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978-0-521-11457-8 - Claude Simon: Writing the Visible

Celia Britton

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

Claude Simon is unquestionably one of the most powerful and innovative novelists of the post-war period in France; and this is a period in which literary innovation has meant above all the challenging and undermining of realism. The Nouveau Roman group, of which Simon has always been considered a central member, has been in the forefront of the attack on representational writing since the mid 1950s. To attempt, thirty years later, to discuss his novels in their relation to, precisely, the representation of the *visible* may therefore seem a reactionary move, or simply a perverse one. But what this book sets out to do is not in any sense to reclaim Simon for realism, or return to earlier critical positions; it is rather to uncover in his writing certain tensions and contradictions which seem to me to be connected with the issue of visual representation – an issue which, as I hope to show, remains less resolved in textual practice than it is in literary theory. It is also, in Simon's case, an extraordinarily potent issue, precisely because of the ambiguities and polarities that it generates: his texts are written through, and derive a peculiar energy from, these internal tensions.

A more external tension, however, becomes apparent as soon as the chronological development of Simon's novels is compared with that of his fellow *nouveaux romanciers* Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet. This shows how much longer Simon remained within a humanist framework of psychological representation – i.e. of experiences and images perceived, remembered or imagined. Thus Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* and Butor's *La Modification*, which both came out in 1957, are far more 'structuralist' texts than Simon's *L'Herbe* which appeared the following year; similarly, Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le Labyrinthe* of 1959 – an even more radical undermining of the 'readability' of realist fiction – predates by a year Simon's best-known and perhaps most *emotionally* forceful novel *La Route des Flandres*; this latter is in turn contemporaneous with the extremely complex and almost mathematical structures of Butor's

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*Degrés*; and 1962 saw the publication of, on the one hand, Butor's *Mobile* which can no longer be called a novel at all, and, on the other, Simon's *Le Palace* which still retains a basis in psychological realism – a central consciousness remembering its past experiences.

There is thus a considerable discrepancy, at least up to the mid 1960s, between the representational discourse of Simon's novels and the conscious subversion of representation pursued by the other principal members of the Nouveau Roman group. In fact as late as 1975, Robbe-Grillet points out that Simon's continuing attachment to *referents* (i.e. objects of representation) sets him apart from the rest of them; in a discussion at the 'Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui' conference at Cerisy, 1971, he said: 'Il n'en reste pas moins que Claude Simon nous donne constamment ces référents ... Donc il faut bien croire que Simon accorde aux référents une importance supérieure à celle que font les autres romanciers de cette réunion' (vol. 1: 33).<sup>1</sup>

There is of course no particular reason why Simon *should* write against representation and reference; but given the very overt and systematic problematization of representation that his colleagues were engaged on, his own involvement in it nevertheless seems slightly strange. It has usually been assumed, if not very explicitly, that this can be explained in terms of a simple logic of development: that Simon moves from conventionally realist novels to, firstly, a modified 'phenomenological' kind of psychological realism based on the perceiving consciousness, and then to the 'formalist' novels of the 1970s (with the two points of transition, in so far as these can be pinpointed, usually taken to be *Le Vent* in 1957 and *La Bataille de Pharsale* in 1969). From this point of view there is of course no *contradiction*; in relation to the rest of the Nouveau Roman, Simon is merely a late developer. And the explanation is, indeed, supported by the fact that it is only when he 'catches up' with the others that Simon starts to theorize his own writing: all his conference papers and articles were produced in the 1970s, at the same time as he was writing his formalist novels.

Some such evolution in his writing – i.e. a gradual and fairly consistent movement away from realism – has undoubtedly taken place. But it is not at all clear that this can serve as an adequate explanation of the status of representation in his work. In other words, the question of representation is still, precisely, a *question* and even a problem, for several reasons which I will briefly outline. Exact definitions of what counts as representation will be discussed in the next chapter; but in so far as one of its possible forms is a concern

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with the visible, however fragmentary, it can be found throughout *all* of the novels, including the three ‘formalist’ ones, in which – as I shall argue later – the relation between the visible and the text has been transformed, but the two poles of that relation are still present. Above all, however, the idea that Simon’s writing follows the path of an in some sense natural or automatic development away from realism, culminating in *Leçon de choses*, becomes completely untenable with the appearance in 1981 of *Les Géorgiques*, which marks a very definite return to the discourse of the 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, Simon himself, in retrospective comment – made from the vantage point of the 1970s – on his earlier novels, tends to assimilate them to his current position by simply denying any representational elements in them: as though what is at issue here is less a rational appraisal of his development than a certain need to ‘repress’ representation. He is particularly emphatic on the question of *visual* representation: at the Cerisy conference devoted to his work, a question to him about the description of a door in *La Route des Flandres* provokes the reply: ‘vous ne pouvez pas “voir”, de quelque façon que ce soit, la porte dont vous parlez. Jean Ricardou a très justement fait observer que, contrairement au cliché répandu, on ne “voit” rien quand on lit (sauf des caractères imprimés ou calligraphiés). Comme il a dit, il n’y a pas vision, mais intellection, ce qui est tout autre chose’ (Ricardou 1975: 408).<sup>3</sup> Leaving aside for the moment one’s impression of a certain amount of coaching from Ricardou, it is still hard to reconcile the theoretical position which Simon adopts here with most readings of *La Route des Flandres*.

Moreover, a similar inconsistency can also be found operating in the reverse direction; that is, even the most forceful of Simon’s theoretical contestations of representation contain a peculiar undercurrent of resistance to ‘pure textual production’. In a paper entitled ‘La fiction mot à mot’, given at the 1971 Colloque de Cerisy on the Nouveau Roman, he criticizes realist texts for their reliance on a logic of fictional events which remains completely extraneous to the text (Simon 1972: 77), and proposes instead ‘une certaine logique interne du texte, propre au texte, découlant à la fois de sa musique (rythme, assonances, cadence de la phrase) et de son matériau (vocabulaire, “figures”, tropes – car notre langage ne s’est pas formé au hasard)’ which he sees as ‘fécondante et, par elle-même, engendrante de fiction’ (78).<sup>4</sup> But this turns out not to be, strictly speaking, a purely textual logic in the sense of a logic based on the play of signifiers, the specific qualities of *words*; because when he goes on to illustrate it with examples from *Les Corps conducteurs*, it is noticeable that they are

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all, without exception, based on the visual properties of the signified as much as the links between signifiers: they are all *shapes*. The sequence *croix – crucifix – cruciforme* (ibid.: 78–9) is in any case hardly very adventurous as word-play; but it is also sanctioned by, and does not go beyond, the *visual* similarity of the objects referred to; and the same is true of the various different characters who are brought into relation by all being ‘coubés’, and of the S-shaped curves of the river ‘snaking’ through the forest, the string on the pavement, and the feather ‘boa’ on the carpet (79).

Thus at various points in the article, the visible creeps back – as when Simon uses a quotation from Leonardo da Vinci talking about painting in order to allow him to say: ‘Et, le livre refermé, le lecteur peut tout de même . . . “saisir tout le champ visuel d’un seul coup”’ (86).<sup>5</sup> The fact that even when he is ostensibly writing a systematic attack on representation and hence, by implication, on the visual, the latter refuses to go away suggests strongly that throughout the 1970s Simon is caught up in a certain *misrecognition* of the presence of the visible in his writing, and that this prevents his rejection of representation from being entirely rational and straightforward. It also suggests that the visible is a more insistent and troubling force than has hitherto been assumed, and one that cannot be contained within the boundaries allocated to it by a simple evolutionary explanation.

It seems, in other words, that the status of the visible – ambivalent, persistent and in some degree unacknowledged – is in need of further investigation. The emphases of recent literary theory, and its application to Simon’s work, have tended to obscure the very obvious fact that his novels are actually obsessed with vision, and with visual representations (pictures, sculptures), and with the problems involved in textual description of visual reality and visual representations. As Serge Doubrovsky has put it: ‘This work may be read as a metaphorical epic of the *eye* . . . Seeing, for Simon, is the driving force behind saying; vision is the awareness of the absolute distance (from words) to things, but inversely, it is the fascination of the language-master with reality’ (1981: 15). There seems, in fact, to be an investment of *desire* in seeing, in the visible as such, which undercuts the explicit theoretical stance on representation and which is, conversely, repressed by the theory.

The elements of representation to be found in his novels, and the significant force that they exert in his work as a whole, will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. My initial point is that Simon’s texts cannot be ascribed unambiguously either to representation or to textual production. Karin Holter concludes her paper on

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*Triptyque* with a *general* statement of the text as a tension between co-existing forces: ‘ce passage montre assez que toute lecture aussi bien que toute écriture doit accepter et essayer de penser, pour chaque texte, la tension contradictoire entre le référentiel et le littéral’ (1975: 375),<sup>6</sup> providing a nicely balanced formulation within which individual texts can be analysed. What seems to me the distinctive feature of Simon’s work, though, is that the ‘tension’ is not merely an issue of theoretical interest but results in a very particular power and fascination in the novels themselves. They are a mixture of representational and ‘productive’ discourses; and this mixture, moreover, is not homogenized; there is a perceptible alternating movement in the texts between one discourse and the other, an *oscillation* whereby fragments of representation – ‘which, though vivid in detail, blur and fade into one another at the edges’<sup>7</sup> – emerge, appear to establish themselves, and then dissolve again into the play of textual relations. The oscillation sets up a rhythm of appearance and disappearance, of illusion and aporia, which both structures the entire text and, in its hesitation, evokes a fragility and a lightness which also become objects of fascination.

I shall thus be arguing that significant elements of representational discourse are to be found throughout Simon’s novels; that they are above all concerned with vision and indicate a certain specific desire for the visible; that they are in contradiction with other elements in the texts, with his theoretical statements and with much of the more recent criticism of his novels; and that the terms of this contradictory co-existence need to be explored. Moving outside the dominant formalist discourse on Simon does not mean returning to a realist perspective: it means in the first place *revealing* the question of the persistence – and simultaneously the subversion – of visual representation in his writing.

Critical writing on Simon in fact falls into two fairly distinct periods.<sup>8</sup> The early criticism takes a broadly phenomenological line, stressing the themes of perception, imagination and memory; the novels are seen as breaking away from traditional realism, but as still remaining within a kind of psychological realism updated, as it were, by an injection of phenomenology. This approach was also applied to the other *nouveaux romanciers* (notably in Olga Bernal’s book on Robbe-Grillet, 1964), but in Simon’s case it had the added sanction of Merleau-Ponty’s own considerable interest in Simon.<sup>9</sup> The transition from this to the later type is motivated in part by a change in Simon’s own work, but also by the impact of structuralist theory on literary analysis in general.

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In order to bring out the problems which seem to me to be associated with each of these two approaches, I shall discuss in some detail one representative piece of work from each period. The early phenomenological criticism is well exemplified by Michel Deguy's excellent article on *Le Palace*: 'Claude Simon et la représentation' (1962). This focuses on the predominance of visual perception in the novel; Deguy argues that Simon sets up a particular 'cinematic' mode of vision which creates a subject as pure spectator, as 'un homme au monde comme pur regard fasciné par images' (1015), and which in so doing reduces the whole of reality to (pictorial) representation: 'Tout est transparence à cet art; il a réduit l'être de ce qui est à cette transparence à la représentation, à cette "représentabilité"' (ibid.). Simon's writing, in other words, is governed by 'une perception qui atteint le réel *comme* illustration ou dessin' (1014, author's italics),<sup>10</sup> and so effects a derealization of reality.

Deguy's discussion of 'le regard' and its objects is penetrating and profound; it is close to my own concern with the visible in Simon's novels, and I have found many of his insights extremely helpful, as will be evident from subsequent chapters of this book. The overall theoretical context of his article, however, seems to me rather less illuminating. His position is more or less explicitly phenomenological: he remarks on 'le parallélisme du discours romanesque ici avec le discours phénoménologique de Merleau-Ponty', cites Merleau-Ponty's remarks on perspective, and asks 'Peut-on parler, à propos du discours romanesque, d'une phénoménologie de la perception spontanée, sauvage et tragique?' (1010, note 1). From this point of view, the derealizing effect of representation is a form of alienation – 'Les rapports entre choses et êtres . . . comme dépourvus de tout autre sens que celui d'être régis par une nécessité qui échappe aux *acteurs*' (1028, author's italics) – and hence 'tragique': later in the article, he distinguishes between the classic 'conscience phénoménologique auprès d'un monde *plein* découvert par *profils*' (1020, author's italics),<sup>11</sup> and the 'anéantissement' (annihilation) of Simon's world, which thus appears as a *degenerate* variant of the phenomenological view. This moral emphasis emerges more clearly towards the end of the article when he claims 'nous croyons ensuite que cette manière de voir qui commande cette manière de faire voir, est commandée très profondément par l'intuition éthique, qui vient elle-même de l'expérience; ou plutôt les deux ici ne font qu'un' (1026).<sup>12</sup> The connection that he goes on to make between the 'manière de voir' and Simon's attitude to history is certainly convincing: but the implication that it is primarily a moral question is less so.

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More centrally, to explain the conjunction of the visible and the unreal solely as a form of alienation is to overlook the strong element of desire that is bound up with vision – although Deguy himself does in fact describe the perceiving consciousness as ‘fascinée donc et frustrée à la fois, et de telle sorte que la fascination et la frustration s’exaspèrent réciproquement’ (1016–17),<sup>13</sup> which, surely, exactly formulates the structure of desire. The derealization of the visible thus seems more likely to be an effect of phantasy, as I will argue later, rather than of alienation.

But the principal difficulty in Deguy’s conception of the novel – and one that is common to all the early criticism of Simon – lies in his treatment of the actual writing. In seeing language simply as expression (‘Pourtant le roman ne cherche à dire rien d’autre qu’une manière de dire les choses comme elles sont, c’est-à-dire comme elles apparaissent’, 1009),<sup>14</sup> he forecloses any consideration of the text as text, and of its capacity for generating meanings through the play of language itself. Tying writing down to the expression of an existing meaning also results in a short-circuiting of its relation to vision: words are the direct unmediated trace of the look: ‘Les déplacements du regard composent un édifice de lignes dont les phrases sont comme les traces écrites, l’ombre projetée sur le papier, lignes de force du discours, architecture à plat . . . Au regard qui parle ici s’appliquerait littéralement la formule de “caméra-stylo”’ (1014).<sup>15</sup> The explosion of metaphors here is powerfully suggestive, but in assimilating writing successively to shadow, magnetic field, building and camera, it also has the effect of cancelling out its specificity as writing. The mechanisms whereby vision is translated into text are surely more complex and problematic – more prosaic, also – than this.

Deguy’s article illustrates both the strengths and the weaknesses of the loosely ‘phenomenological’ type of criticism of Simon, and in so doing indicates also the direction that later treatments of his work were to take. The question of the relative autonomy of language is central to the debate: what comes to challenge positions like Deguy’s, and rapidly assumes dominance, is the emphasis on the text as ‘l’aventure d’une écriture’ (adventure of a piece of writing), to use the phrase coined by Ricardou, and as fundamentally anti-representational. It is in fact Ricardou who is mainly responsible for this critical revolution. He is a crucial figure, not just in relation to Simon but to the Nouveau Roman in general; and although his influence has now declined considerably, the impact he made on critical theory is irreversible, in the sense that it is now virtually impossible to go back to the type of work that was being done in the 1960s.

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His book *Le Nouveau Roman* will be discussed in Chapter 1 in a wider context. As for his analyses of Simon in particular, his articles on *La Route des Flandres*, *La Bataille de Pharsale*, and later *Les Corps conducteurs* and *Triptyque* were immensely influential in the 1970s, and inspired a great deal of similar work by other people (including, some would say, Simon himself); they remain of importance. Their main characteristics are an extremely detailed attention to the micro-structures of the texts (metaphors, puns, anagrams, alliteration and rhyme, pastiche, etc.) and the organization of these verbal strategies into an almost equally detailed classificatory system. He maintains a vigorous stance against realist expressive discourse; his article 'La Bataille de la phrase' – which may be taken as typical of his approach – prefaces its analysis of Simon's novel of nearly the same name with a general section entitled 'Système d'une subversion de l'expression', setting out the mechanisms whereby 'les traditionnelles procédures expressives' are transformed by 'le texte moderne' into *generative* 'moyens de production' (1971: 119) – giving 'métaphore productrice', 'calembour producteur', 'fragment producteur', and 'vocable producteur'.<sup>16</sup> He then discusses *La Bataille de Pharsale* under the general headings 'Génération' (124), 'Transitions' (137), 'Relations' (146), and a short concluding section called 'Ecriture/lecture' (155). Each section views the novel as a construction of language, producing and produced by its own 'laws' of generation and structure. Metaphors, for instance, function like railway points, as a kind of switching system to change the direction of the text; he says of one example: 'En cet aiguillage, la métaphore est aussi bien *structurelle* (elle ordonne les cellules du texte) que *transitaire* (comme un sas, elle autorise le passage de l'une à l'autre)' (120, author's italics). And within this textual transportation system, 'le calembour peut aussi fonctionner comme un aiguillage. Il suffit que l'analogie de certains de leurs signifiés permette la jonction de deux cellules fictives éloignées' (121).<sup>17</sup> Fictional incident, from this perspective, is merely an epiphenomenal spin-off of the productivity of the text.

The method results in an analysis of the text which is often perspicacious and revealing: in the first section, perhaps the most impressive, he demonstrates brilliantly how the initial section of the novel is generated by the Valéry stanza placed *en exergue*. But overall the insights are to some extent submerged by his fondness for taxonomical proliferation: the fact that he needs thirty-two categories (and two diagrams) to account for the 'moyens de



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production' of a single novel reduces the explanatory value of all of them, and seems to have less to do with Simon's writing than with Ricardou's overruling desire for order combined with complication.

This kind of formalism also makes it impossible to look at the position of the subject in the text; in rejecting the humanist subject of expressive language, he posits the text as – in some unexamined sense – self-generating, and the subject is simply excluded. What Ricardou is ultimately engaged in is the fetishization of a conception of the text which is too technocratic to be really revolutionary ('productivity', after all, is a concept of management, used *against* the workers).

There is a further way in which, I would argue, his approach is seriously reductive. In the same article, he attacks '[les] fanatiques de l'expression qui réduisent le langage à un presque rien instrumental' (131), and remarks scathingly that he has chosen *La Bataille de Pharsale* to illustrate his theory precisely because 'il est semble-t-il de bon ton, aujourd'hui encore, de restreindre les travaux de Claude Simon au libertaire foisonnement du lyrique et du sensoriel' (118).<sup>18</sup> He, in contrast, makes the opposite assumption, not only that Simon's novels are completely non-representational, but that *all* 'modern texts' are: the starting point for his theoretical work is that 'À peine abolis, en leur complicité, les rassurants schémas de l'expression et de la représentation, il faut faire face à un immense afflux de possibles' (118, my italics).<sup>19</sup> The normative bias of this position is obvious: representation and expression are reactionary, therefore they no longer exist. This is clearly open to criticism on simple logical grounds; in relation to Simon specifically, it has the effect of suppressing another whole dimension of his writing. It is not just that attention to linguistic devices *need not* exclude consideration of the diegetic level of the writing; it is rather that this level *has to* be taken into account, because it cannot be eliminated as easily as Ricardou thinks; as David Carroll points out in his book on Simon, 'By emphasizing technique and instrumentality . . . problems of sense and representation do not simply disappear' (1982: 166).

That is, a critical account of Simon's novels is in my view bound to start from the proposition that they are, as texts, an interplay of representational and anti-representational elements. This point has of course already been made in previous work on Simon,<sup>20</sup> but usually restricted to the 'central period' novels, and sometimes in a rather partisan spirit: there is a tendency to assume that representation is, simply, a bad thing. Thus, for instance, Gérard Roubichou's rather loaded characterization of *Histoire*:

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The ‘newness’ of *Histoire* originates above all from the fact that here the Simonian novel appears more completely than in the past as a site for textual production at every level . . . [but] *Histoire* still demonstrates the effects of an inheritance or tradition proper to Simon’s novels: that is, the dialectic at work between the textual and the representative (*sic*) since *The Wind*. However, *Histoire* takes Simon a step forward, although the work still must be emptied of its psychological content (1981: 182)

– is typical of a pervasive implicit denigration of representational writing which, while it ultimately derives from a coherent critique of bourgeois ideology (see Chapter 1, note 25), often in practice becomes both moralistic and simplistic. Thus Lucien Dällenbach’s description of the later novel *Triptyque* implies the same normative logic of the ‘step forward’, and adds to it the rhetoric of a promised land of pure textuality: ‘Avec *Triptyque*, le roman simonien fait un nouveau pas en avant et accède, pourrait-on dire, au lieu que les œuvres précédentes n’avaient cessé de convoiter et d’approcher sans parvenir à l’atteindre. Éliminant les “scories” qui subsistaient dans *Histoire* et *Les Corps conducteurs*, il assure mieux encore sa continuité scripturale et opte sans repentir cette fois pour la discontinuité référentielle’ (1975: 162).<sup>21</sup>

More importantly, the co-existence of these antagonistic elements is usually, as in the cases of Roubichou and Dällenbach, explained away simply as a transitional stage in a process of development – and this, as I have already argued, is inadequate. There has not, to my knowledge, been any serious questioning as to *why* the tension persists throughout virtually all of Simon’s work. What is needed is not to privilege either side but to explore their interaction and the conditions which produce it.

An approach somewhat different from Ricardou’s is represented by a minority current in the Cerisy conferences – Sylvère Lotringer, Irène Tschinka – and, in a more developed form, by work such as Stephen Heath’s book on the Nouveau Roman, and David Carroll’s recent juxtaposition of Simon’s novels with a range of different critical theories. Dällenbach’s more recent writing on Simon (for instance, ‘Le tissu de mémoire’ in the 1982 paperback edition of *La Route des Flandres*), and Antony C. Pugh’s articles, also fall into this category. Despite important divergences, these can all be characterized as post-structuralist, as opposed to the basically structuralist orientation of Ricardou and his disciples. This means, above all, that instead of a conception of the literary work which simply represses the question of the subject, they are committed (as the title of Carroll’s book,