

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

PART I

Text and reader

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Text and voice

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI

‘La question essentielle n’est plus aujourd’hui celle de l’*écrivain* et de l’*œuvre*,  
mais celle de l’*écriture* et de la *lecture*.’

Philippe Sollers

‘Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold.’

John Keats

Once upon a time it was easy. To the question: Who writes novels? the answer was obviously: a novelist. Today that is no longer the case. ‘Nous pensons que ce qui a été appelé “littérature” appartient à une époque close laissant place à une science naissante, celle de l’écriture’, writes the novelist and critic, Philippe Sollers.<sup>1</sup> And an American scholar asserts: ‘It becomes futile – because radically inaccurate – to view a speaker as really beginning a discourse, still less as being its master. . . . The relationship between discourse and speaker is governed by rules that antedate the speaker’s appearance and postdate his disappearance.’<sup>2</sup> Instead of thinking of a novel as being written by someone – Dickens or Tolstoy, let us say – we must think of it as a *text*, something which exists in the world, but which is governed by its own laws, which will only be occluded by reference to the name on the title page. ‘La notion de texte’, writes Derrida, ‘pensée avec toutes ses implications, est incompatible avec la notion univoque d’expression.’<sup>3</sup> And lest it be imagined that this kind of talk is confined to France or America, here is the end of a review of Joseph Heller’s new novel which recently appeared in an English Sunday paper: ‘*Good as Gold*’, the reviewer (admittedly an academic) says, ‘is a good, busy, ambiguous text. But perhaps not, quite, good as gold.’

This substitution of the word ‘text’ for ‘work’ or ‘book’ is of course not a mere fad, though one may feel that it is in danger of passing into the select company of critical terms which function more as gestures than as useful tools, like ‘rounded character’ or ‘stream of consciousness’. In France, at any rate, it is one symptom of the triumph of a revolution in thought which has been gradually acquiring momentum since the time of Mallarmé and Nietzsche, and which, in the course of the 1960s, burst with extraordinary force upon the general public. I believe that the assumptions which lie behind the use of the term – the assumptions embodied in the quote from Sollers – are both false and harmful, but that does not mean that I do not recognize and even to a large extent accept the implications of this larger revolution. Indeed, if we want to understand why such assumptions are false I think we have to take very seriously the movement in thought out of which they have grown. Thus, though this is a story that has often been told in recent years, it is necessary to sketch it in very briefly.<sup>4</sup>

With the gradual erosion of the notion of a Creator God, who made the world suddenly and out of nothing, the nineteenth century became increasingly concerned with the idea of origins. To trace something back to where it started was to explain what it meant. Everything must be traced back to its origins, man to the animals, modern civilization to primitive culture, a book to its author. Thus E. B. Tylor, in his article on Anthropology in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1875), could write:

ANTHROPOLOGY: (The science of man...) denotes the natural history of mankind. In the general classification of knowledge it stands as the highest section of zoology or the science of animals, itself the highest section of biology or the science of living beings... It is undoubted that comparative anatomy and physiology, by treating the human species as one member of a long series of related organisms, have gained a higher and more perfect understanding of man himself and his place in the universe than could have been gained by the narrower investigation of his species by and for itself.<sup>5</sup>

This is to some extent true, but it also tends to appeal to analogy as a principle of explanation in a dangerously misleading way. Lévi-Strauss cites an example of this in another work of Tylor’s: ‘The bow and arrow is a species, the habit of flattening children’s skulls is a species, the habit of reckoning numbers by ten is a species. The geographical distribution of these things, and their transmission from region to region, have to be studied as the naturalist studies the geography of his botanical and zoological species.’ But to apply the principles of evolutionary biology in this naive way to the species *homo sapiens* can only result in error, as Lévi-Strauss points out:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Text and voice

5

Mais rien n'est plus dangereux que cette analogie. Car, même si le développement de la génétique doit permettre de dépasser définitivement la notion d'espèce, ce qui l'a rendue et la rend encore valable pour le naturaliste, c'est que le cheval donne effectivement naissance au cheval, et qu'à travers un nombre suffisant de générations, *Equus caballus* est le descendant réel d'*Hipparion*. La validité historique des reconstructions du naturaliste est garantie, en dernière analyse, par le lien biologique de la reproduction. Au contraire, une hache n'engendre jamais une autre hache; entre deux outils identiques, ou entre deux outils différents mais de forme aussi voisine qu'on voudra, il y a et il y aura toujours une discontinuité radicale, qui provient du fait que l'un n'est pas issu de l'autre, mais chacun d'eux d'un système de représentations.<sup>6</sup>

Thus a science which is concerned with the works of man will have to try and discover the specific laws governing such a system and avoid the temptations of analogies with other biological organisms.

Barthes makes a similar point when, in a splendid essay on Butor's *Mobile*, he invokes Mondrian and Webern, and reminds us that 'le discontinu est le statut fondamental de toute communication: il n'y a jamais de signes que discrets. Le problème esthétique est simplement de savoir comment mobiliser ce discontinu fatal, comment lui donner un souffle, un temps, une histoire.'<sup>7</sup> Classical rhetoric provided one kind of answer, the classical novel another – just as Dunstable found the means of writing large-scale works which differed from those of Monteverdi, which differed in turn from Bach's or Beethoven's or Wagner's or Stockhausen's. For all of them the word or the note remains the basic atom out of which the work is constructed.

This being the case, it becomes obvious that the task of literary criticism has barely begun. We possess a history but not a science of literature, Barthes points out,

parce que, sans doute, nous n'avons pu encore reconnaître pleinement la nature de l'*objet* littéraire, qui est un objet écrit. A partir du moment où l'on veut bien admettre que l'œuvre est faite avec de l'écriture (et en tirer les conséquences), une *certaine* science de la littérature est possible... Ce ne pourra être une science des contenus (sur lesquels seule la science historique la plus stricte peut avoir prise), mais une science des conditions du contenu, c'est-à-dire des formes...<sup>8</sup>

Such a science had already been envisaged by Northrop Frye, whose work on Blake and Spenser had led him to see the need to draw up a grammar of the forms of literature:

In this book we are attempting to outline a few of the grammatical rudiments of literary expression, and the elements of it that correspond to such musical elements as tonality, simple and compound rhythm, canonical imitation and the like. The aim is to give a rational account of some of the structural principles of Western literature in the context of its Classical and Christian heritage.<sup>9</sup>

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI

This way of looking at literature has had very beneficial consequences for criticism. Instead of sterile debates about influence and origins we have seen a rehabilitation of that rhetoric which after all guided the creation and appreciation of literature from the time of Homer till the Romantics, and a new impetus has been given to the study of the largely anonymous literature of the middle ages and the formal literature of the Renaissance. In the wake of Barthes and Lévi-Strauss critics have come to see the value for their work of the developing sciences of linguistics and semiology, and have learned the value of the experiments of the Russian Formalists carried out in the twenties. Developments have in fact been so rapid that today Frye's elaborate formal schemes have the nostalgic charm of a Heath Robinson machine. For now we find books appearing with such titles as *Problèmes de la structuration du texte*, in which Julia Kristeva asserts: 'Ce qu'on a pu appeler "objet littéraire" ne serait pour la sémiologie qu'un type de *pratique signifiante* sans aucune valorisation esthétique ou autre.'<sup>10</sup> And Mieke Taat sums up recent developments thus:

Chaque texte particulier constitue lui-même son propre code et l'on peut étudier les écarts que le texte opère lui-même à ce code. Ce qui distinguerait alors un roman d'un autre, un roman moderne d'un roman plus ancien, ce serait aussi bien le type de code que chacun instaure à l'intérieur de son texte, que la manière d'y faire infraction.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps, though, criticism has moved a little too fast and too confidently. The last two quotations in particular suggest that critics have chosen to forget the problematic status of the traditional novel in this whole change of climate. For one way of describing the critical revolution which has taken place is to say that we have managed to escape from certain dominant critical attitudes which saw the novel as the archetypal form of literature. When Barthes, for example, in the passage I quoted earlier, made the point that 'le discontinu est le statut fondamental de toute communication', he was concerned to defend a modern piece of narrative fiction (Butor's *Mobile*) which functioned according to norms other than those of the traditional novel. His point was that one of the things the novel did was to develop an unprecedented power of concealing this truth that works of art are made, not born. The traditional novel – to some extent like the classical symphony – functions by giving the *impression* of naturalness, continuity, unity. In his early work Barthes was concerned to make accessible writers like Robbe-Grillet and Butor, who might not be getting through to a public brought up on Mauriac and Montherlant; but more recently he has turned his

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Text and voice

7

attention to the traditional novel itself, approaching it, as one would expect, as an object made by joining up discrete elements rather than as a given whole. Outlining his approach in *S/Z* he says:

Ce que l'on cherche, c'est à esquisser l'espace stéréographique d'une écriture (qui sera ici écriture classique, lisible). Le commentaire... ne peut donc travailler dans le 'respect' du texte: le texte tuteur sera sans cesse brisé, interrompu sans aucun égard pour ses divisions naturelles (syntaxiques, rhétoriques, anecdotiques); l'inventaire, l'explication et la digression pourront s'installer au coeur du suspense, séparer même le verbe et son complément, le nom et son attribut; le travail du commentaire, dès lors qu'il se soustrait à toute idéologie de la totalité, consiste précisément à *malmener* le texte, à lui *couper la parole*. Cependant, ce qui est nié, ce n'est pas la *qualité* du texte (ici incomparable), c'est son 'naturel'.<sup>12</sup>

This may appear to be a purely neutral and 'scientific' attitude to take, but Barthes cannot always keep out of his commentary a note of disgust which a work of this kind evokes in him – he talks, for example, of 'life' in such a work becoming 'un mélange écoeurant d'opinions courantes, une nappe étouffante d'idées reçues'.<sup>13</sup> And this should not surprise us, for the traditional novel plays in his thought a rather similar role to that played in the thought of Marx and Kierkegaard by Hegel's historiography. We have to remember that the modernist revolution, in its widest sense, is not the product of simple scientific 'advance', but is the result of a series of polemics, directed by artists and thinkers as different as Nietzsche, Marx, Monet, Mallarmé, and Kierkegaard against the established views of the time. And these views are recognized by the early revolutionaries as being rather intimately connected with the ways people normally think or see or read. Proust began by attacking the biographical reductionism of Sainte-Beuve in what at least started out as a critical essay; but it soon became clear to him that to defeat Sainte-Beuve he would have to plunge into a full-scale work of *imaginative* literature: only *A la recherche du temps perdu* is an adequate refutation of what Proust felt to be false ways of reading literature. In the same way, as Barthes noted, Robbe-Grillet's novels were quite inseparable from his critique of the traditional novel: whether it welcomes the position or not, art since 1850 is polemical or it is nothing.

In fact, as we would expect, it is the writers who have thought hardest about the implications of the modernist revolution, and it is to them rather than to critics or scholars that we should turn if we want to understand the full implications of that revolution. It so happens that there took place in Cerisy in 1971 a conference under the general title 'Nouveau Roman: Hier, Aujourd'hui'. What gave it its historical

importance was the fact that it brought together not just academics and critics interested in the *nouveau roman*, but some of the key novelists themselves: Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, Pinget, Simon, Ollier, Ricardou. The papers delivered at the conference have been published, along with the ensuing discussions, in two volumes which provide a fascinating insight into the way certain novelists are thinking about their art today and into the general climate of criticism in France.<sup>14</sup>

The leading light of the conference was undoubtedly Jean Ricardou. In 1967, in the wake of two novels, he had published a marvellous book of essays, *Problèmes du nouveau roman*, and this was followed in 1971 by *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman* (the change from 'problèmes' to 'théorie' was, as we will see, emblematic). These two books established him, in succession to Robbe-Grillet, as the main theorist of the new novel. At the Cerisy conference he was forever leaping up and berating speakers for lacking theoretical or terminological rigour and reminding them of his own precise formulations. His remarks, especially the pithy saying that the novel is no longer 'l'écriture d'une aventure' but 'l'aventure d'une écriture', were repeated with awe by many of the speakers, and, as we will see, Robbe-Grillet himself paid him a surprising tribute.

What then is Ricardou's message? What does it mean to say that writing is 'l'aventure d'une écriture'? In his opening paper Ricardou laid down the basis of his position:

L'originalité, on le sait, est la superstition vers laquelle sont irrémédiablement conduits tous ceux qui prétendent concevoir le distinctif selon le fallacieux schéma d'une doctrine de l'Expression. Pour le dogme expressif, éminemment romantique, le texte ne saurait jamais être que la sortie d'une substance antécédente dont l'auteur serait en quelque façon le propriétaire.<sup>15</sup>

Instead, he goes on, we must realize, that 'C'est dans et par le texte que se produit le texte. Plutôt que d'imagination, il vaudrait mieux parler dès lors d'opérations génératrices qui ont l'avantage d'être spécifiques dans un processus de production précis.'<sup>16</sup> Such 'generative operations' are to be found in Roussel, for example, who, as he explained in a famous essay, would start a story with one phrase ('La peau verte de la prune un peu mûre'), and devise a plot that would lead him to the same phrase at the end, but with a single letter changed ('la peau verte de la brune un peu mûre'). Ricardou himself, explaining how he set about writing *La Prise de Constantinople*, says that he wished to start from nothing, realized that no novel started from nothing since before the first word there is always the title page with the author's name and the name of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Text and voice

9

the publisher, so took off from there: Ricardou has five letters in common with Villehardouin, who wrote about the crusades; the fourth crusade stopped at Constantinople, the name Jean Ricardou breaks down into four plus eight, midnight would figure in the book, and also stars (the star on the title page of Edition de Minuit books), and so on and so forth.

The process is much more rigorous than this sketchy summary suggests, but it does make clear what Ricardou is up to. One way of summing it up is to say that he has pushed Proust and Joyce from the centre of the modernist pantheon and replaced them with Roussel. Robbe-Grillet, for one, is in no doubt that things have changed since the 1950s and that it is Ricardou who has helped to change them:

Le Nouveau Roman a considérablement évolué depuis ses débuts et, en particulier, grâce à vous, Ricardou. Nos premiers écrits ne représentaient certainement pas le même degré de modernité que nos écrits actuels: moi-même et Nathalie Sarraute encore plus que moi, prêtions sans cesse le flanc à des interprétations référentielles. On a dit que *Le voyeur* avait eu comme premier titre *Le voyageur*, c'est inexact: son premier titre était *La vue*, en hommage au livre de Raymond Roussel. Mais, en même temps, sentant peut-être le terrain terriblement mal préparé, j'ai fourni moi-même à cette époque des interprétations référentielles qui allaient jusqu'au significations psychologiques. Quand on me disait: 'votre réalisme, n'est pas objectif', au lieu de répondre: 'c'est la notion de réalisme qui a fait faillite', je répondais: 'non, mais c'est un réalisme subjectif, c'est comme cela qu'est le monde à l'intérieur de nos têtes.'<sup>17</sup>

There are two important points here. The first is Robbe-Grillet's claim that Roussel had always been his ideal but that he had not in the early days known how to realize his Rousselian insights; the second is the implied belief that *either* a work is 'psychological', having to do with what goes on in people's heads, *or* it is Rousselian. I do not believe these are the real alternatives, but let us postpone that discussion for a moment and follow Robbe-Grillet a little further. There has been, he says, a change in the general climate of opinion, a change largely associated with the name of Michel Foucault, and this has coincided with a change within the *nouveau roman* itself:

Je ne suis pas arrivé avec les armes de la modernité toutes forgées dans ma tête quand j'ai commencé à écrire. . . Peu à peu, par l'exercice de l'écriture, s'est accomplie cette révolution. . . ; et il est exact que, pour moi, c'est *Dans le labyrinthe* qui constitue la charnière, à tel point que j'irais maintenant jusqu'à présenter *Les gommages*, *Le voyeur*, *La jalousie*, comme une espèce de trilogie appartenant encore à cette première moitié du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle, alors que nous sommes maintenant, avec vous Ricardou, dans la deuxième.<sup>18</sup>



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI

All his earlier theoretical discourse, he says, served to place his work 'dans cette perspective... dont Joyce et Proust ne songeaient pas à s'écarter'. However,

Quand, peu à peu, par la pratique de notre écriture au sein du contact sensible avec le monde, nous nous sommes trouvés non plus hantés par une profondeur mais de plein-pied avec des surfaces, une comparaison s'est imposée entre ces surfaces et les cartes à jouer. Vous savez que les jeux se font avec des signaux plats: derrière une dame de pique, il n'y a rien: pour une cartomancienne il y a quelque chose, mais pour un joueur de bridge il n'y a rien, c'est à lui de créer sa signification. On lui distribue des cartes et ces cartes sont de pures surfaces. Contrairement à ce que les adversaires du jeu prétendent, cette superficialité n'empêche pas du tout la liberté du joueur. Au contraire, c'est elle qui définit le champ de cette liberté. On vous distribue les cartes et vous commencez à les organiser en ce qu'on appelle une main; et ce seul ordre donné à des figures plates commence à projeter votre intervention dans le monde, ce qu'on peut appeler votre parole... En somme, le jeu est pour nous la seule manière possible d'intervenir dans un monde dorénavant privé de sa profondeur.<sup>19</sup>

It is a satisfying thing to find oneself in step with the times, and Robbe-Grillet's view both of art in general and of the history of the *nouveau roman* would elicit nods of agreement from France's leading thinkers; it certainly emerged as the new orthodoxy at the Cerisy conference. It is true that one irate lady was compelled to remark: 'il suffit de regarder Robbe-Grillet pour voir qu'il est autre chose qu'un mot', but no one paid very much attention to her. There were, however, two more substantial voices raised either in direct protest or in implicit criticism of the prevalent view, and these were the voices of Nathalie Sarraute and Robert Pinget.

In her own paper Nathalie Sarraute went over ground familiar to her readers when she talked about those

régions silencieuses et obscures où aucun mot ne s'est encore introduit, sur lesquelles le langage n'a pas encore exercé son action asséchante et pétrifiante, vers ce qui n'est encore que mouvance, virtualités, sensations vagues et globales, vers ce non-nommé qui oppose aux mots une résistance et qui pourtant les appelle, car il ne peut exister sans eux.<sup>20</sup>

This, one might have thought, would have been entirely acceptable to the author of *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie*, but the new, Ricardianized Robbe-Grillet will have none of it. When you start to write, he asks her, do you feel that your world already exists or is it through language that you bring something new into the world? No, says Sarraute, there is neither a fully-fledged world in her mind beforehand which simply needs to be got down on paper, nor does she simply start with the words on the page: 'ça n'existe pas sans le langage mais le langage sans ça ne peut

## Text and voice

II

pas exister'. But Robbe-Grillet will not let go. Believe me, he says, there are only two fundamental positions which the writer can hold, 'celui qui arrive dans un monde qui existe déjà et dont il va parler et celui qui arrive dans un monde qui n'existe pas encore et qu'il va créer par son propre langage'. And in your case, he tells her, as in mine, what clearly interests you 'c'est la création d'un monde qui n'existe pas encore'. Yes, agrees Sarraute, 'mais ce monde est créé à partir de quoi, pas uniquement à partir du langage?' To which Robbe-Grillet unconvincingly replies: 'Au commencement était le Verbe. . .'<sup>21</sup>

Sarraute thus tries to drive a wedge between the alternatives proposed by Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou. To hold that the novelist does not come with his plot ready-made and simply pours it out on paper does not mean, for her, that he starts with the first words. Sarraute, of course, was, like Beckett, welcomed by the early *nouveaux romanciers* as a precursor; at this conference she is regarded as limited and old-fashioned in her insistence on depth, interiority and mystery. The case of Pinget is rather different. *Passacaille*, published in 1969, is hailed as belonging to the new, purified *nouveau roman*, along with *La Maison de rendez-vous*, Simon's *Les Corps conducteurs* and Ricardou's *La Prise de Constantinople*. It is, says one speaker, a work where we have 'une variation de points de vue dont la motivation ne peut être que compositionnelle et non psychologique'.<sup>22</sup> Pinget's own remarks, however, seem closer to Sarraute, and even to Proust and Joyce, than to Ricardou. In a modest and witty paper wittily and modestly entitled 'Pseudo-principes esthétiques' he says things no one else at the conference was prepared to say and which none of those present quite knew what to do with.

He begins by pointing out that though there may perhaps be something 'modern' or even 'valuable' in what he writes, he has never aimed either at modernity or at value. All he has ever been interested in is one thing: 'seul capte mon intérêt la *voix* de celui qui parle'. The ear is as powerful a registering organ as the eye, but

notre ton habituel, celui que l'on a par exemple avec soi-même ou avec ses proches, est une sorte de composé des divers tons, outre les héréditaires et ceux des livres, enregistrés par nous depuis notre enfance. . . C'est dire que jamais je n'ai tenté de rendre objectivement, tel un magnétophone, le son d'une voix étrangère, j'ai bien assez à faire de la mienne.

And he goes on:

Je dis la *voix* de celui qui parle, car le travail préalable consiste pour moi à choisir parmi les composantes de la mienne celle qui m'intéresse sur le moment et de l'isoler. . .<sup>23</sup>