HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON THE NOUVEAU ROMAN

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HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON THE NOUVEAU ROMAN

A Thesis

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Abstract

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by

Bohdana Demchuk

The purpose of this study is to investigate the link between the elements of the Nouveau Roman written in the post World War II era and the political, social, and cultural dynamics of its time. More precisely, the study focuses on the military developments, on the political polarity, and on the scientific discoveries influencing France in the early and mid 20th century. It takes into account some of the major global events – including World War II, the Cold War, and the findings of the Theory of Relativity – in order to explore how they shaped people’s views of the world and of each other. The study traces the manner in which the changed worldview and self-perception of the authors of the Nouveau Roman found their way into the novel, making it embrace subjectivity and redefine the heroic image of a human.

The primary sources of research include both theoretical and literary works of three authors of the Nouveau Roman: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Marguerite Duras. The literary works feature Duras’ Moderato Cantabile, Sarraute’s Childhood, and Robbe-Grillet’s Snapshots. The theoretical works feature Robbe-Grillet’s influential collection of essays For a New Novel, Sarraute’s Age of Suspicion, and Duras’ Writing, as well as her 1993 interview. For historical and social references the study draws upon Herbert Lottman’s The Left Bank: Writers, Artists, and Politics from the Popular Front to the Cold War, as well as books and essays dedicated to the circumstances and the literary criticism of the Nouveau Roman.

The study confirms that the Nouveau Roman of Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras was equally influenced by the historical and social developments of the 1940s and the 1950s, which produced such distinctive literary traits as the abandonment of political cause, the use of multiple perspectives, the emphasis on the relative nature of reality, and the necessity of subjectivity.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

The Nouveau Roman, emerging in France in the 1950s, at first glance seems to distance itself from the dilemmas of its time. Neither the trials of the war nor the rivalry of the political blocs have an explicit presence in its text. Instead, it delves into the problems of language, the contradictions of memory, and the subjectivity of individual mindset and existence. As such, it dedicates itself to pure writing and creating literature as art – not subservient, but unencumbered and self-sufficient. However, the Nouveau Roman, as well as the attitude of its writers toward life and literature, could not have evolved uninfluenced by the dramatic world events of the 1940s and the 1950s. The literary genre of the novel existed successfully for decades before the advent of the Nouveau Roman. But by the middle of the twentieth century the historic developments in France caused numerous writers to rethink the craft of writing and reinvent the novel.

The decades of the 1940s and 50s were a time of great changes in global political, social, and intellectual spheres. The Cold War, the decolonization effort, and the shift from Paris to New York as the artistic capital of the world were only a few of the events that shaped the world. As a whole, the unprecedented events of these decades not only redrew the physical and the political maps of the world, but also redefined how people perceived reality and how their new worldview was represented on paper. The new literary movements surfacing in France over the late 1940s and the early 1950s were influenced by the austere politics, the scientific discoveries, and the radical social events of that era.
The Nouveau Roman, that began taking shape during that time, echoed the transformations of the world that were taking place, filtering out the disillusionments and exploring new limits in politics, language, progress, and society. There is a strong link between the elements of the Nouveau Roman and the political, social, and cultural dynamics of its time. The circumstances of some of the major global events, such as World War II, the Cold War, and the introduction of the Theory of Relativity, shaped people’s views of the word and of each other. Consequently, the changed worldview and self-perception of the authors of the Nouveau Roman found their way into the novel, making it embrace subjectivity, abandon social enthusiasm, and redefine the heroic image of a human.

The theoretical and literary works of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Marguerite Duras differ in their style and subjects. Marguerite Duras’ *Moderato Cantabile* completely reinvents a love story. Nathalie Sarraute’s *Childhood* redefines the principles of an autobiography. Whereas Robbe-Grillet’s collection of essays *Snapshots* transfers the description of everyday scenes into the realms of art. Writing independently at first, these authors later joined under the genre of the Nouveau Roman because, despite their different styles, there are distinct elements in their works which unite them. All three authors identify similar constraints that limited literature of their time and in a parallel manner they were able to overcome these limitations, simultaneously reinventing the novel. The Nouveau Roman of Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras was equally influenced by the historic and social developments of the 1940s and 50s, which produced
such distinctive literary traits as the abandonment of political cause, the use of multiple perspectives, the emphasis on the relative nature of reality, and the necessity of subjectivity.
Chapter 2

WORLD WAR II

World War II was a military conflict like no other. Not only did it leave a physical trace in the cities of Europe and on the map of the world, it also left a mental residue that appeared in the works of artists and writers to come. Both post-war art and literature demonstrate that “World War II is never far below the surface, and its unresolved issues shape both postwar events and texts, both anecdote and form” (Higgins 1996, 213). Quite a few of the events of the war turned out to be a catalyst for the literary crisis and for the search for new ways of expression.

In the years before World War II the literary scene of Paris was as productive as ever, shedding light on the metaphysical and corporeal aspects of existence and influencing people the world over. It was the legendary time that earned its own name and legacy. The very mention of La Rive Gauche evokes images of intellectuals gathering at cafes not simply for food, but, more importantly, to get food for thought and thought for writing. La Rive Gauche is synonymous with Paris of writers, artists, and philosophers. It embodies a blissful era, when people like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Pablo Picasso, just to name a few, were the driving force behind all things artistically noble and influential. With the creative genius in full force, there were hardly any noticeable precursors that indicated that the written word would undergo a drastic shift. And yet, the events of the 1939-1945 resulted in a weighty literary schism.
Along with the military conflict, the war also brought conflicts to literature, raising vital questions of dedication, involvement, and responsibility. One major part of the conflict revolved around the writers and their political and social involvement. The other one dealt with the text itself, trying to either justify or condemn its activism or, adversely, its submission. For the writers trying to publish their works during the Nazi occupation of France collaboration was the only way to write. However, despite giving the freedom to publish, collaboration effectively took away any opportunity to write freely. Instead, it required the text to proliferate ideas of fascism, all the while closing the eyes to all of its transgressions, and masking all vice of the regime as virtue. For the writers who refused to write collaborationist texts, or text for sheer empty entertainment, resistance was the only way to go. During the occupation the writers of the Résistance had to risk their lives to publish works that were free to denounce the Nazis and to spread ideas of liberation among the public.

Aside from its historic importance and its role in the liberation of France, the divide between the collaborationists and the writers of the resistance turned out to be a painful reminder about the consequences of dedicating the writer’s literary conscience to a cause that exceeded the writer’s competency. Perhaps unintentionally or sometimes knowingly, the collaborationist writers nonetheless promoted a force they could not control.

Upon the end of World War II, there came a realization that Paris would never be the same: people changed, along with what they read, how they thought, and who they
listened to. The temporary euphoria of liberation helped to resurface underground publications of the Résistance and to refuel intellectual collaborations of writers, artists, and activists (Lottman 1982, 219). However, with the recognition given to the writers of the Résistance, the gap between them and the collaborationists was becoming more apparent and increasingly cumbersome. Eventually, the embrace of victory was interrupted by the purging of Paris’ intellectual life. What started initially as a short black list of collaborationist writers and poets, created simply to prevent them from publishing their works in France, quickly morphed into a list of traitors used in the civil trials. As a result, shortly after the end of the war many of the collaborationist and pro-Nazi authors and “leading figures of the daily press and radio were executed” (Lottman 1982, 227).

Needless to say, the fate of the collaborationist writers left a lasting impression on the writers of the Nouveau Roman. As Alain Robbe-Grillet reflected in 1957, it was impossible to “forget the successive submissions and withdrawals, the echoing quarrels, the excommunications, the imprisonments, the suicides” (Robbe-Grillet 1957, 36). The future writers were able to observe firsthand the grave danger of authors carelessly surrendering their mind and text to a manipulative power. An author willing to compromise sound judgment presented a triple threat. On the one hand, the author, blindly dedicated to a certain end of the political spectrum, lost his objective voice, producing works that were falsely objective, or altogether false. Secondly, the text that praised the government regime and ignored its crimes gave it an opportunity to commit even more sins. Lastly, the written word was a link between the reader and the world.
The author who was not mindful of the purity of his work presented a moral danger to his readers.

Thus, the literary crisis and the events of the liberation called for renewals in the literary genre. It was hard for the writers to deny that the image of a so-called ‘individual adventurer’ like Rousseau, Byron, or Nietzsche had been left in the past. In the age of professional politics, mass media, mass production, and mass culture the author had to be mindful of his message. After all, a written work could become propaganda of an unprecedented scale. One could not create genuine text, or art imitating life, dedicated to a force – such as the Third Reich – the true core of which the writer could not fully know. By supporting a particular political power, a writer or a thinker became a part of that greater force or even a catalyst of its errors, and thus, could be held responsible for any consequences.

True to its place and time, the theoretical writings of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, and Nathalie Sarraute all address the dilemmas that surround the writer’s craft at the height of the twentieth century. “What bonded these new novelists together was their common desire to challenge the continuing hegemony of classic ‘Balzacian’ realism which, through its technical emphasis on plot and characterization, they saw as drawing a falsely reassuring map of human experience” (Gratton 1997, 243). In one way or another, each of the authors touches upon the unlikelihood and hypocrisy of creating literature that would not be visibly affected by the events of the war.
Moreover, all three of them break away from an omniscient and objective image of the author. The omniscient quality of the author’s narrative is not highly credible in the post war context. Globalization and the immense structure of the government machine have greatly reduced the agency of a single individual, diminishing the author’s ability to know everything for certain. At the same time, the complex international dynamics have made objectivity unachievable. As a result, the writings of Robbe-Grillet, Duras, and Sarraute reflect an overpowering desire to produce text that is independent, “to write books still unknown to [the author] and not yet decided on by [the author] and not decided on by anyone (Duras 1998, 1).
Chapter 3

THE COLD WAR

The events that took place in Paris before and after the liberation were not the only set of events that changed literary convictions of the writers of the Nouveau Roman. The drastic disillusionment brought forth by World War II was later reinforced by the extreme polarity and manipulations of the Cold War. The strong emergence of the two rival trains of thought – Communism and Liberalism – further contributed to the disillusionment of French writers and intellectuals. In his travelogue Herbert Lottman mentions the words of Andre Breton, one of the founders of literary surrealism, who observed that “The setting up of two antagonistic blocks […] leaves little room for free expression, in the sense it has always been understood” (Lottman 1982, 230).

In the years following World War II the Communist party was becoming increasingly popular among the French writers and artists. It was entirely human for people to attempt to forget the nightmare that was the war and start searching for renewal and hope. After having witnessed the wrongdoing committed by the far right ideology of fascism, the far left dogmas of the Communists may have seemed a lot better than they were. A lot of the principles of the Communist party seemed enticing: equal opportunities for all citizens, utopian equality and absence of social classes, as well as the idea of a perfect government guaranteeing jobs and housing for all workers.

Countless Parisian intellectuals and artists – not excluding even Jean-Paul Sartre – put their trust in bright promises of the Communists. Needless to say, their trust could not
be rewarded. Not long after the proliferation of Communism French writer experienced firsthand one of its major transgressions: the absence of personal freedoms of speech and expression. Those who joined the party were shortly required to align their works with the views and messages of the party leaders. Even forward-thinking Sartre, “having offered himself to the Communist cause, […] made only those moves the Communists required of him” (Lottman 1982, 284).

The creative expression of writers and artists was becoming increasingly limited. Social realism was not just recommended – it became a required mode of expression. The narrow parameters of social realism were dictated by the Communist officials. As a result, language and art slowly morphed into propaganda. Clearly, the freedom of expression could not be provided by the party. Instead, the authors of the Nouveau Roman would have to create it from within.

The Liberalist politics of the United States were a possible escape from the Communist imposition. There were a number of intellectual circles in Europe that, stressing their superiority over the Communist party, advertised complete freedom of expression. However, the disillusionment that already settled among the French writers and artists had made them weary of any political demagogy and any ideology. In the words of Marguerite Duras, for instance, after the disappointment with the respective political dogmas the writer needed to embrace “a letting go of ideologies, not an abandoned ideology but rather the other way round: an abandonment of ideology, of all ideologies” (Duras 1993, 76). After all, even though the promises and conditions offered
by the two opposing ideologies of the Cold War were different, their language and tactics used were unsettlingly similar.

Adding to the disillusionment were the two political trials that took place in Paris. Both the Kravchenko and the Rousset trials had uncovered evidence about the existence in the Soviet Union of several work camps for political prisoners opposing the Communist regime. A large percent of the prisoners were sentenced in a mock trial or with no trial at all (Lottman 1982, 267). In Paris, the long and highly publicized trials involved endless cross-questioning of witnesses. The testimonies of the opposing sides in both trials were full of contradictions. But despite the lack of clarity in the process, two facts were becoming apparent to the public following the trials. First of all, witnesses’ language could be dictated by the party leaders in Moscow. Their discourse was completely manipulated by the authorities. Secondly, truth lost its stability. Truth was relative to the interests of the person or entity providing it. Objective reality became hard to discern. Consequently, the Nouveau Roman’s experimentation with reality and truth was not a mere artistic innovation. It was rather a mirror image of the absence of truth and the distortion of reality of the time.

The seriousness of being a tool for the atrocities of a major power resonated in the refusal of many French intellectuals to subject their works to political propaganda. Realizing that art and language could be manipulated, the authors of the Nouveau Roman approached their discourse with caution. In her discussion of writing Marguerite Duras states firmly her disregard for the books that are not free from agenda: “… they are
fabricated, organized, regulated; one could say they conform” (Duras 1998, 18). Whereas Robbe-Grillet cautions that “… the very notion of a work created for the expression of a social, political, economic, or moral content constitutes a lie” (Robbe-Grillet 1957, 38).

After World War II and over the course of the Cold War the influential international position of France continued to decrease. “The decline of the impact of Parisian intellectuals coincided with the decline of Paris as capital of Europe, and intellectual capital of the world” (Lottman 1982, 287). Once a strong economic empire and an influential political force, France found itself economically, physically, and intellectually wedged in between the two opposing blocs. The decolonization took away from its economic might. The political polarity of the East and the West pushed France aside into the position of virtual detachment. Furthermore, the artistic and intellectual scene was also affected. On the one hand, a paradigm shift from Paris to New York as the new art capital of the world was accompanied by the migration of numerous writers and artists to the United States. On the other hand, partly due to the neutral inactive position of France during the Cold War, the international interest in the opinions of the French intellectuals slowly subsided.

The artists and writers who continued working and writing in Paris were becoming increasingly disappointed with the deceptions of both hegemonies. Over the course of the Cold War the conflicts and manipulations of both superpowers demonstrated that an individual artist or writer had very little, if any, power to radically
change history. It was now up to the economic powerhouses to shape the course of history.

The new generation of writers that emerged after the war was scarred by the growing perception of powerlessness of an individual faced with strong political powerhouses. As a result, during the 1950s, “the Left Bank was taking a long vacation from politics” (Lottman 1982, 288). The global shifts of power had made the writers abandon political activism of either direction and turn their attention to the inner conflict of human existence.
Chapter 4

AWAY FROM SOCIAL REALISM

In its search for new forms of expression the Nouveau Roman “never left history behind, and [it continues] to be defined by a discourse whose context gives it meaning” (Higgins 1996, 216). A lot of the developments of the Cold War were life-altering. Some of the changes were physical and evident: for instance, erecting the Berlin Wall or conducting nuclear attack training in schools. Other changes were hidden. They were transformations of the mindset, a set of adjustments to people’s worldview: like the heightened sense of suspicion to discourse, or the avoidance of the recruiting slogans. The link between history and the Nouveau Roman can become very useful to the reader. Similarly to the literary crisis of World War II, the effects of the Cold War also left their mark on the narrative of the novel.

The Nouveau Roman first puzzles the reader with its narrative. The novel’s lengthy descriptions of the ordinary seem out of place in the politically charged time of the twentieth century. However, the long and detailed narrative is one of the most valuable aspects of the novel. Instead of turning language into political propaganda, the novelists choose to turn language into art. Their text is not subservient to the popular messages of the day. Instead, “the fictional world becomes itself the subject of the novel and the creative act is the creation of a creation or the story of creating a story” (Rahv 1974, 32). The only agenda hidden in their writing seems to be the effort to strike the perfect balance of art and life replicating each other.
The writers of the Nouveau Roman embrace the artistic detachment that language allows. Alain Robbe-Grillet states that “before the work of art, there is nothing – no certainty, no thesis, no message” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 141). According to him, the writer is in no position to dictate any truths to the reader. The reader must find individual meaning within the novel, just like one discovers personal emotion in front of a painting. In a parallel train of thought, Marguerite Duras considers “writing [to be] the unknown. Before writing one knows nothing of what one is about to write” (Duras 1998, 33). Therefore, amid the political misuse of the arts, the authors of the Nouveau Roman display a conscious effort to prevent their works to be reduced to propaganda.

Political propaganda of the time used a distinct type of language. The sentences were short and sharp; they packed a simple one-dimensional meaning into just a few words. The writers of the Nouveau Roman were not the only ones who despised such way of communication. One of the contemporaries of the authors of the Nouveau Roman, playwright Eugene Ionesco, worked in Paris at the same time and faced the same linguistic challenges. “Ionesco attacked the language and logic of a society that buries meaning in clichés, propaganda, empty phrases, and abusive slogans” (Gaensbauer 1991, 45). In order for him to combat the shortcomings of such language, Ionesco infused his with irony, irrationality, and absurdity, often dissolving comprehensible speech completely. The authors of the Nouveau Roman, on the other hand, chose a different approach, concentrating, among other things, on subjectivity, loss of chronology, and extensive detailed descriptions. Despite the differences in the treatment of language by
these authors, they seem to be united by a common desire to renew language. Their texts display “the refusal of ideological interpretations or justifications of the novel (including a rejection of Sartrian “engagement” in a political sense)” (Morrissette 1965, 5). The renewal of language and literature can subsequently result in the new perception of the world.

The desire not to have their works appropriated by the political propaganda may have been the reason why the Nouveau Roman turned away from the principles of social realism. In fact, Alain Robbe-Grillet believed that “telling a story to divert is a ‘waste of time,’ and telling a story to win belief has become suspect” (Robbe-Grillet 1957, 34). To a writer of the new generation, looking to reinvent discourse and rediscover the human purpose amid the political incentives, the works of social realism seemed academic to the point of being dead. As a result, unlike the works of social realism, the texts of the Nouveau Roman lacked any overt messages. Instead, they were aimed at making people rethink everything that they were made to think. To Ionesco, in particular, it was better to “think clumsily and shortsightedly, as well as one can, rather than repeating the inferior, average, or superior slogans of the day” (Ionesco 1963, 140).

One of the forms of social realism that most clearly exemplifies the essence of that movement is visual art. Both the Soviet poster art and the Western social realism were, or could be, mass reproduced. Poster art, for instance, was a simple or simplified drawing with only a few items on the canvas to represent one particular idea or reality. Such posters also often contained a slogan. It could be an encouragement: to work harder,
for example, or a sentiment of opposition: to Fascism or espionage. Whatever the image or the catchphrase, posters usually had one possible interpretation, with their elements guiding one’s train of thought into a narrow direction, toward one and the same conclusion. The slogans selected for the posters must have been approved by the communist officials; and as a whole, the poster art created one reality – though a carefully selected reality. They were intended as an objective form of art, with the author known by name but absent from the picture, representing instead the mind of all and the direction for all. Even the western social realist photography of the time, which is intuitively – and incorrectly – perceived as objective, constitutes, basically, a carefully chosen fragment of life to portray distilled reality.

It was that sort of falsely objective portrayal of reality that the writers of the Nouveau Roman found faulty in social realism. They rejected the idea of art made for guiding people toward the so-called true reality. Instead, the authors of the Nouveau Roman aimed at creating text that would allow one to “free himself from ready-made ideas, in literature as in life” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 139). The authors of such text would have to be alien to outside bias. Their text would have to be open to interpretation, and the reader would have to be free to construct unique meaning.

During the years of the Cold War, France and much of the rest of the world served as a silent battleground for influence among the two superpowers. Consequently, their respective ideologies were fed to people through the mass media. For example, paintings and films were full of political propaganda. French writers of the Nouveau
Roman were certainly aware of the dangers of pre-digested, force-fed, deceptively objective views. That is why their works were intentionally devoid of any enthusiasm.

The conviction that the mass media and mass-reproduced text could have an adverse effect on the poorly-informed populace can be traced not only in the works of the Nouveau Roman, but also in the theoretical writings of the authors of the Frankfurt school. Among them, Theodor Adorno criticized the culture industry and the capitalist contribution to the vanishing of revolutionary and critical consciousness of an individual. And in a parallel approach, Walter Benjamin addressed the changing status of art and culture in the age of mass consumption.

Robbe-Grillet noted somewhat sarcastically that “Soviet criticism – with even more tranquil assurance than bourgeois criticism – constantly reproaches the New Novel for casting away, when it could still serve (we are told) to reveal to the masses the evils of today’s world and the remedies in fashion” (Robbe-Grillet 1955&63, 159). Ironically, this reproach sums up precisely what the novelists were trying to avoid in their writing. Robbe-Grillet makes a point of discussing in his theoretical essays the danger of the novel that attempts to teach the public something of which it does not know itself. According to him, a person interested in social issues or ethics is better off reading about them in the appropriate scholarly articles. Similarly, in The Age of Suspicion, Nathalie Sarraute discusses the inherent sense of distrust that rightfully settled between the reader and the writer in the mid twentieth century. As one can trace in the texts of the Nouveau
Roman, the author cannot and does not want to take on the cumbersome and unnatural responsibility of guiding the masses.

Acknowledging that the masses, especially young people, were susceptible to ideological influences, the writers of the Nouveau Roman refused to supply their works with an overt message. Otherwise, they could easily be turned into instruments of propaganda. Alain Robbe-Grillet criticized the principles of a traditional “thesis-novel” partly for that exact reason. According to him “[the public] saw it reborn on the Left in new clothes: ‘commitment,’ ‘engagement’; and in the East too, with more naïve colors, as ‘social realism’” (Robbe-Grillet 1957, 35). Considering the shadowiness of political machinations and the censorship of the mass media, the threat of the “thesis-novel” lied in its blatant problem-resolution construction and in its certainty, both of which could enthusiastically provide ready answers and, thus, deceive an individual into following instead of thinking. In a parallel train of thought, Ionesco reasoned that there were two threats to the spirit and the theatre: “a bourgeois mental sclerosis, on the one hand; the tyrannies of political regimes and directions on the other” (Ionesco 1963, 148).

Accordingly, the works of Ionesco’s Absurd and those of the novelists were a tribute to neither. They were an exploration of the universal crisis of thought and certainty.
Chapter 5

LITERARY SHIFT: THE NOUVEAU ROMAN

The disillusionment brought forth by the events of the 1940s and 50s and the realization of extreme instability of time and judgment led to active attempts to discover new ways of perceiving the real.

The resulting shift to new modes of expression reflects the determination of French writers and artists to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past decades and to prevent their works from being misused by political propaganda and slogans. Hence, they turned to investigating the dualism of memory and reality, exploring the limitations of art and language, and to questioning human importance. “Instead of being of a political nature, commitment is, for the writer, the full awareness of the present problems of his own language, the conviction of their extreme importance, the desire to solve them from within” (Robbe-Grillet 1957, 41). They became keenly aware that the present could not be explicated using conventional discourse of social realism, which could easily be used for political purposes. Instead, the present could be addressed by breaking the old barriers of expression in an effort to leave the era of crimes and to reinvent old forms of expression. As the playwright Eugene Ionesco put it, “When I write…I try to say how the world appears to me, what it seems to me to be, as honestly as possible. Without thinking of propaganda, without attempting to direct the consciousness of my contemporaries, I try to be an objective witness within my subjectivity” (Ionesco 1963, 129).
To describe the change in French art and written word of the 1950s, one could quote Paul Wood, who, describing the post-war shift in postmodern art, states that “there can be no doubt that a far-reaching shift in the premises underlying what may count as an interesting or valuable work of contemporary art has indeed taken place” (Wood 2004, 8).

Just like art, which became more hybrid, emotional, and conceptual, the Nouveau Roman, too, left the realms of direct author-reader cooperation. Instead, it shifted toward stressing “the refigurative act of the reader as one of many possible ways of making sense” (Hornung 1987, 176). Thus, the position of the reader turned from a passive recipient of gossip and social instructions to that of an active architect of meaning. If the novel of the 19th century was for reading the history of individuals, the postmodern narrative is for reading oneself. “The novel is preeminently the art for feeling out the problems of the self in relation to other selves and the society around them” (Ames 1963, 243).

Instead of looking for specific fixed meaning and permanent conclusions that the author intended for the reader to distill, one has to embrace the totality of the universe that the Nouveau Roman creates. The reader should not look for a distinct theme that consecrates the novel to a particular idea or cause. Neither should he search for final meanings, upon finding which the novel becomes exhausted. “Instead of deceiving them as to the signification of their existence, [the Nouveau Roman] will help them to consider it more lucidly” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 140).
Some of the writers of the Left Bank whose career was only in its infant stage during the critical years of the late 1940s and the early 1950s were Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, and Nathalie Sarraute. In fact, the publishing house Editions de Minuit, which was clandestine during the Resistance and truly found its fame after World War II, later became the “publishing house [of] Alain Robbe-Grillet [and] the birthplace of the nouveau roman with […] Nathalie Sarraute, [and] Marguerite Duras” (Lottman 1982, 232). Written without any initial aim of belonging to a particular movement, the theoretical essays and novels of these authors sum up into a cohesive – albeit multifaceted – genre. Notably, Robbe-Grillet’s *For a New Novel* (1955-63) and Nathalie Sarraute's *The Age of Suspicion* (1956) are the two works that rather effectively lift the curtain into the world of the Nouveau Roman and are often considered manifestoes for this literary genre. The unplanned emergence and popularity of the Nouveau Roman may be considered a testament to the fact that the disillusioned French public was in need of a renewed worldview, of ways to cope with the uncertain. Indeed, there must have been a void in the literary interpretation of the world that later became filled by the authors who were soon unified under the name of the Nouveau Roman.

For instance, Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote most of his theoretical essays on the development and significance of the Nouveau Roman a little over a decade after World War II. In retrospect, it is easy to see that his vision for the place of the Nouveau Roman in literature and for literature itself is remarkably clear, especially considering the instability and the ambiguity of the world arena. Clearly noticeable in his reflections is
the notion that the writer has to be true to his time and not write in the styles of the past ages, because it would not be authentic and would not do anything for the development of literature. “[The] systematic repetition of the forms of the past is not only absurd and futile, but that it can even become harmful: by blinding us to our real situation in the world today, it keeps us, ultimately, from constructing the world and man of tomorrow” (Robbe-Grillet 1955&63, 9).

Indeed, the extreme focus on the condition of the world and the man are central to the works of the authors of the Nouveau Roman. “Man is present on every page, in every line, in every word” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 137). Despite their varying experimentations with layered stories or dialogues, a feature that unites their works is a persistent attempt to single out, in the entirety of existence, an individual story of the man and his relation to the continuous metamorphosis of the world around him. Where the novels of the past attempted to recreate an epic totality of life, the novel of the 1950s could no longer treat reality as absolute, society as hierarchical, and time as whole. In the universe of the Nouveau Roman people’s opinions become subjective, reality becomes a collection of individual perspectives, and time ceases to be linear.

In contrast to the popular works of social realism, which might have treated the reader as a fragment of the masses and the world as a collective workplace, the Nouveau Roman values individuality, even though it may make their hero seem lonely. Furthermore, unlike its politically encouraged contemporaries, the Nouveau Roman is not for the masses or the critics, but for an individual reader, because “the intelligence of
certain readers is remarkable” (Duras 1993, 82). After all, in an era when the collective was trying to replace all things individual, a personal, original opinion would be quite refreshing, if not freeing.
Chapter 6

FREEDOM WITHIN THE NOVEL

It is that quintessential innate freedom that often interests the authors of the Nouveau Roman. In literature, the type of content that allows for several possible interpretations is the most freeing. “Ultimately, it is perhaps this uncertain content of an obscure enterprise of form which will best serve the cause of freedom” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 142). If every poison has its anti-poison, then it is only natural that the antidote to a person’s external limitations would be a renewed search for freedom – in this case, freedom of literary expression. “We can write at any hour of the day. We are not sanctioned by orders, schedules, bosses, weapons, fines, insults, cops, bosses, and bosses. Nor by the brooding hens of tomorrow’s fascism” (Duras 1998, 31). For the writers of the Nouveau Roman the restrictive political circles, the marginalization of France, and the reduced sense of their intellectual influence compensate themselves in freedom: of the author, of the reader, of the text, and of signifier and signified.

To start with, it is the author of the Nouveau Roman who frees himself from any social, political, or other agendas. After all, the sense of social purpose or political cause may be satisfied in appropriate circles – in the party gatherings, on the pages of daily newspapers, or even handing out flyers on the street. But, as the writer of the new, unaffiliated French novel of the 50s, the author has to free himself from any external projections that may consecrate the novel to a narrow topic, thus reducing it to the status of a subservient text. For example, “political life ceaselessly obliges us to assume certain known significations: social, historical, moral” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 141). Such
significations imply a dependence of the author, as well as his text; whereas in truth, like any mortal, “he knows nothing about [the meaning of reality]” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 141). As a result, the free author abandons the role of an opinionated commentator and becomes simply a mellow observer.

In addition to filtering out external endorsements, the author’s freedom also extends itself to the reader: the author should not be dependent on the reader’s expectations. It is rather hypocritical of the author to create a storyline and characters, which the reader expects, or which conform to the commercial success of writing. Such an endeavor would cheapen the novel and dampen the meaning. Indeed, the author “need not be concerned with creating a universe in which the reader will feel too much at home, nor with giving the characters the proportions and dimensions required to confer upon them their rather dangerous ‘resemblance’” (Sarraute 1956, 72). If the authors were to write the novel created explicitly for the reader of the 1950s, it would age and disappear with those readers. Instead, the authors of the Nouveau Roman chose to free themselves from the boundaries imposed by the readers. In that manner they were able to create a genuine work of literature indicative of its time and place, and capable to speak just as effectively to the readers of the next generation.

As Marguerite Duras states in Writing, “I believe that the person who writes does not have any ideas for a book, that all she knows of this adventure, this book, is dry, naked writing, without a future, without echo, distant, with only its elementary golden rules: spelling, meaning” (Duras 1998, 7). That statement somewhat explains the other
important dynamic of the Nouveau Roman – that of the free text. Prominent in the writing of Duras, Robbe-Grillet, and Sarraute is the conviction that their texts, once written, become autonomous entities. “The modern novel […] is an exploration, but an exploration which itself creates its own significations, as it proceeds” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 141). The author’s privilege is that of being able to record the world around, to describe human existence, earthly surroundings. But once the novel is produced, it becomes self-sufficient: the author no longer has absolute authority over its message – instead, each reader, including the author, can equally and freely make sense of the novel’s world.

The writer has to engage in the act of conscious creation, but his work, naturally, becomes a free entity, a universe on its own terms, independent of him and other external influences. The author’s role is to create the world of the novel, but once it is complete, it is free. Freed from the author, the world inside these novels may help explicate the larger world around.

The Nouveau Roman’s underlying emphasis on and the need for freedom often constitutes a counter-action to that which felt the most limited, the most controlled, oftentimes literally arrested: discourse, language. In times of social crisis language and opinion are viewed as most threatening. After all, text, despite remaining constant, is an interactive conversation: when it is being read, it creates a dialogue; it communicates the dilemmas of its age and its surroundings. In this instance, for the novel of the 1950s, the counter-action for dictated meaning is freedom of signification: “We no longer believe in the fixed significations, the ready-made meanings which afforded man the old divine
order and subsequently the rationalist order of the nineteenth century” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 141).

Indeed, the hierarchy of the old divine order, or “the great chain of being,” afforded writers of the past era to use certain things or subjects as rather stable symbols, knowing that the reader will recognize their meaning and associations. Objects were “reassuring […] There was a constant identity between these objects and their owner” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 140). The crimson of drapes or the acres of lush gardens may have indicated royalty, or at least a full wallet of their beholder. However, by the middle of the 20th century the hierarchical link between people and their possessions largely disintegrated. From then on, material goods showed that their owner had the means – not the status. The age of credits, banks, and debt brought chaos into the symbolism of the material, where diamonds showed no wealth, and castles implied no title. With its symbolism removed, the crimson of the sunset in Marguerite Duras’ *Moderato Cantabile* evokes emotion, a state of mind, and never wealth.

At the dawn of the 21st century the fixed symbolism of the objects and the belonging of characters to their surroundings become hollow. Having lost their respective ranks in the so-called natural order, the characters and significations of the Nouveau Roman find their freedom. They no longer depend on each other and they effectively cease to be defined by each other. One might be tempted to think that, once detached from their surrounding, a person becomes meaningless and devalued. But interestingly enough, isolated from the significance of the material surroundings, a person stands out.
It is human existence and individuality that are put forward in the novel. In this new vacuum neither the social status nor the government machine is at the center of existence, but a person and the subjectivity of one’s existence.

In *Moderato Cantabile*, for example, the implied wealth and upper social status of the heroine do not change anything about her character. Her actions and emotions are the only criteria that help define her personality. Similarly, the attention of Nathalie Sarraute’s *Childhood* is directed to emotion, language, thought. The description of material objects or belongings are present in the text for the sole purpose of helping the reader navigate through the story. In *The Dressmaker’s Dummy* Robbe-Grillet creates an opposite scene: human characters are absent and material objects are the only elements present in the narrative. These objects include the most ordinary things like a teacup or a mirror and can potentially be found in other rooms, someplace else. Detached from any real owner, these objects do not acquire any symbolic presence. Overall, the texts of all three authors isolate their subjects by freeing them from any forced symbolism, making them stand out even more in their isolation.

All in all, there is a lot of valor and usefulness in admitting that the Nouveau Roman does not hold answers and absolute significations. It achieves the effect of decentralizing power, redistributing it among the author, the reader, and the subjects of the novel. Becoming ultimately free of its historic and individualistic constraints, the novel may then unveil itself freely for each reader. The future reader may unreservedly evaluate the characters, the surroundings, and reality itself as they coexist and coagulate
in the text. The reader also has a chance to determine for himself the nature of that reality, biased and imperfect as it may be, and discover “new significations still unknown to the author [as well as] new values” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 144).

It is freeing for the reader to be able to build his own conclusions, instead of being dictated what to believe. After all, in the age of suspicion, as Nathalie Sarraute called their literary era, mistrust and disenchantment may prove to be most valuable. Her own texts implicitly and explicitly display that attitude. “Ostensibly a revolt against Sartre and the politically committed or philosophically oriented novel, Mme Sarraute’s view proclaimed that both the novelist and his reader distrusted the fictional character and through him each the other” (Rahv 1974, 20).

Sarraute herself described her narrative as being “the converging point of [the author’s and the reader’s] mutual distrust, the devastated ground on which they confront each other” (Sarraute 1956, 57). For instance, in her autobiographical novel Childhood Sarraute-the-author presents her reader with two differing versions of the same character – one of them is Nathalie as a child, and the other is Sarraute as a more mature self later in life. Both characters – or rather consciousnesses – engage in a meaningful discussion, or sub-conversation, as she called it, pertaining to Sarraute’s life. What is then presented to the reader is a new biography told from two chronologically opposing perspectives. Both of those perspectives are true, but yet they are not entirely the same in their interpretation of facts and sentiments. So the reader has to be cautious not to perceive any
one side as ideally true – instead, it would be the reader’s sense of distrust and critical
mind that should guide him through the story.

Such lack of trust and the intermixing of several true takes on one story are not
mere inventions of Nathalie Sarraute. Similar attitudes can also be traced in various
literary and theoretical writings of other authors of the Nouveau Roman – for example,
Alain Robbe-Grillet plays with truth and invention in *Jealousy*, whereas Marguerite
Duras blurs multiple stories into an approximation of truth in *Moderato Cantabile*. So
overall, if one were to consider Robbe-Grillet’s statement that “the New Novel is
interested only in man and in his situation in the world”, it becomes clear that these
attitudes were appropriated by the novelists from real life (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 137).
Whatever social dynamics and overwhelming views circulated in France prior to and
during the 1950s, they would have to infiltrate their literature as well.
Chapter 7

SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY AND LITERATURE

One’s outlook on life is shaped by a myriad of factors, scientific discovery being not the least important. Dramatic and unprecedented as the world events and politics may have been in the early twentieth century, science achieved advances that resonated far beyond the scientific circles and, as a consequence, left a distinctive mark on the new genre of literature.

Despite seeming at first to be an unlikely pair for mutual interest and influence, science and literature nonetheless explore the same subject. For both of them people and the world around them present areas full of unknowns, speculations, and potential discoveries. Exploring those areas and understanding their components is a key priority for both. Approaching their subject from different standpoints, science and literature often complete each other – where physics ends, metaphysics takes off. So while physics takes an active interest in how the universe behaves, literature actually concentrates more on examining or, in our case, simply depicting why and where it behaves the way it does.

Such spontaneous dynamic between science and literature is often able to produce results that can be quite progressive. Writer’s imagination of the world of the future may prompt scientists to think creatively and come up with innovations that bring the future into the present. Similarly, scientific discoveries influence people’s worldview and expectations and in that manner find their way into the literary text. So it is only logical that at the height of the twentieth century, which is considered by many to be the period
of the most advanced and frequent scientific achievements, the authors of the Nouveau Roman could not continue to write as though they lived before the Industrial Revolution.

Being such a big part of everyday life and acting also as a catalyst in many of the recent world events, scientific influences find themselves camouflaged between the lines in the texts of the authors of the Nouveau Roman. For instance, Marguerite Duras admits to having been influenced by mathematics in one of her novels: “Moderato Cantabile is divided into six sequences, and each chapter has its order, its distribution, through which the reader can guess that I have studied mathematics” (Duras 1993, 70). The effects of nuclear physics and the devastation brought by the militaristic use of science are also interlaced in the narrative of her *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, where Duras discusses physical and emotional effects of bombings, issues of memory, and multiple perspectives on that event.

Science is never an overt subject in these novels. Instead, it surfaces as a factor that shapes the lens through which the author describes the world. It also affects the conscience of the characters. As a result, the novel becomes increasingly complex and layered in meaning. This effect can be found surprising if one concludes hastily that every scientific discovery simplifies our understanding of the world. Instead, every major scientific answer achieves a conflicting effect: it explains the universe around and at the very same time it complicates it, making the world around more multipart, more infinite and ends up creating even more questions. Therefore, the complexity of the Nouveau
Roman comes as no surprise, especially considering the fact that scientific discovery made only a couple of decades earlier radically changed perceptions of reality.

Without a doubt, the scientific discovery of the early twentieth century that modified the very concept of the universe was the myriad of Albert Einstein’s findings. The theory of relativity, the photoelectric effect, and the quantum theory of atomic motion are only a few of his well-known contributions. Most pertinent to the analysis of the Nouveau Roman is, arguably, the theory of relativity: more precisely, the manner in which it modifies one’s perception of time and space, as well as frames of reference and perspectives (All About Science).

Without going too much into the details of physics, one can simplistically state that the special theory of relativity implies that space and time are relative concepts; they are interrelated and depend on various factors. The theory also demonstrates that time and space are not linear and it emphasizes the curved nature of space and time. As such, the measurements of space and time depend on other factors, such as the position of an observer, velocity, and speed of movement, just to name a few.

More specifically, the theory of special relativity demonstrates “the conclusion that two observers who are moving relative to one another, will get different measurements of the length of a particular object or the time that passes between two events” (SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory). This effect is known as length contraction and time dilation. The theory of special relativity was able to prove “that physics is the same only for all inertial observers” (SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory).
Laboratory). For the rest of the observers who are in motion, time and space measure differently and have different meaning.

Even though the postulations and the consequences of the theory of relativity belong to the realms of the science of physics, such major change in the perception of time and space could not have gone unnoticed by the public. After all, both time and space complete the very concept of reality. When people’s interpretation of time and space changes, so does their view on reality. That, in turn, becomes reflected in literature. Because, “even if the novel were only to reproduce reality, it would scarcely be natural for the foundations of its realism not to have evolved in parallel with these transformations” (Robbe-Grillet 1955&63, 159).

The findings of the theory, that state that time is not linear and invariable, make it difficult for writers to discuss time as absolute. After the findings of the theory, the representation of time in the novel ceases to have the same value and same starting and ending point for every person. Alain Robbe-Grillet admits that “film and novel today meet in the construction of moments, of intervals, and of sequences which no longer have anything to do with those of clocks or calendars” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 151). Similarly, space cannot be universally defined and its measurements are dependent on other factors. “Each [writer] speaks of the world as he see it, but no one sees it in the same way” (Robbe-Grillet 1955&63, 158). People in everyday life are rarely inertial observers. They are bound to move and usually get accustomed to observing the world from their
respective location inside their house, city, or country. As a result, each person is likely to have their own perspective on space and time.

Specific reference frames, used in physics to explain special relativity, readily find their way onto the pages of the writers in the 1950s. In his essay *In the Corridors of the Metro* Alain Robbe-Grillet creates almost a Russian doll of perspectives: five frames of reference locking into each other. While reading the essay, one is looking onto a crowd of travelers who glance at a man gazing into a poster of a giant face glaring back at the crowd. Each of their perspectives is clearly different and results in a view subjective to their physical location.

The relativity of time is also implicitly embedded into Nathalie Sarraute’s autobiographical *Childhood*. The two sub-consciousnesses of the author engage in a dialogue on the same topic – the childhood years of Sarraute. However, one of them is an early temporal reference of a child, whereas the second one is that of an adult person. After reading the first few pages, it becomes obvious to the reader that these two halves of one personality are discussing the same events from two very distinct and subjective standpoints. Separated by a weighty timeframe, they each have differing, sometimes opposing, opinions on the events and people in Nathalie’s life. But despite the disparities in their stories, each of them remains true.

Interestingly enough, in the narrative of Sarraute’s *Childhood*, the timeframe that separates the two selves of Nathalie becomes irrelevant. The reader realizes that the dialogue happens in the present. The child’s take on the events was not recorded years
ago. Instead, because time is not treated as linear, the child’s thoughts are always present in the thoughts of adult Nathalie. What the reader perceives as the past and the present blends together and is not bound by time. “The context in which Sarraute’s novels occur is a timeless, space-less vacuum. Sarraute situates her ‘dramas’ in a hermetic universe, isolated from whatever contemporary events may be taking place in the outside world; wars and strikes, natural and manmade disasters, all are absent from her work” (Besser 35, 1968).

Likewise, Marguerite Duras’ treatment of the relativity of time and space is present in her novel Moderato Cantabile. In it, the reader uncovers a story of two strangers – a man and a woman – meeting sporadically under the judgmental eye of onlookers in a café and discussing, sometimes emotionally almost reliving, the tragic story of two lovers. The temporal and spatial reference frames created by this outlay are even more complex.

The relativity of space is apparent in the fact that the story of the two lovers is told by another couple, at a location completely different from that of the original story. The reader never gets an objective glimpse of what happened to the lovers, so this perspective is the one that appears most complete to the reader. In addition to that, there are also people in the café – workers and the restaurant lady – who passively assess both the couple telling the story and the story known about the lovers. Even with these interlacing views, it is difficult for the reader to filter out a version of truth that is at least
a bit more stable. Instead, one has to be compelled with the fact that what happens in the novel is subject to interpretation and a result of individual reference.

The relativity of time in *Moderato Cantabile* creates an equally puzzling effect. The novel’s story unfolds over the timeframe of several days. The events of each day often happen in the same order, where the lengthy description of the crepuscule and the colors of the setting sun over the ocean separate the novel and give it sequence. However, the time sometimes seems to be a formality – it becomes insignificant as the tales blur into one. Moreover, time ceases to be linear and becomes circular as the couple in the café mentally recreates the drama of the tragic passion of the lovers. The tragic love tale is replayed in different space and different time.

The relative nature of space and time did not find its way into the Nouveau Roman by mere coincidence. After all, despite distancing itself from the bias of its time, the Nouveau Roman admits to being dedicated to man – to the conditions and dilemmas of existence after 1945. Scientific findings explained that time and space are not constant, that they are interdependent. That finding infiltrated the novel, creating narratives where “space destroys time, and time sabotages space” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 155). The way that scientific influences get soaked into the novel is indicative of the way that science influenced people’s perception of reality at that time in history. The theory of relativity caused a minor change in the public’s understanding of time. It also set off minute changes in their views on space and perspectives. But together, all of these small adjustments resulted in a noticeable shift of people’s interpretation of reality.
Traditional philosophical realism has generally perceived reality as not dependent on people’s beliefs. It presented reality as an uninterrupted objective continuum. The theory of relativity, on the other hand, made reality a lot more fragmented by making it dependent on individual perspectives. For instance, one of the components of special relativity – the principle of locality – states that an object is directly influenced only by its surroundings. The novel appropriates this principle of locality by concentrating exclusively on the moment. It focuses on the person and its immediate surroundings, which is readily traceable in the theory of the Nouveau Roman: “there can be no reality outside the images we see, the words we hear” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 152). Within the literary fabric of the Nouveau Roman, the two simultaneous moments experienced by two different characters produce versions of reality that are at the same time contradictory and true. Instead of being independent of people’s beliefs, reality has become subject to a person’s perspective and location – in short, subject to interpretation. Keeping this in mind, it is no longer surprising that the manipulation of truth in the aforementioned political trials, the disillusionment of intellectuals, the disinterest in political discourse, and the loss of trust in heroic leaders are all the attributes of the twentieth century. In all of the cases the many different individual interpretations of truth made objectivity unachievable, completely displacing reality.
Chapter 8

SHIFT TO SUBJECTIVITY

Ultimately, science’s emphasis on the importance of an individual frame of reference found its way into the Nouveau Roman in the form of acute subjectivity. It surfaces as an important element of the story in characters’ opinions, in the narrative, and in the overall descriptions, which do not fail to remind the reader of their narrow perspectives.

The theory of special relativity functions under an assumption that space and time are not invariable phenomena. Instead, they have to be evaluated or measured from a certain standpoint: a known frame of reference. Because there can be multiple frames of reference, the measurements of space and time will not always be the same. Einstein’s theory extends itself to discuss the lack of absolute simultaneity, where the sequence of events is relative to the observer’s location and motion. According to special relativity, two events, happening simultaneously for one observer, may not happen simultaneously for another observer if the observers are in relative motion (SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory). Consequently, simultaneity is also relative. It depends on certain factors, which means that the sequence of events may be different for each person, producing a new story every time.

Altogether, the relative nature of time, space, and simultaneity must have quite an effect on the plausibility of objectivity. In a different location, within a different state of mind, a person’s outlook produces one’s own particular truth. Taking into consideration
that truth may have so many true variations, one may prefer to stay within one’s own personal point of view, making objectivity that much more unattainable. Therefore, if even such seemingly stable phenomena as simultaneity and sequencing of events — traditionally considered universal — are scientifically proven to vary from person to person, then subjectivity may be a natural state. Subjectivity may even be \textit{necessary}, as it preserves the integrity of those narrow facts and circumstances within one particular perspective.

The novel, which for decades has concerned itself with presenting a cohesive, objective story, has also succumbed to this subjectivity. The narrative of the Nouveau Roman, according to Robbe-Grillet, is not there to “convince the reader of the objective existence […] of a world which the novelist seemed merely to reproduce” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 146). That was the attribute of the earlier novels. The Nouveau Roman abandons the pursuit of a story that is true for all. Instead, it finds new value in the subjective, personal story, which is a product of a certain place and time. It marvels at the way that subjectivity displaces the events, producing a deeply individual story for every character.

Nathalie Sarraute includes subjectivity in both her literary works and her theoretical discussions of the Nouveau Roman. In the creative novels, “Sarraute’s conception of reality […] appears to be that only true reality is a reality that consists of man’s subjective, invisible feelings. Objective reality is fallacious, insignificant, and banal” (Levinsky 1973, 5). For instance, Nathalie Sarraute’s narrative in \textit{Childhood} creates a complex fusion of several deeply personal perspectives. It is a blend of at least
two subjective minds: those of her two selves at different times of her childhood and adulthood. Added to that are also the secondary opinions of other persons in her life.

The bias of each one of Sarraute’s subjective selves is apparent – it is appropriate to their respective ages. The young, infantile Nathalie often seems wide-eyed, naïve, and thoughtful, describing life simply and with no reservations. There are no calculated actions or sentiments of bitterness in her perceptions. The words of her adult self, on the other hand, conceal a bit of sarcasm and perhaps a trace of disenchantment. The calmness and reservation present in the opinions of adult Nathalie hint to the wisdom accumulated with age, which reflects reevaluated opinions about the people and events of her childhood. The uniqueness of each of these two subjectivities is apparent in the fact that the reader does not need to be told who is speaking. Their distinct attitude towards the story of life is so indicative of their perspectives that it does not fail to set them apart.

In her theoretical essay *The Age of Suspicion* Nathalie Sarraute is equally determined to distinguish the positive effects of subjectivity. She stresses that, in order for the writer to meet the literary demands of its time, the subjective voice is not simply appropriate, but actually necessary.

…to write only of what interests him today, [the writer] realizes that the impersonal tone, which was so well adapted to the needs of the old-style novel, is not suitable for conveying the complex, tenuous states that he is attempting to portray; the fact being that these states resemble certain phenomena of modern physics, which are so delicate and minute that even a ray of light falling on them
disturbs and deforms them. Consequently, whenever the novelist seeks to describe
them without revealing his own presence, he seems to hear the reader, like a child
whose mother is reading him his first story, stop and ask: “Who said that?”
(Sarraute 1963, 65).

Sarraute makes it quite clear that the writer who takes his mission seriously has to
create literature that is in sync with the human condition of the present. Historic
circumstances of the twentieth century have been such that the reader can no longer trust
the objective depersonalized voice of the narrator. Faced with political agenda, social
incentives, and personal ambitions, true objectivity has left the realms of everyday life –
it is now more appropriate within the field of theory.

In order to avoid manipulation and deceit, the reader may be more open to the
point of view that is unapologetically subjective. For that reason, Nathalie Sarraute “felt
the novelist should create all his characters from his own single subjective ‘I,’ which
speaks exclusively of itself” (Rahv 1974, 22). Her opinion shows sound sense, because
the characters, which originated in the author’s subjectivity, would be unbound by the
faulty need to be objective and, as a result, would appear more authentic.

In *Childhood* Nathalie Sarraute took a doubly insightful look into her own life by
creating a dialogue between her child-self and her adult-self. The dialogue joins and at
the same time juxtaposes two distinct subjectivities. It is in the dynamic of these two
subjective selves that the reader can get a glimpse of the story that most approximates the
true biography of Sarraute.
In Marguerite Duras’ novel *Moderato Cantabile* subjectivity plays an equally important role. The conversation between the two main characters – Anne and Chauvin – is focused on the tragic story of two lovers. Everything that the reader knows about the tragic love tale comes from the discussion between Anne and Chauvin. Interestingly enough, the reader never gets a “true” and objective version of what really happened to the lovers or what caused their tragic end. In fact, if one were to ponder who can provide such story, one would immediately conclude that neither the newspaper nor any witnesses could provide a true tale of what led to their tragic end. The only people who could shed any light would be the two lovers involved; although even they would not be able to tell the story ignoring their respective subjective perspectives.

In some way similar to the reader, Anne and Chauvin find themselves guessing what brought the demise of the lovers’ affair. Still, even when Anne and Chauvin retell – and metaphysically almost relive – the tragic love tale, neither the reader nor they find themselves any closer to truth.

Overall, *Moderato Cantabile* has all the elements that could potentially make it into a traditional novel that describes the epic totality of life and creates timeless heroes. There is a love story, there is also a fatal passion, there is a class divide between Anne and Chauvin, there are obstacles that can make love unreachable, and there is a suppressed infatuation that never realizes. Both the characters and the settings possess a distinction that makes them memorable and unique. However, the novel’s subjectivity takes away the finality of the story: there is no omniscient narrator to explain if Anne and
Chauvin experienced an affair, and there is also no objective perspective that uncovers what any of the characters experienced. The reader suspects that a metaphysical love story unfolded in Anne’s imagination, but he does not have enough information to define its limits.

Because of the cloud of subjectivity that surrounds the events in the novel, one is not lured into looking for heroes or villains among the characters. Each character is periodically more likeable or less so, depending on whose perspective is dominant in the narrative and whose subjective opinion the reader prefers. Likewise, the plot is constructed in such a way that prevents it from becoming an epic. For instance, a lot of the events repeat daily, reducing the progress and breaking the continuity of the story. At the same time, the wine consumed by Anne and Chauvin alters their dialogue and makes the reader question the authenticity of their opinions.

Such creative inconsistencies within the novel are a good example of the fact that instead of being an overt element, “subjectivity returns as something always already textualized, always found under a description” (Gratton, 1997, 245). Overall, it turns out to be a productive feature of the novel, making the reader more alert and prompting him to think creatively and to construct his own meaning.

Subjectivity also takes on an interesting form in the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet. His collection of essays Snapshots describes everyday scenes in a way that highlights “the essential subjectivity of ‘objects’ in the novel” (Morrissette 1965, 5). In the first essay, The Dressmaker’s Dummy, the author describes a simple room with its
furnishings. However, the description appears strikingly untraditional. “‘The Dressmaker’s Dummy’ may be considered an experiment in the suppressed first-person or *je-neant* mode […] the point of view, with its rotations, emerges from a consciousness inside the text which the reader must assume, thus placing himself at the observational center” (Morrissette 1965, 10). The rotating frame of reference changes the angle at which the objects are viewed. This results in a constantly shifting perspective, making the objects appear separated from each other – as if existing separately from each other. Their position relative to other objects in the room is, thus, subjective to the angle at which one looks at them.

The Nouveau Roman’s shift to subjectivity, therefore, was not an attempt to distance itself from the social struggles of the time and ignore the dilemmas of the post-war polarized world. It was, rather, an honest effort to detail, and by detailing perhaps to resolve, the “complex, tenuous states” of a person faced with all the uncertainty and suspicion of the world.

By no means, thought, does the lack of objectivity in the Nouveau Roman make it weak. To the contrary, it may be one of the elements that make it resistant to pretentious supremacy, ultimately rendering it strong.

The Nouveau Roman tells its story with a continuous reminder that it is, in its core, subjective. The world presented within the novel is seen through someone else’s eyes, felt in someone else’s heart and evaluated by someone else’s consciousness – “in our books […] it is a man who sees” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 138). One might suspect that
this reliance on the senses of the characters may limit the richness of the novel or be insufficient for the reader. However, there is a lot of value and, ironically, liberation in the reader’s ability to be aware of the fact that the world in the novel is its own, and that the characters’ perceptions of the world also belong to them. Thus, their respective subjectivities become freeing.

Instead of having opinions and interpretations imposed upon him, the reader may be able to appreciate the richness of the written word and the Nouveau Roman’s subjectivity. The reader can take subjective opinions for what they are and use them to relate to the world around, remaining free to create his own meaning. In such manner the novel’s “uncertain content [serves] the cause of freedom” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 142). By not having to conform to a collective objectivity, the reader may remain a silent observer of someone else’s subjectivity.

In the process of reading the novel there is a continuous synthesis of the author’s descriptive subjectivity, the reader’s evaluative subjectivity and the subjective nature of the elements in the novel. “For, far from neglecting [the reader], the author today proclaims his absolute need of the reader’s cooperation, an active, conscious, creative assistance” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 156). The reader of the novel is just as important as the writer, because both of them cooperate indirectly though the elements in the novel in order to create meaning.
Chapter 9

CHARACTER: REDEFINING THE HERO

The creative and conscientious approach of the reader is equally crucial to understanding the characters of the story. Following the political exploitations of literature, the authors of the Nouveau Roman could no longer afford creating characters that were one-dimensionally good or bad. Nor could they consecrate them to a certain mission in life. Furthermore, by abandoning the principles of the traditional novel, the Nouveau Roman exchanged the author’s omniscience for the subjective opinions of its characters. The novel no longer provides an objective explanation of the personality or the actions of its characters, which requires the reader to decipher any significations existing within the character.

The main character or several characters of a novel have traditionally been central to its structure. Their tangible existence, their moral choices and their opinions all contribute to their fictional image and help the reader connect with the characters and their circumstances. In order to obtain genuine representation of a character in the novel, the author usually needs to provide details about them to help the reader construct the character from the written word. The physical description, naturally, is one of the main features that help with that. It gives essential information about the character’s presence. It may specify whether the person is stately or petite, young, in the prime of life, or endowed with the wisdom of the old age. Often enough, these descriptions will also give away clues about the personality: it can be the eyes that hide a spark of a fiery
temperament or some other feature that serves as a hint for the reader as to the character’s fate or actions. Like the natural compulsion to fill empty spaces, it is only human for the reader to want to know as much as possible about the person in the fiction. The name, the face, the age, and the place all help in the reader’s effort to recreate the real person from the novel’s character.

Nonetheless, it is important to ask – what is real when it comes to a description of a human being. That is also a significant consideration for both the writers and the readers of the Nouveau Roman. When one meets a person – whether fictional or living – one actually only gets a snapshot of that person; a picture in time and space, which is only a part of reality in that exact moment. Any sense of understanding a person (or a character) comes with the benefit of knowing them for a long period of time – and even then that sense only faintly approaches the real persona, never reaching an absolute.

Therefore, for an author to present a character as complete at any given moment is disingenuous. For that reason, a noticeable feature of the Nouveau Roman is an exposed incompleteness of the representation of the main character(s). The cloud of ambiguity that surrounds the characters of the story may be attained using various techniques. Probably one of the best known examples that slightly precedes the Nouveau Roman is the main character in Franz Kafka’s novel The Castle. In it, the protagonist’s name is denoted simply as K. Despite being such a minor transgression to the expected elements of the novel, and especially considering the fact that a name really explains little to the reader in terms of the meaning of the novel, the K initial nonetheless acts as a
metaphorical obstacle. It prevents the reader from fully grasping the essence of the character and preserves his anonymity. It also creates a boundary between the reader and the character that does not allow for a full appropriation of the character into a caricature of the day or simply turning the novel and the character into a plain message and messenger.

Similarly, distancing themselves from the image of an omniscient author, the writers of the Nouveau Roman often describe their characters using just enough – or not enough – details to prevent the reader from passing a final irrefutable judgment or drawing incontrovertible conclusions. “Even when a character is defined, ambiguity pervades all that he does or says, impending positive identifications of his personality” (Levinsky 1973, 9). Sometimes the descriptions of characters, like those of Marguerite Duras, provide the reader with only a swift glance at the physical traits of a character. Other times, like Natalie Sarraute’s characters, “they have no recognizable physical appearance or personality traits that stamp them as individuals. Most of them do not even bear a name” (Besser 31, 1968).

The difference between Sarraute’s method and the technique of the omniscient author, who also reveals what each character is thinking or feeling, is that the latter provides all the information necessary to the reader’s understanding. Sarraute leaves the reader to fend for himself. He must learn to recognize characters from the inside, by internal identification with their emotional states (Besser 1979, 68).
All in all, the insufficiencies of the descriptions are historically appropriate. They make it difficult or often illogical for the reader to reduce the characters to a short adjective, to profess his love or hate for the characters, or, much less, to make an idol out of a character.

In his theoretical essay *On Several Obsolete Notions* Alain Robbe-Grillet touches upon the notion of character in the new contemporary writings. Along with expressing his esteem for such forward-thinking writers as Kafka and Faulkner, he also expresses the need for the new writing to break free from the characters as they were in the previous era. “The novel of characters belongs entirely to the past, it describes a period: that which marked the apogee of the individual” (Robbe-Grillet 1957, 28).

Indeed, even a short review of history of the last two centuries reveals a tendency to record people’s actions in absolute values: the hero of Admiral Nelson and General de Lafayette, the genius of Victor Hugo, the villain of Robespierre. Although not entirely perfect or entirely evil, the prominent figures in history have, for convenience’s sake, a record that approximates their deeds to their most influential ones.

In a world of the past centuries history might have had a relatively local sense. History has usually been recorded by the region or by the events. With the so-called great chain of being remaining intact, it has been natural for the literary genres of the time to replicate life, providing the reader with characters who are good, or grim, or gullible: heroes and anti-heroes. However, just as the world has been shifting towards a more
globalized existence, the story of a man has started outgrowing a man. It can no longer be compacted into a single life experience, into a conflict-and-resolution formula.

To think that the writers of the post-war era could continue creating black-and-white characters, or chiseled individuals of Tolstoy, or heroes of Dumas would be naïve. Disillusioned by the fake political facades and manipulations, Hitler’s deceptions, false testimonies, “Stalin’s lack of culture, [and] the stupidity of the French Communist party” the French public, writers, and intellectuals of the Cold War era could hardly trust conventional characters to represent reality, or the mighty hero to conquer either political block (Robbe-Grillet 1957, 36).

The rise of the government machine and the fading of the monarchy made individual actions less influential. Instead, a citizen became more valuable as a member of his community. His actions acquired more significance when coupled with the approval and the contributions of other people. The everyday existence of ordinary people could rarely provide opportunities of becoming a national hero. Nonetheless, life could still provide occasions where even mundane actions could have a heroic consequences in narrow spheres of life, like refusing cooperation with an oppressive regime or selflessly helping others. The notion of the hero remained, but, stripped of its global importance, it produced “heroes without naturalness as without identity” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 155).

As Robbe-Grillet accurately observes, “the world’s destiny has ceased, for us, to be identified with the rise or fall of certain men, of certain families” (Robbe-Grillet 1957,
Indeed, the world’s destiny after World War II appeared to be swinging on a pendulum between two rival powers and systems of thought: the Communist union and the liberal capitalist states. The influence of single individuals – or French intellectuals from the Left Bank, for that matter, – was marginal, if not non-existent. Certainly, heads of state could exercise immense power, but they could do so only because of and as leaders of massive government machines. The notion of a solitary activist, of a hero against-all-odds, has become obsolete. In the eyes of the authors of the Nouveau Roman and their contemporaries, men were either subservient to or messengers of the larger political or social entity, whose “blocs [were] drawing into their respective camps like magnets” (Lottman 1982, 277). The search for a third way, as history shows us, at that time has proven fruitless.

The image of a Promethean hero would be difficult to recreate in both life and fiction. On the one hand, the victory of 1945 had been won by a united effort of many soldiers, many generals, and many states. It was not gained by any one hero like Alexander the Great, or Napoleon, or Jeanne d’Arc. On the other hand, the cult of the individual played out as a catastrophe during Hitler’s reign and would play out similarly with Stalin and many others. Without a doubt, it would be unreasonable to expect that the drastic changes in the world arena from classical antiquity to the 1960s can leave the image of the hero intact. The classical hero has originally been an example of society, one who is able to fight his limitations and guide humanity to better ways. However, the decades after World War II turned out to be the time when the idols of Hitler, Stalin,
Mao, and the like turned too quickly to villains. The image of the hero, if it was to be left intact at all, needed desperately to be reconstructed, reconfigured in a way that would reflect not only the changed world, but also people’s changed outlook and attitude to the world.

The ultimate Hero does not seem to have a place in the twentieth century. The globalized dynamics of the world are too complex to be influenced by one individual, which makes the victory of the modern day hero incomplete. However, there are opportunities in the modern life that make ordinary actions heroic: for instance, having the courage to publish literature that resists oppression, or writing novels that go against the advertised popular literary tendencies. Heroism for people in the twentieth century lies in preserving their humanity. Thus, it is no longer unnatural to think that the image of the hero can emerge not as the leader of the masses, but instead as a man within his own individuality. As a matter of fact, it is possible that the human hero and the human salvation are found in discovering that one’s individuality and one’s subjectivity is of value.
Chapter 10

CONCLUSION

Despite having few explicit remarks of the dramatic development of the 1940s and 50s, the Nouveau Roman bears strong links to the dilemmas of its time. Along with the social and political ordeals happening in France in the middle of the twentieth century, the literary sphere underwent a transformation of its own. A lot of the elements that make the Nouveau Roman a distinct genre have roots in the historic and scientific dynamics of this age.

The trials of World War II tested writers’ dedication and sense of purpose, proving that the sound ethics of a good citizen are indispensable in writing. The post-war era also demonstrated that an author bears moral responsibility for the message in his works and must not masquerade truth in his search for fame. For the authors of the Nouveau Roman this meant abandoning pretentious omniscience and creating books that allowed uncertainty and made it useful.

Following the polarity and the manipulation of the Cold War, the Nouveau Roman isolated itself from politics and social activism. The writers engaged instead in an active search for a new language, which would be free from incentives and propaganda. As a result, the Nouveau Roman embraced language as an artistic medium and allowed the reader to create meaning.

The advent of the Theory of Relativity and the changes in people’s understanding of space and time affected the Nouveau Roman’s chronology and special representations.
The relative nature of space and time and their dependence on individual frames of reference shifted them from their dominant positions in the narrative. Time and space ceased to define the events in the novel and became formalities.

The combined influence of these developments made the writers of the Nouveau Roman recognize the unlikelihood of objective narration. Instead, the Nouveau Roman embraced subjectivity, which became necessary in its effort to ensure the freedom of the author, the reader, and the text. The emphasis on the freedom of constructing meaning and on the freedom of signification acted as remedial actions aimed at overwriting the conformity, the dictatorships, and the idle mind.

By working on their Nouveau Roman, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Marguerite Duras reinvented the novel. They also did a service to the readers by making them more alert and prompting them to engage their creative critical minds. Aside from the literary renewal, Nouveau Roman also carries in itself a silent rebellion – a rejection of boundaries; not moral boundaries, but, more importantly, literary and human boundaries. It is a tribute to the traits that make us human and that unite people on levels that reach deeper than origin or politics.
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