

THE QUESTION OF READABILITY IN AVANT-GARDE FICTION *

SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN
Harvard University

At least two terms in my title call for immediate, even if only provisional or preliminary, definition: «readability» and «avant-garde»—the first having come to the fore in recent years with the emergence of reader-oriented or audience-oriented criticism; the second being an often used but problematic adjective. To qualify a work of literature as «avant-garde» is, indeed, almost as perilous a move as to call it «romantic» or «classical» or «symbolist.»

In a strict or narrow sense, the term «avant-garde» designates the artistic production of a self-conscious, organized group of artists who define themselves in aggressive opposition to what they perceive to be the dominant artistic tradition. Renato Poggioli, in his excellent book on *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, emphasized the fact that such aggressive anti-traditional movements are essentially a modern phenomenon; according to Poggioli, the very concept of avant-garde art did not emerge until the modern period, «with its most remote temporal limits being the various preludes to the romantic experience.»¹ An avant-garde movement in this narrow sense (one thinks immediately of Surrealism, Italian or Russian Futurism, and most recently of the *Tel Quel* group in France) has an inner dynamic and a history of its own: it publishes manifestoes, receives new members and excludes those who no longer belong, usually has a journal—or, like the Surrealists, a series of journals—and perhaps a publishing house associated with it as well; in short, it designates itself and is perceived by the public as a collective enterprise, most often with political and ideological implications. Poggioli's book is devoted precisely to the sociology and the ideology of avant-garde movements.

In a broader sense, the term «avant-garde» may be used to designate any art which breaks, in an evident and self-conscious way, with the tradition—which appears as a «scandal» in relation to the tradition—whether or not the artist belonged to an organized movement. Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Roussel, Artaud, Bataille, Eliot, Joyce and Pound are some of the more obvious examples of writers who have been called avant-garde in this sense. In a still broader sense, the term «avant-garde» has been used as a virtual synonym for the modern. One of Poggioli's conclusions, for example, is that «the modern genius is essentially avant-gardistic,» and that «the avant-garde is a law of nature for contemporary and modern art.»² As David Lodge has forcefully argued, however, in his book on *The Modes of Modern Writing*, it is something of a simplification—or a polemical gesture—to identify modern art with the avant-garde; more precisely, it is a polemical gesture to consider as genuinely «modern» only those forms of art which parade themselves as a break with tradition. As far as fiction is concerned, Lodge pleads that we recognize at least two broad kinds of modern writing: one which is essentially a continuation of the nineteenth-century realistic tradition and which flourished, for example, in the 1930's, and one which, on the contrary, signals itself as an attempt to subvert or break with that tradition. This latter kind can properly be called *modernist*, or in its most recent manifestations *post-modernist*.³ It can also be called—and that is how I use the term in this essay—avant-garde.

Avant-garde fiction, then, is a kind of modern fiction which overtly sets itself up—by means of signals that remain to be defined—as «scandalous» or transgressive in relation to the norms of the realistic novel. I say modern, because we have, of course, some illustrious earlier examples of such formally transgressive fiction—*Tristram Shandy*, *Jacques le Fataliste*, not to mention *Don Quixote*—which can be considered as «avant-garde avant la lettre.» One could even make the claim that the greatest realistic novels are themselves never in complete conformity with the norms of the genre. Where transgression (at least in the domain of art) is concerned, it is no doubt a matter of degree, not of simple dichotomies. Yet simple dichotomies have their function, if only as a starting point for critical and theoretical discussion.

Now what about readability, and how is that notion relevant to a discussion of avant-garde fiction? Readability, as I use the term here, is another word for intelligibility. A readable text is one that «makes sense.» It is intelligible because it conforms to certain

aesthetic and logical norms that a reader has internalized as a set of expectations; a readable text corresponds to a familiar order, a previously learned code. In the case of the novel, the chief expectations that generations of readers have internalized concern some fundamental notions in our culture, and perhaps in all cultures: the principle of noncontradiction (an event cannot occur and *not* occur at the same time, a thing cannot exist and *not* exist at the same time), the notions of temporal succession and causality (events follow each other and are related to each other consequentially), a belief in the solidity of the phenomenal world (a table is a table is a table), and a belief in at least a relative unity of the self (a name designates a person who has certain fixed characteristics and a set of identifiable ancestors).

Since a great deal of work has been done recently on the conventions of realism,⁴ there is no need to insist on them here. The point I wish to stress is that although we have learned to think of them precisely as *conventions*—that is, as cultural constructs, not as natural phenomena—the conventions of realistic fiction correspond to what most of us also think of, in our less theoretical moments, as the «natural order of the world.» In our every day lives we believe, at least we certainly act as if we believed, in the solidity of objects, in temporal succession and causality, in the principle of noncontradiction and in some sort of unity of the self. We know, to be sure, about relativity and the unconscious, about Freudian slips, and perhaps even about Lacan's theory of the split subject—but still we believe that when we see our friend Joe, it really is he and not someone else, that if Joe's eyes were blue yesterday they will be blue tomorrow, that if Joe's brother died yesterday he is still dead, and that if Joe tells us a story it is Joe telling us a story. The conventions of realistic narrative correspond, in a very profound way, to our everyday experience of the world—which may explain why these conventions are so easily internalized that even a very young child can spot and protest against inconsistencies in a story, and why they are so difficult, even for sophisticated readers, to give up. The realistic novel invites us to make sense of it in a way that is not *essentially* different from the way we try to make sense of the world around us.

The hallmark of today's avant-garde fictions, however—and I have in mind now especially the work of French writers loosely associated with the so-called *nouveau nouveau roman* and with *Tel Quel*, corresponding roughly to Anglo-Saxon postmodernist writing—the hallmark of these fictions is that they defy, aggressive-

ly and provocatively, the traditional criteria of narrative intelligibility, and correlatively the reader's sense-making ability. They resist the reader's attempt to structure or order them in terms of previously learned codes of reading: where he expects continuity, they offer fragmentation; where she expects logical and temporal development, they offer repetition, or else the juxtaposition of apparently random events; where he expects consistency, they offer contradiction; where she expects characters, they offer disembodied voices; where he expects the sense of an ending, they offer merely a stop. Even typographically, they assault him/her, either by offering fragments with no indication of the order in which to read them, or else by confronting us—as Philippe Sollers or Pierre Guyotat do, for example—with several hundred pages of unbroken, unpunctuated words forming, apparently, a single monstrous sentence. When faced with the aggression of such a text, it is hardly any wonder if the first reaction of a reader is one of defensive counterattack: she/he calls the text unreadable, which is to say both unintelligible and not worth reading.

Denis Ferraris, in an extremely interesting recent article devoted to the question of readability, or rather of unreadability (not by chance, the title of the article is in Latin), has remarked that «to call a text unreadable comes down to denying it any existence.»⁵ For a reader to adopt such an aggressive position—to pronounce, in Ferraris' words, «a judgement that properly speaking annihilates» the text—she/he must feel that the text in question is not only scandalous, but also, in a very profound way, menacing. Ferraris suggests that perhaps what the reader really discovers in a confrontation with the «unreadable» text is his or her *own* unreadability, his or her own unintelligibility.⁶ The reader's counterattack might in that case be seen as a form of self-protection, a way of keeping the self intact against the dangerous fragmentation of the text. The *topos* of the text as mirror of the world and of the self is, after all, deeply ingrained in our consciousness.

The psychological and philosophical implications of the readable/unreadable dichotomy would deserve a discussion unto themselves. In what follows, however, I wish to focus on a somewhat different question: given the existence of potentially «unreadable» texts, how might one nevertheless go about reading them? As Roland Barthes phrased the question in an essay devoted to Phillippe Sollers's «novel,» *H*: «How is one to read what is attested to here and there as unreadable?»⁷ Barthes obviously did not

share that negative judgement as far as *H* was concerned; all the more significant, then, that he raised the question, and indeed promoted it to a central place in his essay: «What is commented on here is not, properly speaking, Sollers's text; it is, rather, the cultural resistances (provoked by) its reading.»⁸ Why Barthes felt it necessary to defend himself against the idea that he might be writing a commentary «on» Sollers's text will become clear shortly; for the moment, we may note that for Barthes the question «How to read Sollers?» was the question of how to overcome the prejudices and habits of the traditional reader.

Although Barthes played in this essay with the distinction between readable and unreadable (*lisible/illisible*), it is well known that his own preferred binary opposition was a quite different one; not between the readable and the unreadable, but between the readable and the «writable» (*lisible/scriptible*)—and in this opposition the first term was the negative one. As he wrote in the opening pages of *S/Z*, where he first proposed the two terms: «Opposite the writable text is thus established its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readable. We call classical any readable text.»⁹ Tzvetan Todorov has pointed out, in a recent essay, the romantic antecedents—indeed, the essential romanticism—of Barthes's notion of the (modern) text.¹⁰ We find an implicit recognition of this in Barthes's own equation between the readable and the classical—the canonical opposite of the latter being, of course, the romantic.

There is romanticism, too, in Barthes's insistence on the essentially undefinable—one might say ineffable—nature of *le texte scriptible*. Everything he says about this kind of text in *S/Z* is formulated in almost exclusively negative terms: he tells us not so much what the writable text *is*, as what it is not; in fact, the very first thing he says is that «about writable texts there may be nothing to say» (p. 4). The writable text is not a thing, a product to be handled or analyzed; it is what defies analysis, «a perpetual present upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed»; it is «the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing (*écriture*) without style, production without product, structuration without structure»; it is «ourselves writing before the infinite play of the world...is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genre, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages» (p. 5).

In short, the writable text, for Barthes, can only be spoken of in terms of difference, and specifically in terms of its difference from the readable. The readable is serious, fixed, closed, structured, constrained, authoritarian and unitary; the writable is playful, fluid, open, triumphantly plural, and in its plurality impervious to the repressive rule of structure, grammar, or logic (p. 6). However one extends the parallel series of terms, the ultimate binary opposition comes down to this: the readable is systematic, the writable mocks all attempts at systematization.

Now there are a number of paradoxes in *S/Z*, not the least of which is that after formulating the difference between the readable and the writable in such stark terms, Barthes appears to undermine these very differences by reading Balzac's *Sarrasine*, which he singles out as a readable text par excellence, *as if* it were a writable text. He defines the five codes by means of which the readable text constitutes itself, but he refuses to treat these codes as forming an intelligible system. Instead of structuring the text, the five codes are defined by him as a «tissue of voices,» a «vast 'dissolve' which insures both the overlapping and the loss of messages» (p. 20). This way of proceeding is of course a polemical, indeed a political gesture on Barthes's part. By refusing to structure even a text that he himself has just offered as a model of classical readability, he affirms his own power as a modern commentator, whose work consists in breaking up the unified text, «*maltreating* it, preventing it from speaking (*lui couper la parole*)» (p. 15). The absolute difference between readable and writable texts is thus not subverted, but on the contrary reinforced by Barthes, for presumably the writable text would not need to be broken up, maltreated and desystematized by the commentator.¹¹ Being already non-unified and asystematic, it could only provoke the commentator's silence («about writable texts there may be nothing to say»)—or, in terms of Barthes's later vocabulary, the writable text elicits not commentary but *jouissance*.

In the course of a discussion with Alain Robbe-Grillet and others at the 1977 *décade de Cerisy* devoted to himself, Barthes made his position on commentary quite explicit; «The modern work refuses commentary, indeed it defines itself as what refuses commentary; that is the first position on the modern.»¹² Modern is here equated with writable, in a gesture corresponding to the equation of the modern with the avant-garde. More pertinent to my present concern, however, is the fact that in making this statement Barthes was implicitly suggesting one way to read the writable text:

silently, in ecstasy (*en jouissant*)— which means espousing and making one's own the fragmentariness and asystematicity of the text. In this kind of reading, the reader would experience in his or her own body the plurality and the infinite play of language that characterize the writable text. She/he would become, in the time of reading, a fragmented, non-unitary subject. Such a person, Barthes wrote on the opening page of *Le Plaisir du texte*, would be considered horrifying, a kind of madman, in our everyday world governed by the rules of unity and logic: «Imagine...someone who would abolish in himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simply ridding himself of that old specter: *logical contradiction*; who would mix up all languages, even those said to be incompatible; who would bear, mutely, all the accusations of illogic, of incongruity...Such a man would be the abjection of our society...In fact, that counter-hero exists: he is the reader of the text, at the moment when he takes his pleasure.»¹³

It seems to me that Barthes is theorizing here a kind of reader who makes no attempt to «make sense» of what he reads—whose ecstasy (*jouissance*) comes, in fact, precisely from his having abandoned the attempt to make sense or to create order, from letting himself go, rudderless (*à la dérive*)—a most expressive French term I find it difficult to translate. For some readers, however (including myself), this invitation to schizophrenia, even if it is only a momentary and as it were fictive schizophrenia, represents a less than satisfactory solution. I would therefore like to suggest two other, complementary ways in which a reader might approach certain ostensibly «unreadable» texts—the one consisting in the attempt to discover *new* rules of readability that govern such texts; the other consisting in the attempt to see how such texts inscribe the question of their readability within themselves—in other words, how they thematize the opposition between readable and unreadable, unity and fragmentation, order and transgression. I shall look at works by two French writers with impeccable credentials as practitioners of avant-garde fiction: Alain Robbe-Grillet and Maurice Roche.

Robbe-Grillet, or the Readability of Transgression

In discussing Robbe-Grillet's fiction one can safely invoke the author himself as commentator, for perhaps no avant-garde writer has explained and sought to justify his own work with as much persistence and intelligence as he has. In his theoretical writings as in

his numerous public appearances, two themes seem to be dominant. First, Robbe-Grillet sees his own fiction, like that of other *nouveaux* and *nouveaux nouveaux romanciers*, as radically «other» and subversive in relation to the order of realistic narrative, which is dominated by the «ideology of representation.» This means that his novels are non-readable in terms of traditional criteria of linearity, coherence, non-contradiction, and psychological depth of characters. It does not mean, however—and this is Robbe-Grillet's second theme—that his fiction has no order of its own. On the contrary, he maintains that his works are highly complex and ordered systems; it is all a question of the kind of order one is looking for.

Robbe-Grillet sometimes mentions, with a mixture of wry admiration and dismay, the reading that Bruce Morrissette did of *La Jalousie* shortly after it was published.¹⁴ Through a painstaking process of reordering and rationalization, Morrissette succeeded in demonstrating the narrative, and above all the psychological, coherence of the «story.» As a result, noted Robbe-Grillet in a recent public lecture that was subsequently published in English, «The book became readable...and at the same time it was to a certain extent destroyed.»¹⁵ By constructing a unified story out of a fragmented text, the critic succumbed to the natural impulse of all readers who reduce the unfamiliar to the familiar, the unreadable to the readable, but in that process erase or repress those aspect of the text that make it new, other, and subversive. Robbe-Grillet has incorporated a similar reader into *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, which contains brief dialogues between the main narrative voice and a hypothetical reader who is constantly pointing out inconsistencies and demanding rational explanations for them. The narrative voice obligingly provides the explanations, but the effect is that of parody. It is as though the text were saying: «Readers who want coherence will get it, but at their own risk.»

In the remark quoted above («The book became readable...and...destroyed»), Robbe-Grillet used the word «readable» in a mostly pejorative sense; yet, as the second dominant theme in his self-explanatory statements shows, he is also aware of another way in which texts such as his may become readable. This second kind of readability does not consist of the operation whereby the reader—or let us say the traditional reader who looks for narrative coherence—makes the unfamiliar familiar; it consists, rather, of an operation whereby the unfamiliar text *makes itself* familiar by insisting on its own codes. Unlike Barthes, who preferred to think of «le scriptible» as resisting all attempts at

systematization, Robbe-Grillet knows perfectly well that his own transgressions of traditional narrative logic constitute a code, which means that they are both systematic and susceptible of systematic analysis. One could in fact show—and critics like Jean Ricardou have shown, although they have not expressed it exactly in those terms—that the very procedures in Robbe-Grillet's novels and in those of other *nouveaux romanciers* which function most clearly as transgressions of the code of realistic narrative have gradually come to constitute a «familiar» and therefore highly readable set of devices. In a word, they have gradually moved from transgression to convention.¹⁶

Let me give some examples. As every reader of Robbe-Grillet's novels from *Le Voyeur* on knows, one of his favorite transgressive devices is what he calls *glissement* («sliding»). There are many different kinds of *glissement* in his works: from one narrative voice to another (what started out as a story told by X slides into a story told by Y, who has nothing to do with X); from one time-and-place sequence to another (one thought one was reading a story—or at least a sequence—about a girl named Laura who is attacked in the subway, but all of a sudden one has slid to a girl named Laura who is being raped in her room); from the description of inanimate images to narrative movement (what starts as the description of a picture on the cover of a detective novel suddenly turns into narration), and vice versa (what one thought was narration turns out to be the description of an advertising poster). All these *glissements* have in common the transgression of rules of continuity and non-contradiction which function in the realistic novel as a means of insuring readability. The paradox, however, is that after reading a number of Robbe-Grillet's novels, a reader comes to *expect* the *glissements* as part of the code regulating them. This type of transgression begins to function as a familiar device—an element of high probability and consequently of high readability in his works.

The same can be said of any number of other procedures, including one that Robbe-Grillet has taken great pains to explain on different occasions. This is the procedure that consists in taking the most debased myths of our society, especially myths of erotic violence, and subjecting them to a potentially endless series of permutations and variations whose ultimate effect (at least so Robbe-Grillet claims) is to deconstruct or demythify them. The repetition-with-variations of popular myths is here seen as a highly transgressive procedure, subverting both traditional narrative, which

demands linear development, not paradigmatic variations, and the dominant ideology, which demands to be reinforced, not deconstructed. Whether one accepts or rejects Robbe-Grillet's explanations of the effect produced by his *bricolage* with sadoerotic myths (I personally have my doubts, for reasons I have stated elsewhere¹⁷), the fact remains that the procedure has become familiar and predictable, as have the thematic constants (essentially women being raped and tortured) with which his *bricolage* operates.

Indeed, the possibility exists that Robbe-Grillet's novels, both individually and as a corpus, have become all too readable—not in the sense of a readability imposed on them by the traditional reader, but in the sense in which they themselves have codified their own transgressive procedures, and codified as well the *commentary* on those procedures. It is instructive to see how many articles, chapters in books, and book-length studies have been published explaining what Robbe-Grillet is up to.¹⁸ What is happening, in a sense—and it is entirely to Robbe-Grillet's credit that he is aware of it—is a *récupération* whereby works that were intended as a «machine of war against order» (the expression is by Robbe-Grillet) have become «classicized» and classified. This kind of *récupération* is perhaps the tragic fate of every successful avant-garde. As Poggioli remarked, «Like any artistic tradition, no matter how antitraditional it may be, the avant-garde also has its conventions. In the broad sense of the word, it is itself no more than a new system of conventions, . . . Disorder becomes a rule when it is opposed in a deliberate and systematic manner to a pre-established order.»¹⁹

It was no doubt because he understood this that Barthes so persistently refused to define or write analytic commentaries on «le scriptible.» The moment one begins to look for rules and order one inevitably finds them, even if they are not the traditional ones. And since the chief *raison d'être* of the transgressive text is precisely to be—or to appear—transgressive, once one has understood its own rules a certain sense of *déjà vu* and lack of interest ensues. Robbe-Grillet himself recently spoke of the impasse that both the *nouveau roman* and the *nouveau nouveau roman* had reached.²⁰

But perhaps I am being too negative—it is possible, after all, that, having understood the rules of the game, a reader will take great pleasure in playing it over and over, finding delight in the variations presented in each new version. Whether bored or happy, however, there is no doubt that such a reader is no longer dealing

with the unfamiliar or the «unreadable.» S/he has simply discovered a new kind of readable text.

Maurice Roche, or Paradigm Lost and Found

Maurice Roche's work poses the question of readability immediately and radically: in Roche's writing, fragmentation and discontinuity occur not only on the level of narrative logic (as in the case of Robbe-Grillet), but also on the level of individual sentences, paragraphs and textual segments. What is subverted here is not only the coherence of a story, but the coherence of any kind of discourse or text. It is almost as if Roche's writings were meant to illustrate, with a vengeance, Derrida's notion that every text bears within it traces and echoes of other texts: in Roche's work it would appear that a text is *nothing but* a heterogeneous assemblage, a juxtaposition of fragments belonging to different wholes, a collection of verbal (and occasionally iconic) bits and pieces, a cacophony of voices. These novels—for that is what their author calls them—seem really to defy any attempt at systematization. By doing so, however, they also present a challenge to the reader (especially a reader of the «disciplined-orderly» type like myself): Is there no way to read such books other than by surrendering to their incoherence? Is there no paradigm, either of writing or of reading, that they allow one to construct?

These are of course loaded questions, as my reader has no doubt guessed. Indeed, I shall argue that they are questions inscribed in Roche's texts themselves, and that it is precisely their inscription which gives these texts their particular kind of readability.

In 1974, Roche published a novel entitled *Codex*—not an indifferent title, since it means both code and book. It was the codex which, by replacing the parchment of scrolls of antiquity, inaugurated a new era and a new mode of reading. Now the first two pages of *Codex* consist of quotations from two of Roche's previous works: one is from a brief text entitled «Contretypes,» published in *Les Lettres Nouvelles* in 1970; the other is from Roche's first novel, *Compact*, published in 1966. Two quotations from *Compact*, complete with page references, occupy a page unto themselves. They are as follows:

IL EXISTAIT AUSSI DES LETTRES

«:MON AMOUR, J'écrivais
 toujours la même chose, (t'en rendras-tu compte?)

and below that, after a large blank space:

JIVARO OU LE PARADIGME PERDU

With these quotations (which in *Compact* occur twenty pages apart) placed as a kind of preface or epigraph to the text of *Codex* proper, Roche performs an autocommentary analogous to Robbe-Grillet's glosses on his own texts. It is also a *meta*-commentary, since it is part of the work itself. This commentary is extremely interesting, for it both poses and answers the question I asked two paragraphs back—but poses and answers it in such a way that it becomes more problematic than ever.

First, the posing: Mon amour, j'écrivais toujours la même chose (t'en rendras-tu compte?). My love, I was always writing the same things (will you be aware of it?) The question is presented in three different typefaces, with the result that although a coherent interrogative sentence seems to have been formed—and I have emphasized that coherence in my own rendering—we cannot *in fact* be sure that the three segments which form the sentence actually belong together; in other words, that they are readable as a single sentence. This doubt is increased by the fact that the words «Mon amour» are preceded by quotations marks which are never closed, thus creating an ambiguity as to whether the «tu» in the parentheses refers to the same person as «mon amour» or to someone else—and also by the fact that there is no closing punctuation. Having read *Compact*, I know that the different typefaces mark independent areas within the text, each of which can be read by skipping the intervening ones. Thus what appeared to be a coherent question disintegrates before my eyes even as I am in the process of registering it.

The answer (if answer it is, and if question there was) comes almost as a mocking anti-climax: *JIVARO OU LE PARADIGME PERDU*. If the paradigm is lost, how are we ever to notice a repetition («même chose»)? Yet here again, things are not so simple. A Jivaro, my *Larousse en Couleurs* tells me, is an Amazonian headhunter and headshrinker—a preserver of skulls, a specialist in the conservation of traces. I know that the image of the skull, as well as the word «crâne» and its semantic variants, are prominently

featured in Roche's writings. Finally, if I look up the quotation in *Compact* I see that it is part of a series of «condensed» titles, preceded by DIGEST DE LA PHYSIOLOGIE DU GOUT and followed by RECHERCHE DU TIME-BINDING. «Jivaro» then begins to resonate with «Jivago», «le paradigme perdu» with both *Paradise Lost* and *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The very utterance that seemed to deny all possibility of recognizing repetition becomes a pointer to the repetition by the text of other texts, and a pointer also to the work of transformation that Roche's text accomplishes on others, including his own. But transforming implies preserving as well as changing, and to notice transformation is to notice both identity and difference. The «lost» paradigm cannot, therefore, be altogether lost: it can be multiplied, combined with other paradigms, condensed, disseminated, covered up,²¹ transposed. These activities are, I think, the privileged subject of Roche's fictions, and I would like now to look a bit more closely at *Compact*, his first published novel.²²

Philippe Sollers, in his preface to the book, distinguishes four separate *récits* in the text, analogous to the «lines» or «parts» in a musical score. He assigns each *récit* a label—hypothétique, parlé, narratif, descriptif—based on the verb tenses and the personal pronouns that characterize it. Visually and materially, however, the text presents itself as much more fragmented than that, for it is broken up into at least twelve different kinds of typefaces, all of which occur more than once. Six of these can be thought of as consecutive, for if the segments printed in these types (bold-faced roman, for example, or small caps or italics) are read consecutively by skipping the intervening ones, they form a single narrative or descriptive space—I hardly think that «line» is the right word, since there is no linear development and since there are times when a textual segment simply trails off or is cut off in mid-sentence, to be picked up again later but without being *continued* in linear fashion. These consecutive typefaces are what Sollers used in delimiting his four kinds of *récit*. The other six typefaces are not consecutive in the above sense, but each one is used recurrently in the same way. For example, titles and newspaper headlines appear in capital italics; bold face capital italics appear twice, both times in German; extra small type is used in footnotes, and so on.

In saying all this I have already begun to systematize the text, however, for at first glance one is not aware of such regularities. Each page presents itself, rather, as a typographical puzzle consisting of the different typefaces plus blank spaces of varying wid-

ths and heights. As the book unfolds these puzzles become increasingly heterogeneous: there appear parentheses, brackets and quotation marks, many of them never closed; parallel and vertical lines between blocks or lines of type; musical notations, fragments in Greek, Hebrew, Russian, German, English and Eskimo; drawings, figures, and numbers; lines of type run together without any spaces between words; one word superimposed on another as in a palimpsest; lines of nonsense syllables designated as onomatopoeic representations of «*cris chaotiques*» (p. 156). In short, the more one reads, the greater is one's sense that the book is becoming unreadable, disintegrating in the very process of constituting itself: «*des noms hétéroclites peu à peu délavés, illisibles*» («Heterogeneous names gradually washed out, unreadable»—p. 163), and two pages later, the last sentence in the book: «*Une texture de signes, de cicatrices, un tissu tactile se décompose*» («A texture of signs, of scars, a tactile fabric disintegrates»—p. 165). At the very instant at which it falls apart, the text comments on its disintegration.

I will certainly not try to put Humpty Dumpty together again, nor to heal what Laurent Jenny has called, in a different context, «the aggressions of the text against itself.»²³ I would simply like to point out, after having emphasized those aspects of the text that tend to make the very notion of a paradigm—or of readability—derisory, a few counteraspects which, if they do not suffice to create a single totalizing paradigm, nevertheless tend to set up limited continuities and repetitions that a reader can hang on to.

First, from a purely visual perspective, the six consecutive typefaces gradually become continuous, for although they interrupt and disrupt each other on the page, a fairly high degree of visual probability is created for each one after it has recurred once or twice. This is quite apart from the fact that the narrative or descriptive space signaled by each typeface is characterized by a particular set of syntactic features, and by semantic features as well. Thus the very first type that appears (bold face italics) is characterized by the use of «*tu*» and the future and conditional tenses, and features the isotopy²⁴ of blindness; the second consecutive type (bold face roman) is continuous in the use of «*on*» and the present tense, and features the isotopy of pain (*douleur*); the fourth consecutive type (standard roman) is continuous in the use of «*je*» and the imperfect tense, and features the isotopy of death or dying; and so on. Each narrative or descriptive space therefore

has a certain homogeneity and fills out a certain paradigm, even if that paradigm is disseminated, Osiris-like, throughout the text.

What is even more remarkable, however, is that linkages are formed not only between the broken-up segments of a single space, but between segments of different spaces as well. On a given page, segments formed by *different* typefaces can be read in linear fashion despite their heterogeneity, much like the «question» I discussed at the beginning («Mon amour, j'écrivais toujours la même chose...»). True, some grammatical anomalies may result, as for example in this: «On ne remarque pas tout d'abord, tant on y est habitué, qu'IL FALLAIT PROFITER DE CHAQUE MINUTE DANS LE SEUL BUT D'OUBLIER CELLE QUI ALLAIT SUIVRE» («One does not notice at first, being so used to it, that IT WAS NECESSARY TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EACH MINUTE WITH THE SOLE AIM OF FORGETTING THE ONE THAT WOULD FOLLOW»), where the segment beginning «Il fallait» is in a different typeface and the verb tenses change accordingly, thus being ungrammatical in relation to the present tense of «remarque» in the first segment. The syntactic armature of the sentence is so strong, however (or is it our habit of reading linearly that is so ingrained?), that this anomaly goes almost unnoticed. We run the heterogeneous segments together and so «make sense»—and a sentence—of them. Laurent Jenny has noticed a similar process in William Burroughs' textual montages or «cutups,» which have a lot in common with Roche's text. Jenny remarks: «The words combine *after all* (*malgré tout*), and even if their syntax remains suspended one's reading goes on unimpeded, pursuing a tyrannical linearity. Besides, vague isotopies constitute themselves here and there, due to the fact that the montage uses redundant or linked elements over and above the ellipses. This makes one wonder at times whether it is not the materiality of the page that constitutes the text, whether the written text is not condemned to textuality.»²⁵ By textuality, Jenny means, here, textual unity.

This question seems to me particularly pertinent to *Compact*, but I would expand it to include not only the «materiality of the page» but the «materiality of the book.» The «vague isotopies» that Jenny mentions constitute themselves not only between heterogeneous segments on a single page, but between heterogeneous segments throughout the many pages that constitute the book. Thus blindness characterizes not only the «tu» of the first narrative space but also the «je» of the third. *Douleur* and *souffrance* become associated not only with the «on» of the second

space but also with the «je» of the third. The seme «Orient» occurs both in the space of impersonal descriptions set in capital italics and in the discourse of the Japanese doctor (lowercase italics), who in turn figures as a character in the space defined by «je». As I turn the pages, thematic repetitions begin to take shape, linked in some way to the theme of memory... so that finally, the more I read and the more the text emphasizes its unreadability, the more I also tend to establish a single thematic category to make sense of it: the category of «mnemopolis,» memory as trace, as charting, as inscription—lines on a page, convolutions on the brain, roads on a map.

Now I seem to have done exactly what I said I wouldn't—and couldn't—do, which is to find the unifying paradigm and heal the self-inflicted wounds of the text. Is it, perhaps, the *reader* who is condemned to textuality? Perhaps. Yet if I have done violence to the text by making sense of it *malgré tout* (and even so, aware of the tentativeness of that enterprise), it has surely not been without the prompting *of* the text:

Mnemopolis que tu pourras hanter sous ton crâne sera une ville seule et obscure. Pas de rues pas de canaux nul labour alentour (ça?—les circonvolutions de ta cervelle), mais des vestiges auxquels tu tenteras de te raccrocher; autant d'objets ou de fragments que patiemment, et non sans hésitations, tu voudras lier les uns aux autres—leur donner un sens en les raccordant» (p. 16).

Mnemopolis which you will be able to haunt beneath your skull will be a lonely and dark city. No streets no canals no plowing roundabout (this?—the convolutions of your brain), but vestiges to which you will try to cling; so many objects or fragments which, patiently and not without hesitation, you will want to link to each other—to give them a meaning by joining them together—

Etait-ce un syntagme étroit qui venait d'exploser dans cette caboche où j'avais remplacé les objets par des mots? (p. 106).

Was it a narrow syntagm which had just exploded in that noggin where I had replaced objects with words?

La vie n'est là que pour mémoire (p. 107).

Life is there only for memory.

Nous avons la sensation d'être le moule de quelque calligramme fantôme: notre image réduite à la dimension d'un crâne (et nous sommes dedans) (p. 165).

We have the feeling of being the mold of some phantom *calligramme*: our image reduced to the dimensions of a skull (and we are inside).

Surely what Roche's text enacts over and over again, at times in an alternation so rapid that it approaches simultaneity, is the losing and regaining, or rather the losing and *recreating* of the paradigm. JIVARO (headshrinker, preserver) OU LE PARADIGME PERDU (there is nothing to preserve) A LA RECHERCHE DU TIMEBINDING. If to be condemned to textuality means to be condemned to create while destroying, *to make sense* as well as to unmake it, then textuality may not be such a bad thing. And readability neither!

NOTES

*This essay, which is part of a larger project, was written mainly while I held a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1980. I wish to thank the Endowment for its support.

1. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 15.

2. Poggioli, pp. 224, 225.

3. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Literature*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 41-52.

4. See, for example, Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970); Gérard Genette, «Vraisemblance et motivation,» in *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969); Susan Rubin Suleiman, «Redundancy and the 'Readable' Text,» *Poetics Today*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (April 1980), 119-142; Philippe Hamon, «Qu'est-ce qu'une description?,» *Poétique*, 18 (1974), 215-35; Henri Mitterand, *Le Discours du roman* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980); and *Poétique*, 16, a special issue devoted to «le discours réaliste.»

5. Dennis Ferraris, «Quaestio de legibilibus aut legendis scriptis: Sur la notion de lisibilité en littérature,» *Poétique*, 43 (September 1980), 283. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the French are my own.

6. Ferraris, p. 285.

7. Roland Barthes, *Sollers écrivain* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), p. 69. To call *H* a novel may seem to be stretching the term beyond recognition; yet, the subtitle *Roman* appears conspicuously on the cover of the book. Sollers, like other practitioners of «le scriptible,» seems to take delight in precisely the kind of stretching-beyond-recognition that is involved here. For a rigorous analysis of transgressive narrative procedures in Robbe-Grillet, Sollers and Roche, see Christine Brooke-Rose, «Transgressions: An Essay-say on the Novel Novel Novel,» *Contemporary Literature*, 19, No. 3 (Summer 1978), 378-407.

8. *Sollers écrivain*, p. 69.

9. R. Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), p. 4. Here and in subsequent quotations from *S/Z*, I have modified Miller's translation; in particular, I have translated *lisible* and *scriptible* as «readable» and «writable,» whereas Miller renders them as «readerly» and «writerly.» I prefer the more literal translations for both theoretical and linguistic reasons. Subsequent page references to *S/Z* will be given in parentheses in the text.

10. Tzvetan Todorov, «La réflexion sur la littérature dans la France contemporaine,» *Poétique*, 38 (April 1979), 131-148.

11. Interestingly enough, David Lodge concludes that Barthes's «plural» reading of Balzac is a «triumphant vindication of the classic text,» since it can support such a reading. (*The Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 68).

12. *Prétexte: Roland Barthes*, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: 10/18, 1978), p. 266.

13. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of The Text*, trans Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 3. I have modified the translation somewhat.

14. See Bruce Morrissette, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Eds. de Minuit, 1963). It should be said that Morrissette's readings of Robbe-Grillet have evolved considerably since that early study. See his *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), a revised, updated and expanded version of the earlier work.

15. Robbe-Grillet, «Order and Disorder in Film and Fiction,» *Critical Inquiry*, 4, No. 1 (Autumn, 1977), 17.

16. This view, although never stated as such, is implicit in Jean Ricardou's book, *Le Nouveau Roman* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), in which he deals with the work of seven «new novelists» including Robbe-Grillet. See also Vicki Mistacco, «The Theory and Practice of Reading *nouveaux romans*: Robbe-Grillet's *Topologie pour une cité fantôme*,» in S. Suleiman and I. Crosman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 371-400.

17. See my «Reading Robbe-Grillet: Sadism and Text in *Projet pour une révolution à New York*,» *Romanic Review*, 68, No. 1 (January, 1977).
18. See, for example, Morrissette, *op. cit.*; *Robbe-Grillet: colloque de Cerisy*, ed. Jean Ricardou, 2 vols. (Paris: 10/18, 1976); Mistacco, *art. cit.*; and the chapters devoted to Robbe-Grillet in Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau-Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972); Leon Roudiez, *French Fiction Today* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972); *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui*, ed. J. Ricardou and F. Van Rossum-Guyon, 2 vols. (Paris: 10/18, 1972); Ricardou, *Le Nouveau Roman*, *op. cit.* And so on.
19. Poggioli, p. 56.
20. *Prétexte: Roland Barthes*, p. 253. The distinction between *nouveau* and *nouveau nouveau roman*, first proposed by Jean Ricardou and others at the 1971 *décade de Cerisy*, is a slender one. According to Ricardou the *nouveau roman*, or «first phase» *nouveau roman*, «contests» traditional narrative, whereas the *nouveau nouveau roman* goes further and «subverts» it. In the former, one can manage to reconstruct a certain unity of the story; in the latter, such reconstruction is no longer possible (See J. Ricardou, *Le nouveau roman*, p. 139). By that definition, Robbe-Grillet's early novels (especially *Les Gommés* and *Le Voyeur*) belong to the first category, whereas his later novels (especially beginning with *La Maison de rendez-vous*) belong to the second.
21. Roche's commentary on *Codex*, made in a recent (and rare) interview, is instructive: «In *Codex* there is a sort of *cantus firmus* more or less hidden by literary objects which would seem to be foreign to it» (Interview with David Hayman, in *Sub-Stance*, 17 (1977), p. 9). While I do not consider this an invitation to unearth the hidden melody by throwing out the pile of «foreign» objects among which it is hidden, it is certainly an invitation to notice *both* the melody and the «noises» that surround it.
22. Paris: Seuil, 1966. Page references will be given in parentheses in the text.
23. Laurent Jenny, «La Stratégie de la forme,» *Poétique*, 17 (1976), 270.
24. The term «isotopy,» first proposed by the structural semantician A. J. Greimas, designates a redundant semantic category within a text; it is because of such redundancies that texts have semantic coherence.
25. Jenny, p. 271.