CHAPTER EIGHT

Generative Word Play: The Outer Limits of the Novel Genre

Not surprisingly, some modern critics find the new kind of reading so difficult and so different from the old that they call it writing.

Frank Kermode

In Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, one character refers to "Klipschorn's" theories of "blanketing" in language: "That part, the 'filling' you might say, of which the expression 'you might say' is a good example." The linguistic self-consciousness of this and other passages in the novel draws the reader's attention overtly to the fact that he is reading words, words with their different textures and meanings. In a more covert version of this narcissism, such thematization would give way to an implicit, actualized process which in effect would come most close to equating reading with writing as active, creative efforts with language. In order for this to be the case, however, the linguistic structures employed must be immanent and functional within the text. They must not be so subtle as to be invisible, nor should they be so obvious that the reader is not really made to work with language, but merely asked to appreciate the verbal cleverness (as in snippets of Nabokov's *Ada* such as the address to "young laymen and lemens- and not to grave men or gravemen," or the "bric-à-Bracques" or "Aujourd'hui [heute-toity]"). Yet to give but a brief example, one which many critics have developed in considerable detail, in Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* the language play actually serves to structure the plot: the *fillette* and her *ficelles*, her *corps* and the *cordelettes* (and *vaguelettes*), *Violette* and the *viol*, and so on.

The act of reading words becomes one of structuring fictive worlds. As Ricardou explains: "lire, c'est explorer les relations spécifiques par lesquelles sont liés les éléments d'un texte.

Voilà pourquoi, à la limite, un livre qui ne résiste pas ne mérite guère lecture: avant même d'en avoir parcouru quelques pages, le lecteur sait qu'il l'a déjà lu en totalité.2

The linguistic self-reflectiveness or even self-generation of the text are forms of resistance to the act of reading, shifting attention to the semantic, syntactic, and often also phonetic texture of the words which actually serve to structure as well as constitute the work. This centripetal pull, however, does not cut the reader off from what has here been called "vital" or life experience. While it is true that the work becomes a self-contained artificial unit, nevertheless, the extramural link is made through the process of fiction-making in language, the creation of worlds in words. While the early nouveau roman contented itself with delivering a challenge, primarily to fiction's diegetic identity, the more recent nouveau nouveau roman is more subversive in its linguistic orientation: a former division of diegetic unity becomes now a kind of unity of diegetic plurality,3 of linguistic "plurisignification" that is generative of the "fiction" itself. Lest one think that this latest development constitutes a radical break, one ought to recall that there are precedents—the Grand Rhétoriqueurs, the Gongorists, and of course other fiction writers.4 Saussure found anagrammatic play (whether ritualistic, mnemonic, or accidental, he did not know) in early Greek and Latin texts,5 and certainly Raymond Roussel's work was in some ways as radical as Ricardou's. Linguistically generated "heterocosms" (and world visions) exist too outside the confines of the nouveau nouveau roman, in Nabokov's Ada (with its ardor in the arbors of Ardis) or ill Volponi's Corporale.

As with the "auto, automa, autore, automatico" functional play examined earlier in La macchina mondiale, this latter novel offers structurally significant generative word play: Girolamo calms his nerves as a boy by reciting a list of Greek verbs (given to the reader in Italian) whose actions prefigure (generate?) all the major actions of the rest of the novel. He also makes anagrammatic and punning word associations throughout the novel, all of which are thematically or narratively functional. For instance: "Mussolini. Moschicida, moschettiere moschicida, uccidi le mosche."6 To Girolamo, language is a means of

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2 Le Nouveau Roman, p. 70.
3 Ibid., p. 139: "Le récit n'a donc pas disparu: au cours des procès, il s'est multiplié et ce pluriel est entré en conflit avec lui-même."
6 (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), p. 161. See also pp. 27, 242. All further page references will be in parentheses in the text. Translations are more or less impossible on this verbal play level, and so will not appear.
ordering his life—a *mise en abyme* of Volponi's language viewed as a means of ordering the fiction:

Mi viene la voglia di definire qualcosa intorno a me che non vedo e che non conosco, ma che mi pressa e mi punzecchia con delle manazioni:

1 microbo-radio
1 radocobo
1 coboradoc (c, c dolce).

Ebbene, questo mi aiuta, mi dà la mia presenza allargando intorno a me la stretta, "il senso dello stato."

Respirare in mezzo alle presse e intanto stabilire una mia codificazione [p. 142].

In Volponi's opinion, functional linguistic play has the capacity to revivify that part of reality that is structured and developed through language.

However, there is some truth in the statement that the practitioners of the *nouveau nouveau roman* use more frequent and more sustained linguistic play than any other writers, short of Joyce perhaps. They have also theorized upon their own practice at considerable length. This does not, by any means, however, signify communal agreement. In fact, at Cerisy in 1971, replying to Ricardou's earlier claims that *Projet pour une révolution à New York* was anagrammatically generated by the letters, syllables, sounds of "rouge,"7 Robbe-Grillet felt the need to point out that it was rather the colour red (blood, torture, flames) that was the *authorial* generative key.8 In this, it is no different from any other image that structures and thematically sustains a novel—the beam and shape of the lighthouse in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, for example. To Robbe-Grillet, words are signs; to Ricardou they are sounds; letters, syllables to be materially manipulated by writer and reader. This latter generative play would constitute the fourth type of narcissism mentioned in Chapter One—covert linguistic narcissism.

However, this mode proves to be hard to analyze even in terms of the devices or models employed. The pun and the anagram are the most frequently used, but others can exist. Ricardou's *Les Lieux-dits*, for example, is composed by means of an acrostic diagonal; more simply, *La Prise de Constantinople* contains repetitive play on the letters S and L, both overtly at the beginning of words (Lucky Strike, etc.) and in hidden form ("est-ce elle").

In *Ada*, Nabokov delights in interlanguage play (mostly Russian-English) which is both generative and self-reflective: "At the next turning, the *romantic* mansion appeared on the gentle eminence of old novels."9 One also finds the sequence: "half-dotty old doctor, doc, toc,

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8 *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui* 2, 160.
ditty, dotty, ballatetta, deboletta . . . tu, voce spigottita, spigotty e
diavoletta . . . de lo cor dolente . . . con ballatetta va . . . va . . . della
strutta, destruttamente . . . mente . . . mente" (p. 26). This bizarre linking
reveals the actions of the novel to follow. A few of these are those
involving Doctor Van, the theorist about time (toc), easing his broken
heart (cor dolente) over Ada who has left him temporarily (va), and
whose name in Russian, Adochka, is an anagram of adova dochka, Hell's
daughter (diavoletta), and so on. (For Nabokov, interlanguage play is
often linked to parody, as in the three blunders in the first paragraph of
Ada which ridicule the mistranslations of the Russian classics.10)

Still other devices are used. The steps of Slade's word-golf in
Nabokov's Pale Fire function thematically in the novel: for example,
hate-love in three" or hate-late-lave-love. In the nouveau roman there is
Simon's La Bataille de Pharsale in which Duchemin yields de la rue and
l'arrière-garde produces le dernier cavalier.

The punning play of Ulysses and Finnegans Wake is perhaps the
most blatant forerunner of the use of the pun as a structural linguistic
model. Often, however, this device, while frequent enough and usually
functional, seems difficult to sustain. In Barth's "Life-Story," one finds an
isolated example that bears no extension: the writer sits in his "oak-
wainscoted study" pondering morosely his fictive identity when "one of
his mistresses whereof he had none entered his brown study."11 It is the
brevity and "occasional" quality of the pun that make it less structurally
significant in fiction (and harder to discuss).

The anagram is perhaps more sustainable in a narrative, although even
this has been challenged. Renato Barilli12 claims that the anagram is a
"microtrope" that is more poetic than novelistic. Ricardou's "epsilon-
'espion" play in Les Lieux-dits is therefore just a pre-textual stimulation,
not a real textual generator. Given the confusion between pre-text genesis
and in-text production even at that important Cerisy conference (usually
the only distinction was an ideologically conditioned semantic one-
genesis being bourgeois and romantic expressionism), the question of
when and where the language play is conceived by the author had best be
set temporarily aside. However, the objection of the limitation of scope
that Barilli raises is more immediately significant. Does Ricardou's loose
play on rien in La prise de Constantinople (nier, rein, ire, rente, nerf,
rang, dans, rire) really work so as to order the entire novel? Likely not,
for the reader. However this does not totally invalidate its structural
function in the fiction, of course; it merely points to its limits of range.

10 The opening sentence is that of Anna Karenina turned inside out; her patronymic is
given a masculine ending; and the title of Tolstoy's family chronicle is botched by the
fictional translator.
11 Lost in the Funhouse (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 118 and 123.
12 Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui 1, 278-79.
In Sarraute's *Entre La vie et la mort*, a child, playing with the word "Hérault" (*héros, erre haut, R.O.*), is given ideas, stimulated by his discoveries. To Barilli, this would probably be a *mise en abyme* of the process of writing a *nouveau nouveau roman*. From the reader's point of view, a potential problem is suggested. In the Sarraute text, the puns and anagrams are thematized overtly; in other novels the structures might be covert but still remain perceivable by the reader and therefore thematically and structurally functional - as in Nabokov's play on insect-scient-incest in Ada's arords in the arbors of Ardis, or his twins, Nodo (No, do) and Odon (Oh, don't), the traitor and helper in *Pale Fire*. This is true of the early works of Raymond Roussel as well. However, this is where the problem suggests itself more strongly. If linguistic play is going to activate the productive labour involved in reading, it presumably has to be textually immanent, and in some way evident: cryptograms are different from anagrams. While one would want to argue that the latter, by involving the reader in the same process as that of the writer, constitute a mode of narcissism which is still within the limits of the novel genre (as a process mimetic form), the former is another quite different case. And the use made of Roussel by the *nouveaux nouveaux romanciers* raises this issue very clearly.

Roussel's work seems to have inspired two separate kinds of novelistic narcissism. One, on a diegetic level, corresponds to Ricardou's "auto-représentation verticale, ascendante, productrice." It includes the *mises en abyme* of the novels (the plays, machines, and so on), of some of the "textes de grande jeunesse" ("Chiquenaude," "Nanon," "Une Page du folk-lore Breton," "Parmi les noirs"), and the stories within stories of "Documents pour servir de canevas." Similar diegetic constructions inspired by Roussel are evident in the works of Ollier, Ricardou, and Robbe-Grillet. However, the greater stress has been on the linguistic "procédé" of Roussel. This is what Ricardou refers to as "auto-représentation horizontale, littérale, productrice" in the *nouveau nouveau roman*. Or is it?

There were several stages in Roussel's discovery of the imaginative possibilities of language. Always a lover of children's games, especially word games (see "Parmi les noirs"), Roussel began toying with minute differences on the level of the signifier. In these "textes-genèse," he would select two almost identical words (billard and pillard), place them in two exact same sentences, then construct a logical, verisimilar plot for a story which would begin with one and end with the other. This linguistic play *precedes* the actual writing and the reader is only aware of the clever structure at the last sentence of the piece; it is not a case of the *nouveau nouveau roman*'s "production" in and by the text. This is even more evident in the amplified version of this process used in the novel, *Impressions d'Afrique*, where the mechanism is not in the text at all, not at all available to the reader. For example, he claims in the posthumously
published Comment j’ai écrit certains des mes livres ([Paris]: Pauvert,1963) that the "queue de billard" yielded the "robe à traîne" of Talou, the "pillard."

The next stage of his language play is even more influential for modern French fiction—and even more problematic. Taking any phrase, Roussel proceeded to disintegrate it phonetically: "J'ai du bon tabac dans ma tabatière" gave him "jade tube onde aubade en mat a basse tierce"—the key plot elements of "Le Poète et la Moresque." Unfortunately the process cannot be traced backwards; the play, from the reader's point of view, remains cryptogrammatic. Indeed, even Roussel could not recall the original words he used, beyond the few offered in Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres.

Surely the intention behind this dissimulation lies in the author's mystifying desire, and not in a desire to liberate the act of reading, as apparently is the case in the nouveau nouveau roman. But there are still other differences between the language play\textsuperscript{13} of the new novelists and their forbear. The first of these has finally been acknowledged, after being long ignored (by Ricardou\textsuperscript{14} in particular): Roussel's breakdown of words was done on the level of the phoneme—not the graphic letter, as is the case in Ricardou's La Prise de Constantinople. Secondly, as has already been pointed out, Roussel's play was a stimulus to his imagination, engendering the action and plot details. In other words, hidden to the reader, it preceded the actual textual composition. The nouveau nouveau roman on the other hand tries to make linguistic play into an immanent producer of the text, into a structural architecture. Roussel's texts do not point, however, to their linguistic pre-textual generators.

From what is known of Roussel, his language games were as much a defensive, infantile, protective shield against reality,\textsuperscript{15} as an effort to offer a literary challenge to existing forms. Those games ultimately share the "gratuité pure" of the nouveau nouveau roman's games, perhaps, but the conservative elitist Roussel certainly had no similar ideological end in view.\textsuperscript{16} The nouveau nouveau roman's linguistic work

\textsuperscript{13} The term signifier play has deliberately not been used here since the customary use of his is in fact only metaphoric. The Saussurian signer or signifiant has no substance phonic or graphic); it is only form—that is, those differentiating traits which have a function in the langue system.


\textsuperscript{15} See Michel Leiris, "Conception et réalité chez Raymond Roussel," Critique 10 no. 89 (octobre 1954), 829, and Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres, p. 132, a reprint of Pierre Janet's 1926 piece on Roussel in De l'angoisse à l'extase 1.

\textsuperscript{16} Ricardou, in "Disparition élocutoire," pp. 16-17, claims that "à mesure que s'accrois sent le nombre et la rigueur des rapports entre les signifiants d'un texte . . . le langage tend à occuper toute la scène tandis que l'auteur, comme subjectivité propriétaire d'un sens, s'amenuise jusqu'à disparaître" and so farewell to the bourgeois Romantic ideology.
is intended to free both writer and reader, but Roussel forgot to teach the rules of the liberation game to the reader. Ricardou seems to deny this difference in his writings on Roussel, claiming for him a modern textually (not pre-textually) challenging linguistic play. He points out that while Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres begins with the word "je," it ends with "livres," the important element that literally gets the last word. At Cerisy (1971), however, the title of Butor's paper, "Comment se sont écrits certains de mes livres," points to what is really a difference, certainly of intent and even of result. The cryptogrammatic element already mentioned should also serve to separate Roussel's linguistic genesis from the modern "production" within the novel genre; if the word play of the former is not traceable, it is not functional within the text. It is not therefore novelistic narcissism. One has perhaps stepped into the Ovidian mythic pool and over to the other side.

This, then, raises the question of the limits of the genre. How linguistically self-reflective can the novel or short story be and still remain diegetic, that is, mimetic? In "Naissance d'une fiction," Ricardou revealed the linguistic mechanisms of La Prise de Constantinople. The question one is faced with now is this: how much of this play could a reader conceivably have discovered on his own? How much of it, in other words, is really textually immanent and functional, and how much is pre-textual genesis, inaccessible to the reader except in such statements of authorial intent as Ricardou is wont to make? That the word play somehow structures the work seems undeniable- once the author has pointed it out. But can the act of reading alone produce this knowledge?

The fact that Ricardou was (though no longer is) an early member of the group centred around the journal, Tel Quel, might suggest that he has moved, despite his protestations to the contrary, beyond the limits of the nouveau nouveau roman. How far can auto-representation go before it becomes anti-representation? In order to answer this, one must look more closely at the reply given by Tel Quel itself and by the avant-garde of fiction writers in other countries, for there is no doubt that a formalized theoretical and creative move to supersede the genre has been in existence for at least a decade and a half. It must be decided if and where a line can be drawn at the outer confines of the novel as linguistically self-reflective metafiction.

One might logically begin this investigation, therefore, with the work of that early Tel Quel group. Aware of the dangers of reductionism for

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17 See Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui 1, 128.
18 Ricardou chooses to ignore all the other Romantic references to "gloire," personal genius, and imagination in this same book.
19 "Disparition élocutoire," pp. 16-17.
which Sollers attacked Pingaud, one must nevertheless attempt to outline the basic premises of the group. Unlike Pingaud's, however, the intention here is not to determine the value or validity of the group's theory or practice, but merely to examine their implication for a study of the limits of a genre. This purpose, of course, will also restrict the present discussion to the early writings of the group-critical and creative-since by the time ideas had coalesced into the *Théorie d'ensemble* (1968), the novel had been left behind. The more recent pronouncements-political, cultural, and critical-along with the latest texts of writers like Roche and Sollers, form yet another topic, too vast to be entered into at this point. The only concern here is with that fine line which is the outer limit of the novel in its most linguistic narcissistic form.

In its early years, then, *Tel Quel* sought, under the influence of Russian formalism, to break with the tradition of extra-literary justifications of literature. From its inception, however, the journal's adherents at least attempted- in theory and practice- to free literature from genre limitations, to help produce new formal "organisms," to "faire sortir la narration de son 'copiage' pseudo-réaliste ou imaginaire pour l'amener à une exploration en profondeur du fonctionnement et des permutations de la langue" (Sollers, *Théorie d'ensemble*, pp. 392-93).

The break here implied was historically conditioned, for the newly articulated concepts of "écriture," "texte," and "intertextualité" could probably never have come into being without Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Marx, and Freud, as the *Tel Quel* articles which pay intellectual debts revealed. Derrida's first anti- or post-structuralist statements and Kristeva's early semiological research joined with the early path-forging of Robbe-Grillet as the major contemporary forces at work in the beginning.

The linguistic orientation of *Tel Quel* was evident from the start, but soon an ideological (Marxist and then Maoist) dimension was added.

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22 "Le Réflexe de réduction" in *Théorie d'ensemble: Tel Quel* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 391-98. All further page references to this volume will appear with *Théorie d'ensemble* in parentheses, with any necessary information regarding the title of the article and its author.

23 Umberto Eco, in "The Death of the Gruppo 63," *20th Century Studies* no. 5 (September 1971), 67-68, feels that the radical Italians of the same period used the open self-questioning structures of what Levi-Strauss called "serial thought" while the co-generational French took structuralism as their more closed operational model (code-decoded message). This was only true, if ever, in the very beginning. Derrida's influence has proved stronger and his critique of structuralism's reductive spatial model has moved closer to Eco's "opera aperta" (as in the "jeu des pièces" concept). See Derrida's remarks in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (eds.), *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 268, and his earlier, more expanded version in "Force et signification," in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 30 and 44. For more on Eco's distinction see his *La struttura assente* (Milano: Rompiani, 1968), p. 306.
"Écriture," the group's concern, was defined by Baudry as "une activité théorique qui a pour fonction de penser à la fois le système de langage, le relai d'informations par lequel cette société se parle et se vit et les nouveaux systèmes formels qui viennent à apparaître" ("Écriture, fiction, idéologie," *Théorie d'ensemble*, p. 127). What replaced mimesis and the novel in importance was the "écriture" and its manifestation, the "texte." With the maximal saturation of the signifier that this involved, came the increased difficulty in reading.

Michel Foucault ("Distance, aspect, origine," *Théorie d'ensemble*) found certain other common denominators in the works of the group, especially on the temporal and spatial levels. When the only given was language, literature became a network in which personal pronouns replaced proper names, fantastic elements were neutralized, and blanks appeared in the text-functioning as areas of muteness of articulation around which the language could pivot, in order to create "l'espace épais" in which experiences of dream, madness, repetition, doubling, and so on came into being.

The critics of the *Tel Quel* persuasion were not immune to a surprisingly naïve theoretical insularity. It is a critical truism that all fiction not just "textes"-can only be judged by a criterion of literary validity, for "truth" has no meaning in literary theory. Yet the opening remarks of the *Théorie d'ensemble* attributed this constant to a new *Tel Quel* revelation. Pleynet's feeling (in "La Poésie doit avoir pour but. . . ," *Théorie d'ensemble*, p. 94) that the novel had escaped naturalism, while poetry had yet to discover a new "realist articulation" revealed an odd refusal to acknowledge American New Criticism, then thirty years old. Is Kristeva's "intertextualité" really so far from the Russian formalist theory of parody? However, these problems remain minor in the light of the overall impact on fiction of *Tel Quel*, especially with regard to the functioning of the signifier and the political stance this entailed.

The linguistic theory was common to the early work of most members of the group, from Lacan's "chaîne signifiante" to Kristeva's "sémanalyse," which has been called a "réflexion sur le signifiant se produisant en texte."24 The major problem posed by a deliberate destruction of the Saussurian sign by the idea of a signifier-generated text was that later raised by Fredric Jameson.25 Was one not in danger of rejecting a transcendental signified in favour of an equally rigid transcendental signifier-a "prison-house of language"? And, in addition, given the very definition of the signifier, if one could separate it from the signified,26 it would have no meaning, but would only be an object.

While this was indeed the idea behind *Tel Quel*, is a system of signifiers in any way related to the genre one knows as the novel? And it is to this question alone that this chapter addresses itself.

Yes and no—was the reply of the early *Tel Quel*. The "texte" had simply replaced genre categories in its theorizing. In opposition to the idealism of a pre-existing meaning which was then concretized or expressed, the "texte" offered the materialism of an open play of the signifier. In that the "texte" made language into productive "travail," this could be seen as an extreme but still potentially novelistic version of the linguistic self-consciousness of much modern metafiction. The anagrammatic combinations, the "polysémie," the permutation of grammatical possibilities worked by and in the text, became the "travail" of the reader, labouring as he did from the "phéno-texte" to the "génó-texte," to use Kristeva's terms. This critic also specified that the text was "un appareil trans-linguistique qui redistribue l'ordre de la langue . . . donc une productivité" ("Problèmes de la structuration du texte," *Théorie d'ensemble*, p. 299). This redistribution function ultimately made mathematics and logic of more value than structuralist linguistics to the study of the "texte" as a self-generating mechanism.

The choice of this neutral term, "texte," was presumably intended to eliminate any suggestion of creation as the product of an individual personal effort. The "texte" was not to be consumed; it had no bourgeois market value; it was open, the property of all, a collective work of "productivité." This, of course, was where the ideological stand entered. Much of the theoretical work of *Tel Quel* was aimed at showing the close but subtle connection between radical literary practice (Lautréamont, Mallarmé, for example) and social or political revolution—usually interpreted in Marxist, Maoist, or even Freudian terms. Their practical literary efforts sought to bring about such a revolution of all value systems—linguistic, economic, psychoanalytic, and political. Imagination, creation, genius—all were considered bourgeois terms, individualistic and Romantic, and thus to be avoided.

The ideological stance of the journal was not naïve: unlike Sartre's *engagement* which ultimately acknowledged, in Sartre's own terms, that art could do nothing for a dying child, Ricardou's early idea of the "fonction critique"—the critical action of literature as literature—attempted to contest reality in operative terms only through the productive aspects of the "texte" as, in a now famous phrase, the "aventure d'une écriture" and not vice versa. Ricardou perceived this as the end result of a three-stage historical process.

From the "illusionisme représentatif" of Balzac, fiction moved to the narcissistic *mise en abyme* structures of the *nouveau roman* in which the only thing the novel represented was its own creation and functioning. 27 The next step he described—that taken by *Tel Quel* by 1968 at

27 Ricardou's more recent works seem to expand, but not substantially alter, his view of
least- is the problematic one here. From auto-representation, the form of fiction altered- to anti representation- as literature became increasingly a challenge. Based on a principle of opposition, such “textes” aimed at disruption, at abolishing the representational categories (and so characters became mere grammatical entities- pronouns), at violently formalizing the narration itself in order to submit the signified to a permanent critique which would prevent it from coagulating and concealing the “travail” that formed it (“fonction critique,” Théorie d’ensemble, p. 265).

Since representation was seen as the dominant mode of a society which the early Tel Quel condemned, the novel, and with it the traditional mimetic and even structural methods of analysis, were at this point left behind. Saussure was replaced by generative grammar and semantics, as well as mathematics; Kristeva postulated a paragrammatic conception of literary language as the “seule infinite du code” which would make the text a double entity composed of “écriture-lecture”: “‘Lire’ denote, donc, une participation aggressive, une active appropriation de l’autre. ‘Écrire’ serait le ‘lire’ devenu production, industrie: l’écriture–lecture, l’écriture paragrammatique serait l’aspiration vers une aggressivité et une participation totale.”

The “texte” became a network of connections based upon a non-linear tabular model, inspired by “grammes chinois,” a potential Maoist exit from occidental discourse.

Although Sollers’ Drame (Paris:Seuil, 1965) was said to be structured on the numerology of the Yi-King, this knowledge does not appear to be necessary to some comprehension at least of the chess-board structure of the novel. Drame, from its opening- “D’abord (premier état, lignes, gravure- le jeu commence)”- to its closing- “On doit pouvoir considérer que le livre échoue ici-(brûle) (s’efface)”- invited the reader to doubt the closed nature of the novel without destroying the genre itself, although Sollers later claimed that a text “n’apparaît que pour s’effacer et réciter cette apparition qui s’efface” (“Écriture et révolution,” Théorie d’ensemble, p.73). Like Sanguineti’s Il giuoco dell’oca, Drame still narrated at least its own self-consuming narration; in that Aristotelian sense of mimesis (including diegesis), then, both could still be considered novels. However, the later works, such as Nombres, which aimed at making impossible what Sollers called novelistic exploitation, seemed to announce another genre, the “texte” or the “fiction,” the manifestation of “écriture.”

It would seem to be clear that the word “novel” on the title page or cover of a book would program the act of reading, ordering, and ultimately reducing complexity to a function of the reading. Tel Quel,
in moving at this stage beyond the genre, sought to escape this closed structure. In its hands, semiotics subversively destroyed not just genre distinctions, but literary/non-literary ones as well. "Literature" was seen as a concept which was historically and ideologically a product of a capitalist consumer society, as indeed was the notion of the sign itself. The destruction of the sign and of representation (even auto-representation) would seem to mean, then, that by 1968 at least, Tel Quel had passed beyond the novel genre, and so had passed beyond the scope of this discussion.

There appears, as well, to be a definite feeling that the anti-representation of even the early Tel Quel is indeed rather different from the nouveau roman's auto-representation,\(^{29}\) even in its more radical recent language-oriented form. In the latter, the inner linguistic mirrors are not destructive, but rather the doubling forms the "fiction" itself. The objective is more unification than disruption. Categories such as that of character are subverted without being destroyed, and the process of representation is not annulled but only turned in on itself, whether horizontally or vertically. The "fiction" in the latter case is invaded by the "narration,"\(^{30}\) to return to Ricardou's basic terminology.

While an extreme form of this invasion -the actual devastation of the "fiction- signals the moving beyond the novel, the early presence of the works of the later Joyce, of Gertrude Stein, and of the early Raymond Roussel suggests that there actually is room for a more productive, active notion of novelistic writing and reading. In the new new novel, the interest of fiction seems to be decentralized, drawn away from the story told toward the functioning of language or even broader diegetic processes shared by writer and reader. Language becomes a "matière langagière," the object of certain transforming operations which make it "matière signifiante,"\(^{30}\) not because it might carry pre-existent meaning, but because of the multiple contextual significances given by the selection anti organization processes.

Tel Quel, however, while sharing many of these same concepts, left the novel behind, and it was not alone in its rejection. At the 1966 Cerisy conference, Aldo Rossi tried to convince the critics that there was perfect synchrony between Italian and French avant-garde interests.\(^{31}\) The fact that Sanguineti was published in Tel Quel, however, ought to be weighed against his sortiewhat antagonistic position at Cerisy in September of 1963. There were differences between the

\(^{29}\) As noted earlier, see Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui 2, 348 (Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou on Sollers) and Thibaudau's remarks in Michel Foucault (directeur), "Débat sur le roman," Tel Quel 17 (Printemps 1964), 25-26.


Italian radicals and their French colleagues—largely as a result of their working out of different literary, political, and social situations—but they shared a desire to push the novel form to its linguistic limits and, in theory at least, to surpass it.

Although we have been informed by a trustworthy source—Umberto Eco—that the Gruppo 63 no longer exists, it remains the closest non-French relative to those radical writers of Tel Quel in its early years. This family resemblance, however, must not be taken too literally, for there are significant differences between the two groups and their backgrounds. Italian literature, for instance, has been both very language-conscious and also very politically aware for some time, as it has struggled to overcome what it considered the bastardization and falsification of official language—first under fascism, the neo-capitalism. Unlike the contemporaneous literary situation in France, in Italy’s essentially poetic literary tradition, it was understandably poetry that was the first genre to feel the linguistic effects of the protest against the neorealism and hermeticism of the first half of the twentieth century.

To the radical new poets and theoreticians of the fifties and sixties, poetry was oppositional to the dogma and conformity that was solidifying and immobilizing Italian culture. The reader was no longer to be a consumer of poetry, for the linguistic energy of these new poets would not allow such a passivity. Out of this fertile ground sprang the novelists of the neoavant-garde, bringing to the narrative genres a poetic inventiveness of form unknown to previous Italian fiction.

There was, however, at the start, no unified movement, no constant political or literary theory centered around a critical journal, as there was in France at the time. The yearly conventions of the mid-sixties revealed only a sort of general common intention to promote the fertile reciprocal influence of critical theory and literary practice, a working toward an end which included literary and social renovation through a critique of the super-structural dimension—language. The importance of the theoretical work of indigenous critics such as Umberto Eco is clearer that that of any imported structuralist influence, especially in the forming of the group’s values, both positive (open, experimental) and negative (closed, traditional).

The neoavant-garde were so named in order to distinguish them from the earlier twentieth-century innovators—Proust, Joyce, Musil, Svevo, Pirandello. There seems little agreement, however, as to whether the new group shared or was in opposition to the concerns of that early avant-garde.33 Robbe-Grillet was the single most important

non-Italian liberating force, along with, of course, Beckett, the surrealists, and a few Italian writers such as Gadda.\textsuperscript{34}

In non-literary terms, though, it was the failure of the communists to gain control in the 1950s that likely provided the impetus for the birth and growth of the neoavant-garde. If politics proper had failed, perhaps literature as socio-linguistic contestation might succeed. A rejection of the vulgar Marxism of social realism in favour of a research-oriented Marxist perspective led the revolt against the traditional “riformismo” of novelists such as Cassola, Tomasi and Bassani. Journals sprang up (such as \textit{Il Verri} in 1956) to give voice to the new linguistic experiments of the young poets who would constitute \textit{I novissimi} by 1961. In 1962, \textit{Il Menabo} shifted the weight of its emphasis from literature and industry to literature and language, and finally in 1963 at Palermo, the \textit{Gruppo 63} met with seemingly only one common denominator- a rejection of traditional establishment means of expression and the subsequent interest in linguistic renovation. Further meetings were to reveal a shift from poetry to fiction, and from revolt to reconstruction.

These poets-turned-novelists saw political implications in their denunciation of the traditional bourgeois normality which formed the optic of the “old” neorealist novel. The imagination had to be liberated in order for it to become the only “altro regno possibile” The novelist’s task became the declaiming of “fluent lies,” not aiming at truth but exalting truth to the status of the lie.\textsuperscript{35} Like other self-informing metafictions, their works were characterized by that same particular exhibition of their own arbitrary structure as valid, autonomous forms of experience which has been noted in Nabokov’s \textit{Ada} and Barth’s \textit{Lost in the Funhouse}.

However, from this point on, there was little agreement among the members of the group. To one faction, literature had to be freed from ideology, voided, for it had no operative function. Novelistic language is autonomous; the novel is artificial verbal play with no ties to reality, or even to any communicative function. Another view held that language could never be void, naïve, innocent; it is always ideologically conditioned. But in this very fact resides the key to the de-structuring of society, through the anarchistic contesting of it by means of the historical and ideological entity called language. Yet another faction placed the neoavant-garde in a broader phenomenological perspective in order to situate its claims and contentions.

The first of these three groups, under Guglielmi’s leadership, was set strongly against the operative function of literature for fear of risking a relapse into socialist realism. The problems that arise from the theoriz-

\textsuperscript{34} Angelo Guglielmi, \textit{Vero e falso} (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1968), pp. 17-18, 100.
\textsuperscript{35} See remarks by Roberto De Marco and Giorgio Manganelly, \textit{Il romanzo sperimentale}, pp. 158 and 174 respectively.
ing of this faction are rooted in a narrow provincialism that perhaps only the very early *Tel Quel* can rival. Guglielmi felt that all pre-*Gruppo 63* literature was extraneous and non-pertinent, because it worked, worked with objects, not words.\(^{36}\) But the earlier universes of Svevo and even Verga are also decidedly direct products of self-informing linguistic effort: *La coscienza di Zeno* is as much a discourse on literature and language as is Giuliani's *Il giovane Max*. The lack of traditional novelistic qualities in this latter work once led Guglielmi to call it poetry, but the clue to its non-novelistic generic status lies more in the non-functional nature of the word play than in the presence of verbal exercise itself. It is not with the *Gruppo 63* that the concept of language as a mimetic medium is first called into question.\(^{37}\) Readers of *Madame Bovary* know that this negation was thematized in fiction a hundred years earlier; and *Don Quijote* stands in the background, once again.

In contrast to the baroque but functional verbal energy of a Pynchon or, still in Italy, of the Volponi of *Corporale*, many of the writers of this faction tended to reduce language to a basic minimal form which was intended to intensify the literary experience almost to the point of a verbal equivalent of the Joycean epiphany. Grammatical and syntactical structures came under attack, as the "asemanticità" battlecry led the forces towards a de-structuring and de-functionalizing of the Italian language.

Within this faction, novelist Giorgio Manganelli asserted the autonomy of literature as a man-made creation. In *La letteratura come menzogna* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1967), he offered the thesis that man has always feared literature, reducing it to lies, invention, mere game. Today, he felt, writers had to acknowledge this uselessness; their writing is never a social gesture but rather is giving testimony to language as the only stable and real condition in their existence—even in its very instability and unreality. The writer must understand what language demands of him. Like Roland Barthes, Manganelli opposed the monosignificance of a consumer view of literature: meaning is infinite and literature is artifice and artifact. Truth is a meaningless criterion, for art is not verifiable. In his own fiction— in *Agli dèi ulteriori* as in *Hilarotragoedia*— things exist only in and through language, peopling a proliferating linguistic universe structured and created self-consciously by the inventive power of verbal form. Like the signifier play in Massimo Ferretti's "Gazzarra" or the plotting of Arbasino's fictions around the operation of the author in organizing his verbal materials, Manganelli's texts do not touch or imitate any empirical reality; they remain autonomous linguistic entities which invent new realities, new fictive universes. And they remain novels.

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36 *Vero e falso*, p. 43. See also his analysis of Giuliani's *Il giovane Max* in *La letteratura del risparmio* (Milano: Bompiani, 1973), p. 142.
37 As Guglielmi would have it in "Avanguardia e sperimentalismo," *Gruppo 63*, p. 19.
The second faction mentioned above accepted the autonomy of literature as a truism and proceeded to interpret it in ideological terms. Feeling strongly the political failure of neorealism, they too sought to contest the utilitarian functional concept of language and communication. Like Tel Quel, this group theoretically broke the bond between signifier and signified in an attempt to de-mystify and de-structure the reified communication systems. The next stage involved trying, again in theory, to separate the sign from its referent in order to negate the relation between language and reality - especially in the light of the mass media's reduction of language to a bourgeois product, pathologically deformed and aesthetically useless.

As early as 1963 the split between these two factions was evident. Guglielmi wanted to transform literature from within, gradually altering the public taste, but Sanguineti urged a terrorist break with the cultural establishment in order to effect social change. An operative emphasis had always been inherent in the desire of the entire group to change reading habits, to force the reader to question his ideological and literary concepts, not by confounding him with incomprehensible new codes, but by inner provocation (closer perhaps to the Russian formalist notion of "ostranenie").

All avant-garde writers, from Joyce to Sanguineti, seem to have shared a view of art as having a paradigmatic function in the opening and liberating of both the tradition of literature and the mind of the reader through self-conscious experimentation with language and the use of irony, parody, paradox, and so on. The Italian radicals, however, seemed to be more easily accepted and tamed by bourgeois society than their forbears. This potential neutralization had always been one of the greatest dangers to their political aspirations, for unlike their French brethren at Tel Quel; they had no common strong ideological base, as the disintegration of the journal Quindici later revealed.

Renato Barilli's phenomenological perspective formed what was almost a third viewpoint within the Gruppo 63, one that sought to link the new work with a vaster framework of contemporary cultural, scientific, and philosophical concerns. He presented, in La barriera del naturalismo (2nd ed., Milano: Mursia, 1970), a view of fiction which was based on his belief in the increasing modern suspension of judgment and pure projection of consciousness - free from ideology or the interference of the interpreting intellect. Because it was the least insular perspective of the three, Barilli's was perhaps less immediately relevant, but more interesting as an attempt to bridge the gap between French and Italian radical fiction: Barilli was present and active at that 1971 Cerisy conference on the nouveau roman.

These three views seriously divided the precarious unity of the Gruppo 63 from the start, but two writers did eventually emerge as the
literary exemplars - Balestrini and Sanguineti. The former, since his major contribution has been in collage and computer poetry (although there do exist larger texts written prior to his post-1968 rejection of writing in favour of collecting documents on factory workers' movements), is of less interest to fiction theory than is the latter.

In an interview with Ferdinando Camon (reprinted, significantly, in *Tel Quel*\(^{(38)}\)), Sanguineti outlined his views on language and ideology in fiction. Literary language is not a natural, neutral instrument; it is perfectly conditioned and ideologically characterized in order to create artificially a conventional product. Any use of language, by extension, is also a means of interpreting reality, an ideological filter. In many ways Sanguineti was the Ricardou or Sollers of Italy—the spokesman for radical views at conferences, academic defender, and explicator of his own creative work.

One of Sanguineti's most powerful means of literary challenge was the parody he deployed in his fiction—*Capriccio italiano* to *Il giuoco del Satyricon: un'imitazione da Petronio*—in an attempt to achieve that greater availability of linguistic, literary, and intellectual materials that Eliot and Pound had brought to poetry earlier in the century. Carlo Salinari, a Marxist himself, attacked the political implications of this parody, or "mannerism," for he felt that the breaking of the language-thing link in favour of a language-literature one would never contribute to any social transformation.\(^{(39)}\) Sanguineti disagreed; for him it was through the consciousness of its own fictiveness that the novel could and did achieve a genuine political function, as a challenge, a contesting.

The entire *Gruppo 63* was often accused, as was Sanguineti after the publication of *Il giuoco dell'oca*, of being too limited, of denying imagination, individuality, of overstressing trivial language concerns to the detriment of content implications, and ultimately of being unreadable. Their theoretical pronouncements were often greeted with nervous anger, yet also with some valid opposition to their evasion of certain issues, their insularity, vague terminology, and terrorist rhetoric. Their verbal play was accused of being gratuitous, deliberately nonfunctional in the texts. But that was not always the case in fact, if it often was in theory. And the writing of Manganelli, Arbasino, Sanguineti, and the others seems to have done more—through its avowedly fictive but ideologically significant nature—to liberate the Italian novel from the bonds of the "illusion" of neorealism and from a kind of vulgar Marxist degeneration of engagement, than has any other in recent memory.

This does not mean that there are not large problematic issues which were unearthed by the neovant-garde. Did the critical awareness,


experimentation, subversive intent, and so on really constitute anything so radically new? Is not Don Quijote equally contesting in literary and social terms? Perhaps one is dealing rather with a constant in the dialectical development of narrative: was Sanguineti to Cassola what Fielding was to Richardson?

The Gruppo 63 has committed suicide, Eco has claimed. The events of May, 1968, the disintegration of Quindici (preceded by its more vigorous handling of political than literary matters), the hardening of the ideological arteries- all these had helped it decide not to become an ossified relic. Its success in the general cultural domain assisted in destroying the subversive value of the group, itself even more than ever a part of the cultural establishment of radio, television, publishing, and the universities.

On the other hand, the last few years have witnessed the resurrection of those writers the group fought to supersede- Cassola, Morante, and others. Perhaps the radical fiction failed even in its attempts to change the reading habits of a public whose tastes are rooted in the sentimental, realistic fiction of the past. Yet, the humour, the vitality, the novelty on a literary level have been positive additions to the range of Italian fiction- with one reservation. This energy tends to operate on the level of the page, not the book. The fascinating battle with language that had been intended, has perhaps ultimately led to an ignoring of the narrative battle with the reader.40

This suggests, however, that other possibility- that this kind of linguistic play could lead, or in some cases has already done so, to the formation of a new genre. The intended, if not always achieved, de-functionalizing and de-structuring of traditionally novelistic language in, for example, Balestrini's text Tristano obviously implies a passing beyond the boundaries of an already elastic genre. The more radical work of the Italian neoavant-garde seemed to share with that of Tel Quel at least an intent to go beyond mimesis-even a diegetic or linguistically self-reflecting version of it. In the words of Enrico Filippini: "il romanzo sperimentale avrà finalmente prodotto, tramite il salutare olocausto di un genere, la fine oggettiva di un linguaggio indiretto e avrà aperto canali non irrilevanti ad altre prassi."41

The less political nouveau nouveau romanciers turned to Roussel, among others, for linguistic inspiration. The roots of the differences between their fiction and the creative work of Tel Quel can be seen in Julia Kristeva's response to Roussel's Impressions d'Afrique.42 She perceived a duality here. There are two meanings of the "impressions" of the title: the product which has been imprinted and an active process.

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41 Il romanzo sperimentale, p. 165.
42 "La Productivité dite texte," Communications no. 11 (1968), 59-83.
The former she condemned as auto-representation (and therefore still novelistic, mimetic) which gave in to the reader conditioned to look for "vraisemblance" (warning him that if he was not accustomed to the author's technique, then he had best read Part Two of the novel first). All Roussel did here, claimed Kristeva, was reverse the usual order of literary consuming by putting the "travail" after the "texte." To her mind, Roussel was not part of that radical break in the conception of the linguistic sign that has culminated in *Tel Quel*’s productivity of the "trans-signe"; he represents only a transition. The un-novelistic cryptogrammatic play alone, which tends (because of its lack of self-sufficiency and its need for extratextual intention for comprehension) to go beyond the narrative genre, was the only area in which she would grant him a semblance of textual "productivité," for it was based on a resemblance of signifiers and a difference of signifieds (a system hidden to the reader, however). She ultimately could accept as valid only the poetic and parenthetic *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* because of its auto-destructive, anti-representational verbal structure. The new novelists, on the other hand, drew from all of Roussel's various language games.

It would appear, then, that some sort of political-literary dividing line between narrative or novels and "textes" or "fictions" has been drawn by *Tel Quel* itself which one ought to take into account, for a similar distinction has appeared, in the theory at any rate, of the Italian neoavantgarde. In the latter case, however, the superseding of the traditional genre depended mostly upon a theoretical defunctionalizing, de-structuring ("asemanticità") which often did not, in fact, take place. *Tel Quel*, on the other hand, almost over-functionalized on the level of the anti-representational "texte" by transferring critical and ideological attention to the linguistic process of the signifier within the "texte" itself, the manifestation of that "écriture" which was their primary concern.

This is not exactly the case with the *nouveau nouveau roman*. Its often extreme linguistic self-reflectiveness is usually still auto-representational, still part of the elastic mimetic genre one calls the novel. This is the feeling that one has in reading the extended analyses of this covert linguistic mode of textual narcissism that appear in the proceedings of that Cerisy conference (*Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui* 1 and 2). Many critics, plus authors such as Pinget, Ricardou, and Robbe-Grillet, provide interpretations or descriptions of linguistic play in the *nouveau nouveau roman* that are fuller and more informed than any that could be offered here. Instead the focus of this chapter has been the investigation of the issue of the very serious implications of this particular mode of metafiction for the novel genre itself. And it would appear that it is not so much a matter of intense textual self-consciousness being self-destructive, or leading to the death of the novel; it is rather a case
of its suggesting a further but different stage-anti-representation- which, usually for ideological reasons, would deny mimesis and even diegesis. When this stage is reached, one requires the extra-textual aid of the author-from Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres to those crucially important back-cover comments of the Tel Quel literary collection-in order to understand the functioning of the "textes." There are obviously limits to the novel's elasticity. It seems evident that a new genre- in theory and perhaps even in practice- has been born of the novel, but it would be more than premature to suggest that consequently the novel itself has died in childbirth- or expired, self-obsessed, by Narcissus' pool.