien entendu évoluées mais ne sont pas éxclues et périmées. ... Tous les arts évoluent, et tous les arts évoluent en général par la transgression, la déformation des formes. Seulement il faut que, dans cette déformation, on retrouve quelque chose de cette forme initiale, et il faut qu'on retrouve le sens et l'émotion.

J.K.: L'appellation de 'la Nouvelle Fiction' invite une comparaison avec le nouveau roman?

G-O.C.: Tout à fait. Mais je ne récuse pas du tout le nouveau roman. Petit, je crois, le récuse, et peut-être d'autres. Moi, je trouve qu'ils sont de très grands auteurs. Ce sont des gens de grand talent qui ont caché leurs voeux. ... Robbe-Grillet qui est en fait le vrai théoricien du nouveau roman, a été un homme de publicité. ... Il a travesti sa propre production et celle des autres. ...

Ce n'est pas pour ça qu'on a baptisé la Nouvelle Fiction 'la Nouvelle Fiction'. C'était par une sorte de provocation. On savait parfaitement que ça faisait peur à tout le monde, que tout le monde allait lever les bras au ciel et crier 'encore quelque chose de nouveau'. ... Il y a quelque chose de nouveau, mais cette nouveauté, c'est justement le désir constant de revenir en arrière. Donc, il y a rupture: c'est avec les gens des années 70; c'est avec la textualité, la sémiotique. ... Parce que dans les années 70, les gens des sciences humaines en France ont tant de poids et de pouvoir à la place des créateurs.

...

J.K.: On a vu dans certains nouveaux romans l'assèchement de certains éléments jadis considérés essentiels du roman, par exemple le récit, le personnage. Quels sont les éléments essentiels de la fiction pour vous?

G-O.C.: Nous acceptons les règles du jeu, presque les règles de Balzac. D'ailleurs Balzac est peut-être un mauvais exemple: il est connu un peu comme le père du roman réaliste en France ... mais en même temps c'est un important romancier fantastique. Je crois que dans nos romans et nouvelles ...nous essayons d'inventer les personnages, de les faire vivre, de leur donner cette autonomie qui va permettre ensuite au lecteur de les faire vivre dans lui-même. Les histoires sont parfois truquées, et c'est peut-être là qu'il y a la possibilité de désaccord dans le groupe, c'est sur le degré de truquage. Certains sont assez truqueurs,

les autres sont plus immédiatement sincères. ... Je ne truque pas, j'essaie vraiment de faire vivre mes personnages. C'est naïf: je veux véritablement raconter une histoire; je veux que les personnages la vivent et que les lecteurs la vivent à travers les personnages. Tout ça, c'est très classique.

J.K.: Vous ne cherchez pas des innovations techniques?

G-O.C.: Non. Je crois qu'on peut distinguer deux catégories de romanciers. Il y a des écrivains qui inventent leur langue: c'est Joyce, c'est Rabelais, c'est Céline. Et puis il y a des écrivains qui acceptent d'utiliser, en la modifiant en fonction de leurs propres besoins, une langue qui leur a été léguée et qui convient à peu près à leurs besoins. ... Le 'challenge', qui consiste à raconter une histoire dans une langue neuve, est trop fort pour moi.

APPENDIX 4

ENTRETIEN AVEC HUBERT HADDAD

Au Café de la Mairie, Place St Supplice, Paris, le 26 mars 1997.

J.K.: Qu'est-ce que c'est que la Nouvelle Fiction à votre avis?

H.H.: Au départ, la Nouvelle Fiction c'est d'abord des singularités, des individus qui travaillaient chacun de leur côté et qui étaient tous considérés comme des inclassables. Il se trouve qu'il y avait des coïncidences, des relations.

Nous, nous sommes beaucoup plus proches de la littérature de l'Amérique du Sud, le 'réalisme magique', le fantastique, mais pas le fantastique gothique, On pourrait même dire, bien que ça soit une exagération de le dire, que toute la littérature est fantastique: dans la mesure où c'est une illusion de perspective, le réalisme est une forme du fantastique, qui se regarde en lui-même. À partir du moment où il y a une relation tautologique, il devient obsolète, il disparaît, il ne restera qu'une littérature qui n'a plus de référent et qui apparaîtra comme étrange. L'important, c'est notre ordre d'homme, c'est notre homme à sa vie, sa mort, c'est la traversée des civilisations, des mythes. C'est ça qui est important et chacun d'entre nous l'envisage d'une façon différente. Il y a plusieurs personnes dans la Nouvelle Fiction qui ont une fascination pour le jeu de l'entente de la littérature, dans le rôle du lecteur, mais moi, dans mon travail, ça m'intéresse moins, je veux plutôt avoir à faire avec une vérité, avec la vérité, ce qui est vivre dans une illusion. ...

J.K.: L'appellation 'La Nouvelle Fiction' invite une comparaison avec le nouveau roman, n'est-ce pas?

H.H.: ... La Nouvelle Fiction c'est vraiment le contraire du nouveau roman: c'est le contraire mais ça le rejoint justement parce que c'est une littérature obsessionnelle, qui décide d'une vérité dans son axe de regard, telle que le réalisme halluciné de Robbe-Grillet; et puis il y a certains romans qui deviennent quasiment fantastiques dans leur décalage, comme *Dans le labyrinthe.*

J.K.: Et est-ce que vous croyez que la Nouvelle Fiction pourrait être décrite comme 'post-moderne', comme Châteaureynaud l'a suggéré, étant donné que ça implique le désir de revisiter les formes anciennes de la littérature sans nécessairement les détruire?

H.H.: Revisiter un passé qui n'a jamais été tellement visité, qui a toujours été mis un tout petit peu en doute, en question, qui est toujours inquiet, évidemment c'est ça. Mais sans chercher simplement

à reprendre les formes anciennes: il n'y a pas de réaction dans la Nouvelle Fiction, même si nous sommes parfois attirés par la tradition. ...Chacun garde son univers, et d'ailleurs chacun d'entre nous avait une oeuvre déjà écrite avant la Nouvelle Fiction. ...

J.K.: Vous avez déjà parlé un peu du fantastique, ce qui est peut-être un point de désaccord dans la Nouvelle Fiction; vous êtes de quel côté?

H.H.: Oui, je fais le fantastique, mais le fantastique c'est un terrain vaste. Et je fais avec une partie de la Nouvelle Fiction une revue qui s'appelle *Le Horla*. ... Quant au fantastique, *La Cène* par exemple, c'est un roman hyper-réaliste. Il s'agit de cet avion qui est tombé dans les Andes, je l'ai écrit il y a assez longtemps, en 1975, et pour moi, pourtant, malgré tout, il y a une dimension Nouvelle Fiction là-dedans parce que dès que cet avion tombe un groupe d'individus se retrouve tout d'un coup coupés de tout, et dans une situation absolument primitive, première. ... Ce groupe d'humains qui ont fait une espèce de régression schizophrène; ils revisitent les grands mythes humains, leurs corps dépendants, dans l'horreur de cet isolement dans les montagnes. Et à travers les faits divers vous trouvez tout. ...

J.K.: Vous vous intéressez à la mise en abyme?

H.H.: Ça permet justement ... c'est une manière extraordinaire de revisiter des oeuvres (d'une manière post-moderne!), qui nous fascinent. C'est ce que j'ai fait avec un des livres que vous avez reçus, avec *L'île au trésor*; c'est un livre culte en France comme ailleurs, le livre de la mer par excellence. ... On ne peut pas faire mieux, ...Mais je voulais l'écrire aujourd'hui, pas à l'extrémité de l'océan. Donc, j'ai imaginé avec ce marsouin de marin fidèle, de raflotter[sic] l'Hispaniola, le bateau de *L'île au Trésor*, qui devient un décor de cinéma avec des comédiens, et des vieux loups de mer; et un cargo qui suit ce magnifique décor en flottant, jusqu'au moment où il y a une courrouce[sic] tempête et vous les voyez sans armes dans la tempête. ... On se retrouve dans les conditions de la marine à voiles au dix-septième siècle. Vraiment, là c'est de la mise en abyme.

...

Il n'y a pas *une* réalité, il n'y a pas *un* réel: à partir du moment où la vérité qui nous est présentée est peu crédible ou se pose comme unique ... dès qu'on rentre dans un sujet il y aura une dimension fantastique parce qu'il y aura un doute sur la réalité donnée et le réel, il y aura toujours un doute.

J.K.: Est-ce qu'il s'agit d'hésitation de la part du lecteur, comme suggère Todorov dans sa théorie du fantastique?

H.H.: Pour nous, en tout cas pour moi, il n'y a pas d'hésitation, car la réalité est douteuse, mais elle est essentiellement tronquée. ... Donc, il n'y pas un doute, il y a une certitude que la réalité est donnée. Celle qui fait référence, et celle qui est cet espace, l'hallucination du réel ... est une dimension à explorer, dangereusement dans la vie, et de façon plus profonde dans la littérature.

J.K. : Qu'est que c'est que ce terrain ou réservoir de l'imaginaire dont vous parlez dans le livre de Moreau?

H.H.: C'est infini. ... Tout le monde a cette capacité, pas seulement les créateurs, tout le monde. J'en suis entièrement persuadé. ... Sauf, évidemment, qu'il y a des limitations données pour des raisons circonstantielles. Mais ça peut être tourné: il y a une possibilité d'imagination, de sujet, par exemple, pour un roman infini, et tous... chacun a ce pouvoir en lui... d'où vient cette tristesse, cette mélancolie de l'écrivain qui doit se restreindre et qui n'écrira jamais tous les livres. ... On est tous portés à l'imagination, par exemple, comment est-ce qu'on a construit un truc comme ça, cette église, cathédrale là? [Il indique Saint Supplice du doigt.] C'est de l'imaginaire, de l'imagination humaine. Toutes les civilisations sont portées par ces formes-là, et on traverse tout ça avec un sentiment puéril comme si on ne participait pas à la naissance d'une civilisation. On est tous à la naissance de tout.

J.K.: Vous ne fuyez pas dans l'imaginaire, puisque le réel c'est créé par l'imagination. Ça serait donc injuste de caractériser la Nouvelle Fiction comme simple littérature d'évasion?

H.H.: L'évasion est partout. Le divertissement, je le vois dans le sérieux, dans le normatif, dans la crise d'identité illusoire. Peut-être aussi dans la Nouvelle Fiction il y a ça, le peu de crédibilité de l'identité, il n'y a pas d'identité. L'identité c'est une construction, c'est hallucinatoire. Il y a une sorte d'assujettissement de chacun à l'abstrait, d'une certaine façon, qui s'est manifesté objectivement dans le monde. Il n'y a pas d'identité. Il y a une infinité d'identité de chacun. C'est-à-dire que cette affinité d'identité se fonde sur l'abîme, sur l'absence; il y a un abîme originel.

J.K.: Puisqu'il ne s'agit pas d'une simple évasion, est-ce que vous vous considérez en quelque sorte comme écrivain engagé?

H.H.: Il y a dans l'engagement ...c'est un mot qui ne convient pas du tout à ce que je fais. Chercher la vérité, pour moi, c'est porter des témoignages. Évidemment, la vérité n'a rien à voir avec ce qu'on peut appeler la vérité quand on appartient à une religion ou à un parti politique. ...Je cherche la compréhension de tous ces arbitres, à travers la littérature et la poésie. ... Alors, l'engagement, c'est très problématique en France: c'était la littérature qui référait à la littérature

romanesque de Sartre. Tout ce qui est engagé chez lui tombe maintenant dans les ineptes. Ce qui reste est là où il a oublié d'être engagé mais où il a été complètement lui-même. Il reste *Les Mots, La Nausée,* et quelques textes comme ça. Et bien sûr on n'est pas comme ça. Mais pour nous l'engagement est dans la passion de cette recherche. ... Quand j'avais dix-sept ans, j'ai fait une revue que j'allais vendre et crier dans les rues avant 68, qui était sous-titrée 'Organe Virtuel de l'Art engagé pour l'Art'. On était des gamins. Mais il y a engagement: c'est la liberté... à tout moment, ce qui est en danger, c'est la liberté. Dès qu'il y a un rassemblement, dès qu'il y a intrigue, dès qu'il y a manifeste, même quand on se bat pour la liberté il y aura danger pour la liberté. Donc, là, on est toujours en état d'éveil. Et pour changer il faut que chacun visite sa liberté, la liberté, ce sentiment-là.

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The following bibliography includes the works of the three most recent members of the movement, Francis Berthelot, Jean Claude Bologne and Sylvain Jouty, who have only become fully a part of the *Nouvelle Fiction* since the publication of the collective work, *Demain, les momies!*, under the 'Nouvelle Fiction' imprint at Le Rocher, in 1996, although they had already collaborated with the original group in 1994 on a similar project, *Dernières nouvelles de King Kong*. Moreau, acknowledged by all as the catalyst for the group, although a critic by profession, has been stimulated by the association he brought about and has now published a collection of his own short stories.

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