Conférence

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CONFÉRENCE

Claude SIMON

Texte présenté et traduit par Lois OPPENHEIM¹

« Pourquoi un colloque sur le Nouveau Roman? Pourquoi en ce moment? Et pourquoi à New York University? » Ce sont là trois questions posées par Tom Bishop, Florence Lacaze Gould Professor of French Literature à NYU, lors du colloque « Three Decades of the French New Novel », organisé par Tom Bishop en 1982 et publié quatre ans plus tard sous le même titre par The University of Illinois Press. J'ai eu le plaisir d'éditer ce livre où les questions de Bishop introduisaient ses remarques préliminaires.

Plus de trois décennies de Nouveau Roman s'étaient écoulées avant cette rétrospective; plus de trois décennies ont maintenant passé depuis la publication du livre. Et les réponses restent encore intéressantes de nos jours : le Nouveau Roman a constitué une rupture radicale avec la tradition romanesque; les quatre romanciers français qui participaient au colloque venaient chacun de publier une œuvre de fiction, quatre romans très bien reçus par la presse ainsi que par le grand public, à en juger par les ventes; et le Centre de civilisation et culture française à NYU, dirigé à l'époque par Bishop, entretenait depuis un certain nombre d'années une relation étroite avec le Nouveau Roman. Professeurs et

1. Professor of French and Chair, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Montclair State University. La conférence, dans cette même traduction, a été initialement publiée, sans titre, dans L. Oppenheim (dir.), *Three Decades of the French New Novel*, Urbana et Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1986, p. 71-86. Elle avait paru un an auparavant dans une traduction d'A. C. Pugh sous le titre « Reflections on the Novel : Claude Simon's Address to the Colloquium on the New Novel, New York University, 1982 », dans *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Elmwood Park, Ill.), vol. 5, n° 1, 1985, p. 15-23. Les *Cahiers Claude Simon* remercient Lois Oppenheim et Mireille Calle-Gruber, ayant droit moral pour l'œuvre, d'en avoir permis la réédition. Sur les raisons de la publication de la conférence en anglais, voir l'avant-propos, p. 15, n. 20. Voir également, dans ce numéro, la « Note supplémentaire d'Anthony C. Pugh », p. 131-133.

étudiants s'intéressaient énormément à cette école littéraire qui n'en était pas une, et ces quatre Nouveaux Romanciers – Claude Simon, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, et Robert Pinget – venaient assez régulièrement enseigner et/ou intervenir à NYU.

Claude Simon, pour ne citer que lui, était considéré par Bishop comme un des plus grands écrivains de la littérature du XX^e siècle (ce que le Prix Nobel décerné à Simon allait bientôt confirmer) et Bishop tenait beaucoup à ce qu'il prenne part au colloque. Dans un contexte où la participation des quatre romanciers témoignait d'un besoin de se défendre contre les accusations de motivation stratégique, contre les accusations d'intentions théoriques qui feraient tabula rasa du réalisme balzacien, c'était en effet Simon qui allait le plus loin en niant tout pensée conjecturale sur le roman en général. Comme on le verra dans ce qui suit, la contribution de Simon, son texte et sa participation à la table ronde, affirment surtout l'importance de l'expérimentation et de la créativité pure et simple, plutôt qu'une critique de quelque institution littéraire. En effet, en récusant devant son auditoire tout point de départ théorique ou révolutionnaire à ses écrits, il s'est montré non seulement modeste et humble, mais extrêmement perspicace en ce qui concerne l'interrogation fondamentale propre à toute forme d'expression esthétique, extrêmement pénétrant en ce qui concerne la relation de ses écrits (et du Nouveau Roman en général) à notre modernité (car chaque période a la sienne, nous rappelle-t-il) et à l'historicité elle-même...

*

Before I begin, I would like to ask that you excuse me if the lecture which I am going to give lacks a certain rigor and takes in a bit of everything. For reasons beyond my control (as they say), I learned that I would be allowed to come here only twelve days before my departure. This left me very little time to try to set in some order the notes I had taken while thinking about this colloquium and to compose in haste a text which would have profited from being more concentrated. But this was not my fault.

And, as a preamble, I must warn those who have come to listen to me that they are facing a simple, self-taught writer whose knowledge of literature does not surpass the level of amateurism. The majority of you, whether professors, essayists, or students, certainly know much more than I about the novel, theater, or poetry, as well as literary theory, semiology, or linguistics, with regard to which I often wonder, moreover, whether, contrary to what

Barthes believed, this was not a poisoned gift that Roman Jakobson granted to literature, as were, in other respects, sociology and psychoanalysis by others.

But, after all, perhaps art is doomed to sail periodically among the dreadful reefs of scientism. For example, at the end of the last century, a painter whose name would otherwise have been long forgotten, Paul Serusier, elaborated a “*théorie des complémentaires*”, as seductive as it was inoperative in practice. And, over these last few years, we have seen writers wear themselves out building, carefully, so as not to be outdone, texts which rest completely on some dreary series of anagrammatical acrobatics more or less inspired either by Saussure or a famous guru of psychoanalysis. It is not that I want to throw out the baby with the bath water but that, just as Lenin revealed a “*maladie infantile*” [an infantile disease] of communism (which still seems to perpetuate itself), there exists a chronic disease of art and literature—and I do not know whether it is infantile or senile—which scientists of all persuasions devote themselves with constancy not to curing, but to aggravating.

As far as I am concerned, my cultural experience (if I may use this expression) is that of a dilettante. When I was young, I was made to study mathematics (which, alas, I have long forgotten!) and I do not even have my degree in philosophy. The little that I know was acquired by reading, traveling, visiting museums, and attending concerts, always in a rather disconnected way, without ever determining to study a subject in depth and obeying only the rules of pleasure. For example, it took my being a prisoner (and I think that one of the more fortunate aspects of my existence is that I lived the first part of it in a rather troubled Europe which enabled me—as, by force of circumstances, I was involved in certain events—to learn, I believe, something other than can be found in books). It took being a prisoner for me to read Kant and Spinoza, not because I chose to, but because that was what fell into my hands. The experience I had at that time, moreover, was instructive in two ways: first, I discovered that, in a space surrounded by barbed wire where it was strictly prohibited to own whatever was not absolutely necessary for the most primitive survival, it was possible to find almost everything, from women’s garters to *Capital*, including obscene postcards and the *Acts of the Apostles*. Second, that if Kant and Spinoza were not at all practically or morally useful to a starving man (they did not in any way help me to accept my misery), those books offered, nevertheless, even to the layman in philosophy that I am, this possibility for a gratuitous—and by this very gratuitousness, irreplaceable—excitement which is provided, as by music or painting, by reading.

So this was my education or, if you prefer, my cultural “baggage”, constituted mainly of deficits and contained in this kind of sieve which is my mind, a mind retaining here and there only scraps of knowledge, at least consciously, for, after all, it is possible that Kant and Spinoza, swallowed, like mathematics, almost forcibly (and I do not have a very clear remembrance of them either), did contribute without my awareness to shaping it, as did (at least negatively) all the books which I have never wanted to reopen: for example, *La Princesse de Clèves*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, *Lucien Leuwen*, as well as those I could never finish because they were too boring, whether *La Cousine Bette* or *L'Éducation sentimentale*. I must confess, most nineteenth-century French novels and their twentieth-century epigones, with their characters of a too foreseeable, too rational fate (as opposed, for example, to those of Dostoevsky), remind me of those bulls so appreciated by matadors called, in the slang of the corridas, “ferrocarrils”, which means “set on rails” because they rush straight, and without warning, for the lure. (By the way, and since I have just mentioned Dostoevsky, I must say how surprised I am that each time I hear people speaking of the so-called traditional novel, they refer inevitably to Balzac, Stendhal, or Zola, forgetting, as though he had not existed, one of the three or four greatest writers in the history of literature and to whom, precisely, we owe fiction which is the contrary of those univocal novels so abundantly produced by the French nineteenth century and which give of the world this far from reassuring—and even eminently frightening—image mentioned yesterday by Robbe-Grillet).

To come back to myself, if I am asked the famous question “Why do you write?”, I must confess to my great shame that I have never had, like some others, even the least ambitious motivations: it has never occurred to me (and I have never wondered about it) that I should write to fight against the established order or to criticize it. If I have written (and still write), it is very prosaically, and maybe very selfishly, because I was impelled (as everyone is in his field, I think) by a certain need of “doing”. If I am asked why I “have done” in literature rather than anywhere else, and if I want to be sincere, I will answer “because I wasn’t capable of anything else”.

When I was young, I was rather lazy and, at the same time, like all young people, rather romantic (which, after careful thought, may be a form of laziness). I was led by these two shortcomings to throwing myself into various experiences like painting or, for a while, revolutionary action which my

incurable dilettantish mind rather quickly caused me to abandon and which, nevertheless, still causes me all kinds of problems each time I want to come to this country.

There remained the possibility of writing, which I thought to be easier than painting or revolution and, naturally, of writing what I believe required the least specialization or discipline: this kind of carry-all which is the novel, a genre whose rules (if there are any!) are not well defined and in which one thinks, at the beginning, that one can do and put down just about anything.

Unfortunately, I was not aware that here, too, I lacked the gift of seriousness which enables one to produce books likely to be of interest. Naively, I thought that in once again choosing (as I had for my readings) mere pleasure as a rule, this pleasure would be communicative and that I would be able to pass on a part of it to those reading my books. In spite of my various experiences as a revolutionary and as an amateur warrior (for war as I practiced it—in open country, on horseback, and armed with a saber, complete with musketoon, against planes and armored cars—though awfully deadly, it bordered on caricature), I did not yet know that the general public (of which every writer dreams) is tremendously “self-interested” (as we say of those game of cards or dice where money is involved). This is to say that the kind of pleasure, or rather of “profit”, that it expects from a novel is either that of an escape—where one forgets oneself for a few hours to identify with an exemplary hero or heroine comparable to some archetype (either good or evil)—or that of a teaching, of a bearing of knowledge which would propose a solution to the problems with which it is preoccupied—whether problems of social or love relations, the meaning of life or that of History, even without a capital letter— or, as, for example, in a detective story when the name of the murderer is revealed.

Given this, I soon had to resign myself to admitting that in this field, as well, I would never be a true professional. To tell the truth, as indicative of the profits my books have brought me over thirty years, I think that they must be more or less equal to those of an unemployed worker. Once more lacking the erudition and the skills which would have allowed me to earn my living by publishing articles or teaching in universities (but teaching what?), I am wondering how, if I had not been lucky enough to inherit a small fortune, I would have managed to provide myself with clothes, a place to live, or even very simply food, and to maintain myself in this marginal situation thanks to

which I can, without conceding to any considerations of profit or opportunity, write and say whatever I think good.

By some miracle (or maybe by some misunderstanding), I was lucky, in spite of the limited circulation of my books, to find in my life a first, then a second, and finally a third publisher, one who happened to also be that of other writers whose books, except Samuel Beckett's, I had never read and among whom, some, however, assured me (maybe once more by misunderstanding) that my work was moving in the same direction as theirs. That was extremely kind of them and flattering to me. Though, I must confess, not very clear to me when I became familiar with their works, except that for them, as for me, the time of a certain form, an even unbearable form, of novel seemed outdated and that, like me, they were trying to do "something else".

Unlike my new friends, however (and as it could be detected in the very contradictory statements made by each of us at a meeting about ten years ago which united us all under the firm rule of a severe schoolmaster), I had never theoretically thought either about the problems which were posed, or about the way to solve them. I was proceeding by trial and error and, as a consequence, I had the impression that I was like a kind of M. Jourdain to whom his grammar teacher explains that he is speaking prose without knowing it. For instance, I read in the papers² that in the course of another, more recent colloquium, our friend Robbe-Grillet had drawn the conclusion that he and Nathalie Sarraute were the spiritual inheritors of Jean-Paul Sartre, that which he confirmed yesterday evening to the approval, moreover, of Michel Rybalka. Of course, I do not know the laws of genetics, but I must again confess that, despite careful self-examination, I discern nothing in myself which would allow me to claim this strange paternity —unless, in this matter as well, I am still like M. Jourdain.

Because as far as I am concerned, whether it be thirty years ago or now, I was working, and am still working, in a completely empirical way, taking from the start what suited me and rejecting what did not suit me in one or another of the writers whom I liked to read, like Dostoevsky, Conrad (and, by the way, I am surprised that his amazing preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* seems to have been forgotten), Joyce, Proust, and Faulkner. I was moving (and am still moving) forward rather gropingly, without ever knowing when I start a text what it will turn out to be (in the last analysis, it is always

2. *Le Monde*, January 22, 1982.

very different from the original project which is so deeply modified in the process that generally very little remains of it), and I know even less what the text “should be” in order to obey certain canons.

Finally, I must add that I am somewhat afraid that it is once more because of a misunderstanding that I am here today, somewhat embarrassed and disturbed at having crossed the entire Atlantic Ocean to, ultimately, perhaps disappoint those who have invited me, for I have little more to formulate than a few amateurish reflections made after the fact about my works, accompanied by a few very unimaginative remarks.

What this means is that I feel at ease to request of those listening to me that they do not in any way consider the remainder of my talk as a magisterial lesson on the novel, and that I will gratefully welcome objections and perhaps even observations revealing my errors. That would be for me an opportunity to learn and enrich myself. In advance, therefore, I thank you.

And as I have just spoken of misunderstandings, perhaps it would be best to start with those revealed by certain questions asked of me either during interviews or privately a little more than a year ago when my last novel, *Les Géorgiques*, was published. These show rather well how most readers continue, still today, to conceive of and receive the novel, fiction, and, more generally, literary texts.

Two things in particular struck me: First, that many of my interlocutors insisted on the fact that the characters of that novel had, they claimed, “existed”, that they were “real” characters (some critics even believed that they could identify them). Second (and this was said with no malevolent intention), that there were (still in that novel) phenomena of “fragmentation” and “discontinuity”, phenomena which, according to some, would be characteristic of “modernity” in the sense that (to quote word for word one of my interviewers) “*l’écriture y contrecarre sans cesse la poussée narrative*” [The writing unceasingly works against the narrative thrust]. This thinking is typical, I believe, of a kind of uncertainty, and even bewilderment, the result of the conflict between, on the one hand, old reading habits and, on the other, certain maximalist theories which, more or less harebrained and smelling of terrorism, were made fashionable over these last few years.

To this kind of observation, I am instinctively tempted to reply: “narration” *of what?* “fragmentation and discontinuity” *of what?*

I will not launch into a critical analysis here of the “realistic” novel such as it was throughout the nineteenth century in France and such as it continues to be today in serving for many as a model. But, in a few words, what strikes me in this kind of novel (and probably what bores me so) is less that “non-conformist” hero’s expulsion from the established order that Robbe-Grillet spoke about yesterday than its pedagogical and documentary pretensions. And what strikes me as well is that, following in the wake of the fable, the parable, the philosophical tale, and conceived as a demonstration of some moralizing thesis, whether in the social or psychic domain (“*un enseignement social*” [a social teaching], Balzac used to say), this kind of novel displays precisely all the characteristics of fragmentation and discontinuity.

Contrary to its pretension of describing the “real”, it is obvious that, unable materially to say everything, the realistic novel is limited to showing the successive fragments of the story whose discontinuity is masked from the reader’s eyes only by the author’s assurance that he is relating only the “essential”. Others have maliciously stressed all that was arbitrary and questionable in this notion of “essential”. Others, as well, indicating on two parallel ordinates so-called referential time (that of the clock) and so-called literal time (that of the text), have easily shown how, in the latter, the former is subjugated to constant processes of dilation (when the text lingers over one event or one description), alternating with overwhelming compressions (when the text skims over, merely mentioning them, events considered “minor”). The text is even sometimes nullified (when the author decides, as he sometimes writes, that for one hour, one day, or several, nothing “important” has happened) or even inverted, through the process of looking back, of flashbacks re-counting what, to use the expression, happened elsewhere “in the meanwhile”.

The principle which governs the composition of this sort of novel, where the author hides behind a false objectivity (hence the most biting condemnation of realism which is this phrase of Baudelaire: “*La nature comme si je n’étais pas là pour la dire*” [Nature as if I were not there to tell it]), the principle which governs the succession of events recounted in the text is that of *causality*, a linking of causes and effects leading the characters and the reader to that famous denouement considered by Emile Faguet as the “*couronnement logique*” [logical culmination] of the novel, with the characters, therefore, being narrowly *determined*. Thus another critic, Henri Martineau, could claim that when he started writing *Le Rouge et le Noir* [*The Red and the Black*], Stendhal already knew how Julien Sorel was “to end up”, which, by the way,

is true since we know that Stendhal wrote this novel (as Flaubert did *Madame Bovary*) from a news item read in a local paper. This also demonstrates that this kind of novel has the status of a fable: it is not because a wolf devours a lamb that “*la raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure*” [the reason of the strongest is always the best] but, on the contrary, it is to demonstrate this axiom that the fabulist shaped a little fiction ending with an allegorical wolf devouring a no less allegorical lamb. In the same way, to justify the revolver shot fired by Julien Sorel at Madame de Rênal or Emma’s arsenic suicide, Stendhal and Flaubert had first to fill hundreds of pages with psychosociological explanations of what led their hero and heroine to these acts.

Fortunately (and we must hasten to say it), between these intentions more or less flaunted by these authors and what they really gave us to read, there exists, for the salvation of literature, something more which in no way competes with these laborious “teachings” and in which resides, precisely, their respective geniuses, even if they would have perhaps considered this something to be “inessential”. (And I say “perhaps”, for when reading the numerous “scenarios” written by Flaubert in planning for *Madame Bovary*, it appears that they are precisely and *essentially* composed of notations of fragrances, colors, sounds, and sensations of any kind. So much so that one is led to wonder if, eighty years prior to a claim put forth by Tynianov, and despite the famous caricature showing him brandishing at the tip of a scalpel Emma’s bleeding heart, Flaubert did not consider his *fable* to be mainly the *pretext* for an accumulation of descriptions.)

To come to “modernity” (or rather to our modernity, for each period has its own, and there is no great writer, no great painter, no great musician who is not an innovator), which unquestionably marks an important break (undoubtedly one of the most spectacular since Giotto’s break with Byzantine hieratism), it dates, in my opinion, from the end of the last century and the beginning of the one in which we live.

I know that it is always perilous to venture comparisons and parallels between different arts, and I am no more a specialist in the history of painting than in literature, but it appears to me, though I may be wrong, that the decisive break was initiated not by writers but by painters who overtly (and I say “overtly” because the “subject” in painting had long been no more than an alibi) called into question the principle (or rather the dogma) of realism and proclaimed that their work aimed at rendering images no longer of the

“real” world, but only (that which is entirely different) of the *impressions* they received from it. In other words, from then on, the concern was no longer with “la nature comme si je n’étais pas là pour la dire” [nature as though I were not there to relate it], but with the world as seen through me, this partial, distorted, and personal vision that I have of it.

It was on this horizon that Cézanne appeared. It was he who challenged the word “impression”, preferring that of “sensation”. “We *know*,” Jakobson said, but we do not *see*.” And it was in seeking to rid himself of this ready-made knowledge that comes between our true sensation and our mind that Cézanne managed, at the very least, to completely modify painting.

To explain myself, I will say that in Cézanne’s contribution, I am particularly struck by two things. On the one hand, he left behind apparently unfinished paintings (I say “apparently” because the question of the “finish” of a work, whether it be painted or written, is, in itself, an entire problem deserving reflection). Cézanne left us apparently unfinished paintings where only the “strong points” of the motif are accounted for, which is to say that here and there, on the virgin and neutral surface of the canvas, there exist only a few lines and a few spots between which the spectator’s eye is invited to grasp “connections” by confronting them without passing through any intermediary filler.

On the other hand, always careful to grasp his feelings with precision, he noticed that “*les plans se chevauchent*” [the planes overlap] and even, as he was to say to Joachim Gasquet, that “*les objets se pénètrent entre eux*” [objects penetrate each other], that which is characteristic, if we think about it, of our way of perceiving the visible world, with a kind of imprecision or indistinction, and our perception of the entire world (shapes, colors, smells, sounds, and so on) as well —as much in the present as in our memory where, unceasingly, memories, images, and emotions veer into one another, superimpose on, associate with, and interpenetrate one another.

And it is from there (which is to say where we really apprehend things only by discontinuous fragments that overlap and combine *to form, on the other hand, an emotive or sensorial continuity in our minds*) that the Cubists were led, in a first step, to practice what was called “analytic Cubism”. This, following Cézanne’s example, arranged on a neutral background a few lines (horizontal or oblique) and a few spots —or rather a few modulations. In a second step, in 1913, came “synthetic Cubism”, which, without any solution then of continuity, and with no other principle than their qualitative affini-

ties (shapes, colors, rhythms), had fragments of objects, imagined or even sometimes “real”, like sheets of newspaper, pieces of tapestry, of “*faux-bois*”, and so on, agglutinate, interfere, and intermingle with each other in the way that we really perceive them. Then later, after the collages and sculptures of Picasso, artists like Kurt Schwitters, Louise Nevelson, or Robert Rauschenberg conceived vast compositions or assemblages executed with the help of various materials: boards, tarred paper, debris from pieces of furniture or machines, the pouring of raw paint, and so on. To the extent that, if the word were not so devaluated today, one could call it a true realism in the dual sense that from a meditation on the at once both chaotic and very coherent nature of our perception and our memory, objects are thereby effected which seek their reality only within themselves.

If I had to sum up with an incisive and necessarily simplifying formula the change which thus occurred, I would venture that over the principle of the establishment of relations justified by *causality* and necessitating a kind of totalizing (and illusory as well) inventory, the principle of the establishment of above all *qualitative* relations took precedence.

If I have insisted on this date 1913 in a way which some might find a bit pedantic, it is that, at the same moment, Proust and (though to a lesser extent) Joyce (for *Ulysses* was still considered to be full of more or less esoteric significations) undertook to construct texts in which considerations of quality would have priority over the, succession or, if you prefer, the confrontation of the elements.

That the streams of cause and effect linking the different episodes of a story intended to show the excellence of some moral or of some thesis could seem as arbitrary and questionable as that which, in this new perspective, associates two events of a text with no demonstrative pretension seems to be to me irrefutable. I may still think, despite what Balzac wanted to have me believe, that Cesar Birotteau could just as well, despite his honesty, have never again risen from his ruin. I may still think that it is because of a series of very strange coincidences that Fabrice del Dongo commits the murder which causes him so many troubles and reveals to us the mechanisms and intrigues of power. I may remain skeptical (if not amazed) when I read in Faulkner’s plan for a preface to *The Sound and the Fury* that

Si on avait envoyé les enfants passer l'après-midi dans le pré pour qu'ils ne restent pas à la maison [...] c'était afin que les trois frères et les petits noirs puissent lever les yeux vers le fond souillé de la culotte de Caddy grimpée dans l'arbre.

[If the children were sent off to spend the afternoon in the meadow so that they would not remain at home [...] it was in order that the three brothers and the little blacks could have a look at the soiled panties of Caddy perched in the tree³.]

On the other hand, however, I cannot question the fact that the unevenness of a cobblestone associates the courtyard of the Guermantes Hotel with two paving-stones of Saint Marc's Baptistry. I cannot question, so obvious it seems to me, that the juicy flavor of the fruit which she plans to buy at the market leads Molly Bloom to an erotic daydream. Neither can I question that the word "Caddy" shouted by the golf players makes Benjy shriek with pain. It appears to me that, on this basis, on this principle, Proust, Joyce, and Faulkner built constructions of which the solidity, the reliability, and the *continuity* seem much more determinative, if we want to use this word, than the chance meeting of two characters or of two animals in a fable. These other meetings, while they are dictated by associations of impressions or images, are also (like the strokes of the Impressionists) inseparable from the material (which is to say the language that, as has rightly been said, "*parle avant nous*" [speaks before us]), speaks by what is called its "*figures*", its tropes (metaphors, metonyms), and by its very dynamics (sometimes only phonetic effects), which itself provokes rapprochements, associations, and *transports*. (Must we be reminded that the word μεταφορά is, in Greece, written on trucks?)

It seems that there exist two excesses (or, if you prefer, two maximalisms, two terrorisms) whose effects are equally negative. In the same way that Valéry used to say that the world was threatened by two dangers, order and disorder, language could be said to be threatened by two dangers as well: on the one hand, that of being considered only as a vehicle of meaning and, on the other hand, that of being considered only as a structure, for it is always *simultaneously* both. It is really in these two potentialities and their perpetual interference that there appears to dwell this wonderful ambiguity which provides language with so many tremendous powers.

To those, therefore, who claim to bend it only to the requirements of expression and representation, we can answer with Lacan (and also already with Proust: let us not forget that the last part of *Du Côté de chez Swann*

3. W. Faulkner, *Œuvres romanesques*, éd. Michel Grenet, Gallimard, coll. "La Pléiade", vol. 1, n.d., n.p. Translators' note : this quotation was retranslated into English by us.

[*Swann's Way*] is entitled *Noms de pays : le nom* [*Place-Names: The Name*]) that the word is not only a “sign”, but “a network of significations”. As I wrote in my preface to *Orion Aveugle*, a “*carrefour de sens*” [a crossroad of meanings], which is to say that, like the elements of the Cubist painting or “assemblages”, the word is, *in itself*, a reality. While the word, of course, evokes the image or the concept of the object which it designates, it simultaneously calls up numerous other concepts, other images—those of objects sometimes very far away in the time of clocks and the measurable space of the “real” object and with which it is soon linked—to the extent that, *at the moment of writing*, a multitude of propositions are provided. Taken into consideration, these propositions will considerably distort the author’s first intention to the point where we can say that he who works language is at the same time worked by it, that which naturally implies a deflection in the meaning which is therefore not “expressed” but, in accordance with the accepted terminology, *produced*.

As for the hard and fast terrorists of the other side who fearfully resist any notion of meaning or of “referent”, their declarations always remind me of this little apologue of an art critic who remarked that when the Impressionists were first starting, when they were not yet established and when the public was seeing in their painting only “*barbouillages informes*” [shapeless daubs], their, at that time, rare defenders would say to people (in front of Monet’s *Nymphéas* [*Water Lilies*], for example): “Stand back, stand back, and you will see that it depicts something!” A few years ago, at the time when the Tachists were fashionable, their defenders, seeking to justify them by finding respectable ancestors for them, would bring people before these same *Nymphéas* saying, “Come closer, come closer, and you will see that it does not depict anything!”

I was asked to speak specifically here of my last novel, *Les Géorgiques*, and I have but a little time left, though in fact I have really done nothing else for more than a half an hour now. It is naive to believe that, as I heard an essayist say, one whom I nevertheless esteem (this took place at a colloquium on Proust organized by New York University at the École normale supérieure in Paris), by who knows what perversity, a novelist fragments a totality to reassemble its pieces according to his fancy. As I have already said, this kind of suspicion would be accurately based only on an examining of the methods used by the so-called realistic novelists.

As with each plan I have had for a novel, that of *Les Géorgiques* was, at the beginning, very vague. I am, as I have also already said, neither a philosopher (“*Heureusement pour vous !*” [Fortunately for you!], Merleau-Ponty once said to me, “*Si vous l’étiez, vous seriez bien incapable d’écrire vos romans !*” [If you were, you would certainly be incapable of writing your novels!]), a moralist, or a believer. That is why I have nothing special to reveal about the great questions which are posed by mankind, like sex, the meaning of History, of life, evil or good. Naturally, like everyone else, and because I have in my life been involved in some rather tumultuous events, I have, of course, a few ideas concerning these things, but, in fact, they are too vague and sometimes too contradictory for me to consider them worth publishing.

The question which I had to answer was not “What have I to say”, but rather “What could I *do*” with a slew of old papers left by one of my ancestors who had been a member of the Convention, and then a general during the French Revolution and during the First Empire. And here we come to the question of the “referent” which, apropos of me, seemed so disturbing to my friend Robbe-Grillet at the Cerisy colloquium. As I am no more a historian than a philosopher, I have no ambition to write the life of this character by going to various ministries and searching through official archives for documents which would have allowed me to complete my information. Despite the abundance of papers which had come into my possession (letters, memoirs, travel accounts, drafts of speeches, and numerous military orders), huge gaps or, if you prefer, huge “black holes” were left in the history of that life.

Moreover, in spite of these holes, the mass of images which was conjured up in me by these documents was sufficient enough to constitute a stimulant. This made me want, without searching further, to do “something” with them, and with others, other images of war, other images of revolution, which I was preserving from my personal experience.

For, while there was actually a *discontinuity* in the fragments of information which I possessed, as there is in all those which we receive from the world surrounding us at every moment, I also perceived an extraordinary thematic *continuity*. (Thematics is nowadays condemned by a certain university fashion, but this does not matter...) Thus I found a disturbing relationship, one so close that at moments time seemed abolished, between events which had taken place some hundred years earlier and those which I had witnessed in Barcelona in 1936 or in Belgium in 1940, or even the account which George Orwell rendered of his experience in Spain, an account which is in

itself a perfect model, from its very first page, of an account by more or less voluntary omissions, and thus itself an account full of holes.

What I tried to do, therefore, was gather all this scattered material into a composition which would owe its coherence to those principles of quality which I mentioned earlier, by interweaving themes like those of a fugue, developing variations, and so on. I have related elsewhere how my work reminds me of the title of the first lesson of the study of Advanced Mathematics which is called “Arrangements, Permutations, Combinations”, and I cannot explain why I have the feeling that, just as there exist syntactic laws governing the organization and the coherence of a sentence into main, relative, and subordinate clauses, there exists as well, though not codified, an internal logic of language which requires a syntax of the text in its entirety, from the first to the last line, and from which, if one manages to follow those hidden laws, “something” will tell *itself* for, were this not so, all discourse would be nothing but conventional chatter. “Il en va du langage comme des formules mathématiques” [Language is comparable to mathematic formulas], Novalis wrote almost two centuries ago: “(membres de la nature) elles constituent un monde en soi, pour elles seules; elles jouent entre elles exclusivement, n’expriment rien, si ce n’est leur propre nature merveilleuse, ce qui justement fait qu’elles sont si expressives, que justement en elles se reflète le jeu étrange des rapports entre les choses” [(members of nature) they constitute a world in itself, for them alone; they play among themselves exclusively, express nothing but their own wonderful nature, which is precisely the reason why they are so expressive, why precisely the strange interplay of the relations between things is reflected in them].

And actually, from these discontinuous fragments of history, thus organized and interrelated in a way which I thought proper to forming a continuity, from this *composition* there emerges for me no “message”, no “moral”, no “fatality” which, as has pompously been said, “*introduirait la tragédie grecque dans le roman*” [would introduce Greek tragedy into the novel]. Neither does there emerge any mockery: in a word, there is no kind of “teaching” beyond the single acknowledgment of these thematic or simply emotive “correspondences”.

Nothing, moreover, allowed me to arrange these events in a progression leading to a denouement which would have constituted what Faguet called a “couronnement logique” [logical culmination]. After having confronted all the dangers which a man can face during his lifetime, General L.S.M. dies very prosaically by his hearth, “O”, for his part, escapes only by chance from the agents of the Guépéou who have pitilessly hunted him down in Barcelona

like his companions of the P.O.U.M., and the General's great-grandson gets away without a scratch from the slaughter to which the French generals had sent the calvary in 1940.

Need I point out that in speaking of these various characters I have just used the *present tense*? Must I emphasize after all that I have just said that they existed (that they were actually alive) only to the extent that the text was writing itself, and that they were continually modified by the addition, the suppression, or the moving of a paragraph or of a sentence? That, made of words and of the images which these words provoke (and of the referential gaps as well), L.S.M. is not, nor can he be, a portrait of General Lacombe Saint-Michel, just as "O" is not George Orwell (who, moreover, was himself not George Orwell since, in reality, he was named Eric Arthur Blair...). That the old lady is not my grandmother and that the General's great-grandson, *a character of the novel just as the others are*, also bears but a distant and limited connection with me?

These characters, of course, borrow many of their features from people who "really" existed and in this way they may be differentiated from those characters, one may call them allegorical, usually found in works of fiction either in France or elsewhere, characters shaped out of nothing to suit the needs of the cause and intended, through their behavior and their adventures, to show what happens to the avaricious, the liar, the extravagant, the ambitious, or other such conventional "personalities".

Neither L.S.M.'s life nor his death prove anything at all and neither any kind of "moral" nor any kind of teaching is to be drawn from them —no more than from "O's" adventures or from the acts of the other characters who appear in this novel. Moreover, too many unknowns remain, too many contradictions, too many doubts.

And it is perhaps this uncertainty which, beyond our differences and at times even our divergences, unites me with my friends in this movement of the "Nouveau Roman", a movement which has given rise to a lot of misunderstandings, a lot of exaggerations, a lot of superficial commentaries, but in which, I believe, we are gathered by a common feeling that one can never be entirely sure of anything and that we are constantly treading on quicksand.

Thank you for your patience.