

## New Novel, New World

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Any end is a beginning.<sup>1</sup>

1957, Paris. Émile Henriot, critic, writer, and member of *l'Académie Française*, publishes an article in the respected French newspaper *Le Monde*<sup>2</sup>. It deals with the third novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalouse*, and the new and definitive edition of *Tropismes* by Nathalie Sarraute. Henriot mocks both books and entitles his article: “Le Nouveau roman”, in the same way that Louis Leroy created the pictural word *impressionism* several decades before, after the title *Impression soleil levant* by Claude Monet<sup>3</sup>. In the 1950s Henriot is renowned. Robbe-Grillet and his publisher Jérôme Lindon decide at once to take advantage of that article and henceforth to use the label New Novel coined by Henriot but now with capital letters to show that a new avant-garde movement is born<sup>4</sup>. Together they originated this most prominent and significant post-World War II development in Western fiction. “Be mad, just be yourself!”, they told the writers they chose: Claude Ollier, Claude Simon, Marguerite Duras, Robert Pinget, and Michel Butor. Samuel Beckett remained aloof. Critics point out, however, that the New Novelists were highly individualistic in their writing, and most are reluctant to categorize them as a cohesive school.

But *new* itself does not mean very much, of course: New Novel, New Theater, New Narrative Poets, New History, New Critics, New Philosophy, New Sociology, New Realism, New Wave, New Beat, New Deal, New Labour, *nuevo tango*, *bossa nova*, and even Beaujolais *nouveau*! The sense of new is linked to enthusiasm, as already noted by Alphonse de Lamartine<sup>5</sup>. And very early in the history of the New Novel *mouvance*<sup>6</sup>, Robbe-Grillet himself emphasized that since its beginnings the genre had always been new: Flaubert wrote the new novel of 1860, Proust the new novel of 1910 (see PNR, 10). More than hundred years before these words, Stendhal named *Romantics* the writers who endeavoured to study the world they lived in — and gave Sophocles, Euripides, Racine, Shakespeare, and Dante as examples<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the New Novelists could agree that Balzac was a new novelist in *his* century, the previous one, for they did not exactly reject him. They only meant that Balzacian realism was out of date for *their* century: old-fashioned, obsolete, antiquated, hackneyed, lengthy, didactic, and dull. Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute, among others, argued that such a novel, with its dependence on an omniscient narrator, and adherence to the unities of time and place, creates an illusion of order and significance which is inconsistent with the radically discontinuous and aleatory nature of modern experience.

1 Sergiu CELIBIDACHE, *La Musique n'est rien. Textes et entretiens pour une phénoménologie de la musique*, traduit de l'allemand par Hadrien FRANCE-LANORD et Patrick LANG, Arles, Actes Sud, 2012, *passim*.

2 Émile HENRIOT, « Le Nouveau roman : *La Jalouse*, d'Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Tropismes*, de Nathalie Sarraute », *Le Monde*, 22 mai 1957, pp. 8-9.

3 Louis LEROY, « L'Exposition des impressionnistes », *Le Charivari*, 25 avril 1874, p. 79.

4 See Roger-Michel ALLEMAND, « Robbe-Grillet à Minuit : *editoring* et lancement du Nouveau Roman (1955-1963) », pp. 319-348 in François BESSIRE (éd), *Travaux de littérature*, n° 15, “L'Écrivain éditeur. 2. XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles”, Boulogne, ADIREL, sept. 2002.

5 « La nouveauté est une des conditions de l'enthousiasme. » (Alphonse de LAMARTINE, *Nouvelles Méditations poétiques*, Paris, Furne, Panierre & Hachette, 1856 : « Préface » [1849], pp. 1-8 [p. 3]).

6 R.-M. ALLEMAND, *Le Nouveau Roman* (1996), Paris, Ellipses, coll. « Thèmes & Études », 2016, p. 3.

7 STENDHAL, *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823), Paris, Hachette-BNF, 2018 : « Ce que c'est que le romantisme ».

Against the Ancients, the old ones, *new* is young, sounds modern, or better, postmodern in the case of the New Novel that diverged from classical ones. Starting from the premise that the potential of the traditional novel had been exhausted, it marked a drastic departure from the conventions of the genre. The New Novelists sought new avenues of exploration in that they emphasized fictional form over content and ignored such elements as plot, linear narrative, and human interest. Their “stories” are distinguished by a disregard for chronology, prominence given to objects and space, substitution of pattern for plot, unorthodox treatment of dialogue, and a new approach to character. Also, they often dramatize a puzzling search for meaning within an inscrutable reality, requiring that the reader play a significant role as a participant in the work itself. In its efforts to overcome literary routine and to challenge the habits

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