

The "Incongruous Stranger" as Structural Element in the Novels of Elsa Triolet

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Introduction

In *Language in Literature*, Roman Jakobson underlines the presence of a certain device, which he calls the superfluous passerby, in Russian realist literature. Through this act, Jakobson reveals one of many elements that distinguish Russian realist literature from other realist literatures. Although Russian, this element has found its way into French literature through the works of a Russian-born expatriate novelist, Elsa Triolet. Several of her works present precisely this type of character, and even extend the device structurally; "passerby" passages sometimes function in the same way as the character would. This study analyzes both the traditional and the modernist aspects of this device, places the character within the Triolean repertoire, examines its narrative function, and takes a first step in rehabilitating an unjustly ignored French author.

The author and the critic

Elsa Triolet was born Ella Juriévna Kagana in Moscow in 1896. As a child in a very progressive family, and a younger sibling to a lively and artistic sister, she came in contact early with the intellectuals of the OPOJAZ and Futurist groups, whom she is credited with having introduced to each other (Faye 98). Through her Vladimir Majakovskij, Viktor Sklovskij, and espe-

cially Roman Jakobson, a childhood friend of hers, came to discuss their views together. Jakobson was someone with whom Triolet kept particularly close contact once both had emigrated, often greeting him in Paris to discuss literary matters (Robel). Triolet's fiction—three novels in Russian, followed by three sets of novellas and fourteen novels, as well as other writings, in French—contains a subtle, nuanced version of many of the modernist concerns of these authors and critics (and of many older, more established Russian forms such as the *bylina*).¹ Her work had in turn a limited influence on French literature, primarily for extra-literary reasons, but she engaged in a lively fictional and philosophical dialogue with Camus and is sometimes associated with the *nouveau roman* movement. She had a very precise, direct influence on the prose of her husband, surrealist poet Louis Aragon, especially in terms of structure and of the use of different devices.² To illustrate the device analyzed here, examples are taken from Triolet's *Zascitnyj cvet* (1928), *Mille regrets* (1942), *L'Inspecteur des ruines* (1948), *Luna-Park* (1959), and *Ecoutez-voir* (1968).

Analysis of the device

“Qu'est-ce qu'une comparaison poétique? . . . l'un des moyens d'introduire dans la tournure poétique une série d'éléments qui ne sont pas amenés par la marche logique de la narration” “What is a poetic comparison? . . . one means of introducing into a poetic turn of phrase a series of elements that are not brought into it by the logical movement of the narrative” (Jakobson, “Fragments” my translation; 294). In this discussion of “mots-mains qui aident à faire” “helping-hand words,” Jakobson's words form a parallel to another phenomenon that he refers to as the superfluous passerby. In this device a character can appear in order to provoke a new development in plot or character relations.

As Jakobson explains it, such a character—a figure he finds common to Russian realist fiction—has no direct relationship to the characters or events portrayed, and has no “logical” reason for being present (*Language* 25). Therefore, as opposed to classic novelistic perspective, where minor characters serve as foils for

the protagonist, placing that character's personality and point of view in relief, this incongruous and unknown character shifts and blurs the characterial hierarchy by his non-link to the main character. In this way, the superfluous passerby displaces the focus of the narrative, creating a moment of impeded perception as the reader attempts to determine that character's purpose in the narrative. According to Jakobson, that purpose is to announce an important event (*Language* 32). The superfluous passerby's presence always immediately precedes a momentous happening in the life of the main character. Thus the link between this stranger and the main character exists, but on a different level, that of narrative structure. The incongruous stranger creates a moment of diversion that makes the following event foregrounded in its decisiveness. In a minor form, this device could be considered a Jakobsonian "dominante," one of those elements which "gouverne, détermine et transforme les autres éléments" 'governs, determines, and transforms the other elements' (Jakobson, *Huit* 77), and thus one of many "signes proposés au lecteur-spectateur [par Triolet] pour tirer son regard vers une certaine représentation des choses" 'signs proposed [by Triolet] to the reader-viewer in order to attract his gaze to a certain representation of things' (Rohou 300).

It is worth noting in this context of representation that Jakobson considers this tactic to belong to the realm of realist art, in his definition of the term: "a tendency to deform given artistic norms conceived as an approximation of reality" (*Language* 22)—a definition somewhat resembling Madaule's definition of Triolet's realism: "[écrire] ce qui aurait pu être. Et qui sait si ce n'a pas été?" '[write] what could have been. And who knows if it had not been?' ("*Témoin*" 20), for both put in doubt the relationship of the perceiver to reality. In the case of the superfluous passerby the given artistic norm of traditional characterial hierarchy is deformed by the new structural relationship of the characters. The result of such deformation is an intensification of effect, as can be seen in, for example, the paintings of Salvador Dali. In addition, the authors to whom Jakobson refers to support this theory are two anomalies in realist fiction (or, if you will, two

proofs of the specificity of the Russian version of realism), Gogol and Tolstoy.³ This realism as an attack on what is perceived as realism can be said to define succinctly the modus operandi of Elsa Triolet, a style that her critics called *réalisme fantastique* and which involves “une réalité qui tend à se dépasser elle-même” ‘a reality that tends to escape from its own self’ (Madaule, “L’Ame” 283) or a “glissement imperceptible du réel au fantastique” ‘an imperceptible shift from reality to the fantastic’ (Apel-Muller 138).⁴

An additional aspect of this device as a purely Russian product is its similarity to a phenomenon observed by Vladimir Propp. Propp was studying folk narrative, but many aspects of the older oral forms of Slavic narrative still apply today, as the Russians had never distanced themselves from oral literature as much as Western Europeans had (McLuhan 89). The superfluous passerby can be seen as a more modern version of Propp’s donor or helper, whose appearance heralds the passing of an ordeal by the hero (51-54, 96-97). Any magical behavior or objects associated with these characters have disappeared from the modern narrative, but their “magic” influence on the course of events has remained. Such a parallel between old and new forms takes nothing away from the modern power of this device; both Marshall McLuhan (21, 36, 62) and Walter Ong (135-36) have emphasized how much the reordering of artistic hierarchies and the cooling of new media have created forms that reproduce pre-typographic procedures. This device, especially in its Triolet aspects, can be seen as participating in this post-typographic reordering of narrative. It is through Triolet’s use of it that the superfluous passerby becomes a particularly modernist device.

The incongruous stranger as character

We see an early example of the technique of the superfluous passerby—here referred to as the incongruous stranger, as the character in question may not necessarily be passing in the strictest sense, and because his or her “superfluity” would have to be judged through the perspective of classic novelistic hierarchy—in *Zascitnyj cvet*.⁵ This is Triolet’s first fully fictional work, and

her last to be published in Russian. Although written in Russian, the action takes place almost entirely in Paris; it was probably this clash of “bourgeois” French elements with Soviet concerns for “didactic” literature (preceding the Zdanovian canon of “socialist realism”) that caused subsequent rejection of her works by Russian editors. Triolet herself says that by the time of the publication of *Zascitnyj cvet* she had “Paris dans la peau” ‘Paris under her skin’ (ORC 1: 32), and so the transition to writing in French was by then inevitable.

On the surface, the novel deals with the love affairs of its heroine, Lucile, and with the development and eventual collapse of her close friendship with Varvara; on a more profound level the work explores Lucile’s lack of social conscience and Varvara’s attempt to help her acquire one, all the while suffering herself from a crippling fear of life (ORC 1: 24). These two characters confront their “flaws” through this meeting (Z. c. 165); their meeting is thus placed at the core of the action.

Lucile falls in love with Conrad just before he leaves her to go to the colonies. Listless and desperate, she wanders aimlessly in Paris; one evening she finds herself far from home at dinner time, and decides to eat alone in a Montparnasse restaurant.

Poslednyj svobodnyj stolik zanjal neobyčajnoj xudoby celovek v černom sjurtuke i černoj širokopoloj sljape. Ego xudoba polozitel’no gipnotizirovala Ljusil’. On sidel s opuscennymi glazami, razlamyval xleb dlinnymi pauc’imi pal’cami i bystro glotal.

The last available table was taken by an unusually thin man in a black frock-coat and a black wide-brimmed hat. His thinness positively hypnotized Lucile. He had a crestfallen look. He broke his bread with long, spidery fingers and swallowed quickly. (Z. c. 24)

This thin man has already shown two important traits; first, he hypnotizes Lucile. Just as the reader is distracted from the main current of the story, so is Lucile distracted from thoughts of Conrad to fix her attention on this man. Equally important is the fact that *her* attention *follows* ours; we see the man before we learn of Lucile’s sudden fascination. Thus reader and character parallel each other in action. This serves both to heighten the readers’

participation in the narrative, as they find their gaze mirrored in a character's, and to foreground the device itself by this double gaze (McLuhan 56). This is a frequent practice for Triolet; a character or narrator will often witness with the reader, offering a commentary of the witnessed phenomenon which is sometimes voiced as a response to the reader's. Characters will also often remember and forget turn by turn that they are involved in a narrative, mirroring the reader's alternate absorption and distance in relation to the reading. The lines of life and narrative are blurred; a character will talk about a "story" rather than about a life. Varvara herself offers such a reflection:

Vse zizni takie, kakimi my ix vidim: tol'ko perecen' faktov, opernye libretto, ne bolee. Ja ne mogy pojmat' logiku faktov . . . Ja glupa, kak geroi romanov, kotorye ne vidjat svoej sud'by, takoj jasnoj s samogo nacala dlja citatelja.

All lives are just as we see them, they're just a list of facts, opera libretti, nothing more. I cannot grasp the logic of facts . . . I'm stupid as heroes in novels, they can't see their destiny, so clear from the very beginning to the reader. (Z. c. 156)

This doubling of reader and character in facing the text, with its consequent blurring of the boundaries between the two, is vital to Triolet's style.⁶

To return to the prompter of these remarks, the thin stranger in black, the second important aspect of his appearance is that he takes the last remaining table. The next person who enters must sit at an occupied table—Varvara is placed at Lucile's. Thus the stranger heralds the coming together of the two female protagonists, the meeting of the unconscious Lucile with her "âme moustachue" 'mustached soul,' the one who will awaken her (Delranc 56).

The two subsequent moments in the narrative when the thin man in black comes to the fore reinforce his function as announcer of the meeting. Each moment corresponds to a form of contact between the two women. In the first instance, it is a question of eye contact; Lucile has been staring at Varvara "kak vesc," 'as if she were a thing.' When Varvara's order arrives, she puts

down the newspaper she has been reading, the barrier between herself and Lucile's stare. Their eyes meet, then Lucile looks away, embarrassed. One sentence later, the thin man is described again: "Xudoj celovek glotal mjaso, otryvaja kuski xleba dlinnymi pauc'imi pal'cami. Ljusil' daze stalo strasno, gljadja na nego" 'the thin man swallowed his meat, tearing his bread with his long, spidery fingers. Lucile even began to be frightened, glancing at him' (Z. c. 25).

The man's action of tearing his bread is repeated, bringing it to the level of a Triolean repetition (repetition constituting a major device in her work⁷). The tearing parallels the coming destruction of Lucile's innocence, a destruction prompted by Varvara. Lucile's fright at the man parallels her struggle to retain the smooth unperturbedness of her world. The doubled mention of spidery fingers indicates that her attempts are doomed; Varvara weaves a web of ponderables that entrap Lucile in conscious thought.

It is at his departure that the thin man's final link with the two women is forged:

Mezdu tem v restorane cto-to proisxodilo. Lico devuski, stojascej so scëtom v rukax u stola xudogo celoveka, i lico podosedsego k nim xozjaina byli rasterjanny: xudoj celovek tscëtno iskal kosëlek.

Zenscina za stolom Ljusil' toze rasterjanno smotrela na xudogo celoveka, potom sxvatilas' za scëku, kak-budto u neë vdrug ocen' zaboleti zuby.

Xudoj celovek vstal. On ne iskal bol'se kosël'ka. Groznyj, kak prokuror, sagal on k vyxodu, sredi vinovatyx lic. Nikto ne poproboval ego ostanovit'.

—Ocen' prosto, poobedal i usël . . . —skazala zenscina za stolom Ljusil', i zacem-to sdernula sljapu.

In the meantime something was happening in the restaurant. The faces of the waitress, standing at the thin man's table with the check in her hand, and of the proprietor, walking towards them, were distraught; the thin man was vainly searching for his purse.

The woman at Lucile's table also looked distraughtly at the man, then put a hand to her cheek, as if a tooth had just started throbbing painfully.

The thin man stood up. He was no longer searching for his purse. As terrifying as a prosecutor, he walked out among the guilty faces. No one attempted to stop him.

"He simply ate and left . . ." said the woman at Lucile's table, and for some reason took off her hat. (Z. c. 26)

Varvara speaks for the first time in the narrative, apart from a Russianized (palatalized and trilled) "merci." These words are not addressed to Lucile particularly; they are simply a thought expressed aloud. The fact that Lucile is there at the table, however, makes her a receiver of the comment, and therefore part of that communicative act. By prompting the remark, the thin man shows himself to be the catalyst in forming the Varvara-Lucile bond by means of this communicative act. The representation of the thin man as a prosecutor continues his foreshadowing function; at the end of the narrative, Lucile feels judged for having ignored the harsh realities of life (165).

The thin man brings the two together, but it takes another incongruous stranger to finally cement the relationship between Lucile and Varvara. Actually, it would be better to talk about an incongruous incident; the event involves the restaurant's young bartender. Since it is normal to find a bartender at a restaurant, we cannot consider his presence incongruous. However, he is a stranger to both women, and what happens to him is out of place in the context both of his work at the restaurant and of the narrative plane. The accident that he suffers is unusual in his job, and is not by itself an integral part of the plot. This incident, moreover, provokes an integral event in the plot: bringing Lucile and Varvara to speaking terms. One could advance the idea that by its context and its role as catalyst, the event is itself placed in the function of the incongruous stranger, a phenomenon that is analyzed below.

This function is even more clearly defined as it operates at the third meeting of Lucile with Varvara; between the incident of the thin man and that of the barman, there is a second brief encounter:

Na sledujuscij den' Ljusil' opjat' posla v malen'kij restorancik. Vcerasnaja sosedka, kotoruju Ljusil' nazывala Russkoj, byla uze tam.

Ljusil' poklonilas' i prosla mimo, no sela tak, ctoby videt' eë [. . . Varvara] bystro ela, ne zamecaja Ljusil', rasplatilas' i vstala.

Lucile returned to the little restaurant the next day. The woman, whom Lucile had started to call the Russian, was already there. Lucile greeted her and walked past, but sat where she could see her [. . . Varvara] ate quickly, without noticing Lucile, paid for it all, and stood up. (Z. c. 26-27)

No other contact except the greeting takes place between the two women, a fact that indicates the need for some kind of prompting. The narration is waiting for an incitement. Nor does any other character, primary or secondary, appear in the scene; no possible catalyst is present. The bartender is therefore brought to center stage during their third meeting as an additional catalyst.

At the beginning of this third passage, the two women are again at the same table, but still have not attempted to sustain the communication started indirectly at their first meeting: "V vecer, kogda Ljusil' opjat' poexala v malen'kij restorancik i podsela k stoliku Russkoj, oni snacala tol'ko usilenno ulibalis' i sledili drug za drugom, peredevali goricicu, xleb . . ." 'One evening, Lucile left again for the little restaurant, and sat at the Russian's table. They only smiled earnestly at each other at first and watched each other, handing each other the mustard, the bread . . .' (29).

Just at this point the bartender comes to the fore, creating a diversion from the main narrative that heralds the definitive linking of the two women:

No restoran neozidanno zavolnovalsja: za prilavkom, v polu, naxodilsja spusk v pogreb, i mal'ciska v dlinnom fartuke skatilsja tuda, k uzasu obedajuscix i xozjaev. Xozjain za sivorot, kak kotënko, vytascil ego iz cërnoj dyry, mal'ciska vspotel, no byl cel.

But the restaurant suddenly sprang to life; behind the counter, in the floor, was a way down to the cellar, and the young fellow in the long apron fell down into it, to the terror of the diners and the owners. The proprietor pulled him out of that black hole by the collar, like a kitten; the boy was in a sweat, but in one piece. (Z. c. 29)

The boy's mishap finally provokes a direct act of communication between Varvara and Lucile, which starts as part of the general reaction to the incident: "Obedajuscie smejalis' [. . .] Ljusil' i sosedka ulybnulis' drug drugu, i Russkaja neresitel'no skazala: —Vas davno ne bylo vidno . . ." 'The diners laughed [. . .] Lucile and the Russian smiled at one another, and the Russian said hesitantly, "You have not come lately . . ." (29-30). This exchange, once established, remains permanent; the two women stroll and converse for the rest of the evening. Through the intervention of the barman and the communication act provoked by him, the tie between Lucile and Varvara is bound: "Oni privykli drug k drugu v etot ze pervyj vecer znakomstva" 'It took just this first evening of acquaintance to become accustomed to one another' (31).

This incident parallels that of the thin man also because of the doubling—or here tripling—of the gaze. The reader's attention is turned to the incident first; that of Lucile and Varvara follows. The paralleled gaze of the reader and characters is repeated in this passage.

When Triolet transfers this technique to her French prose, she puts it to much subtler uses. The link between an incongruous stranger and an important event is more attenuated; there is no abrupt transfer from the person to the event. Most commonly, some secondary conflict or repetition enters to form the actual link of the person to the events heralded.

Mille regrets offers two examples of this more elaborate system. *Mille regrets* is Triolet's second work in French, made up of a collection of four novellas. Two were begun in Paris before the war, and two others after the Nazi occupation began. They were all finished between Triolet's flight from Paris and the couple's departure from Nice to take part in the Resistance. These are thus among the last of her works to be published legally, although Triolet calls *Mille regrets* "la seule contrabande" 'the only contraband' in the work, in that it contradicts the Vichy regime's message of gratitude and relief toward the disciplining influence of the occupier (ORC 3: 33). Three of the four novellas reflect the problems of this war situation, and the two examples discussed take place in the framework of flight and hiding from the enemy.

Mille regrets is narrated through the eyes of an unidentified woman who has fled Paris at the advance of the Nazi forces and taken refuge in Nice, living in extremely straitened conditions. She has trouble sleeping at one point, and thinks back to two incidents that she had observed in wartime Paris and Orléans before escaping to Nice. The incongruous characters are thus couched in a flashback which further disguises the passage's function; a reader who puts the incident in its proper chronological order in relation to the other events in the story will fail to see its link with that story's culminating point. The reader must refrain from mentally reorganizing the text in such a linear fashion in order to perceive the importance of the existing order of its parts. This can be seen as paradoxical, as the attempt to reconstruct a text chronologically is part of the reader's participation in it, and Triolet regularly incites participation. This can be explained by the observation that a refusal to organize is also a form of participation, in that it is a reaction to the text, and is therefore still in contradistinction to passive reading, in which there is no probing reaction. In other words, a keenly participating reader will try to reconstruct the chronology of the story (a process akin to McLuhan's "filling in" [42]), a conscious reader who refuses this participation will observe the juxtapositions created by the breaking up of the chronology, and a passive reader will simply notice that the narrative is "disorganized," or "not in its right order."

The passage in question first involves an incident that the narrator witnesses from her apartment window in the middle of the Parisian night:

j'ai pu voir un car arrêté devant la porte de la maison d'en face [. . .]

—Je te l'avais dit, c'est une ambulance qu'il fallait . . .

—Bon, alors grouillez-vous . . . [. . .]

Les agents grimpaient dans le car. Le bruit s'en alla mourir dans le Paris noir. [. . .] Devant la porte ouverte de la maison d'en face se tenait une ombre silencieuse [. . .] L'ombre devant la maison toussa. Enfin un bruit de moteur, et une ambulance grondante s'arrêta devant la maison. La coiffe blanche d'une infirmière apparut à la portière [. . .] l'infirmière ressortait de la maison, avec à côté d'elle une femme qu'elle aida à monter dans l'ambulance.

I could see a bus stopped in front of the door of the house across the street. [. . .]

“I told you, it’s an ambulance we need . . .

“Fine, then get going . . . [. . .]

The policemen got into the bus. The sound of its engine became fainter in the dark Paris night. [. . .] At the open door of the house across the street stood a silent shadow [. . .]. The shadow in front of the house coughed. Finally the noise of a motor was heard, and a grumbling ambulance stopped in front of the house. The white cap of a nurse appeared at its door [. . .] the nurse came back out of the house with a woman beside her, whom she helped get into the ambulance. (*Mille* 62-63)

The shadow and the woman (who, as we learn elsewhere in the passage, are a certain M. and Mme. Martin, the wife going to the hospital to give birth) appear for no apparent reason in the middle of the narrator’s sleepless night. The incident as a whole shows its importance as harbinger in the fact that it has stayed in the narrator’s memory; her fascination with the event functions in the same way as Lucile’s hypnotism by the thin man.

Her thoughts continue to drift, guided now by the thought of the baby:

Je revois sur une place d’Orléans un autobus parisien plein de nouveaux-nés, emmaillottés et rangés sur les banquettes comme des bûches. Peut-être y avait-il celui pour lequel des agents étaient venus une nuit dans la maison en face de la mienne.

I remember in a square in Orléans there was a Paris bus full of newborns, all wrapped up and lined up on the seats like logs. Perhaps the one the policemen had come for one night, to the house across the street from my place, was there. (63)

Again, the narrator’s interest shows us the importance of the event. All the information that the reader receives is through her; this time our gaze follows her mental backward glance.

This question of whether the baby born to her neighbors is among the others leads to another question concerning someone else’s whereabouts, a question deliberately left unanswered: “Je n’ai pas cherché à savoir comment Tony a été tué. Avoir tout supporté de son vivant pour que sa femme ne sache rien et risquer

qu'elle apprenne maintenant" 'I didn't try to find out how Tony was killed. To have put up with everything while he was alive so that his wife wouldn't know, and risk her finding out now' (63-64). Thoughts of Tony, her married lover killed in the *drôle de guerre*, frame the narrator's scattered memories of babies. The thread that links the nurse and the babies brings us back to him. This thread—there is a baby—Where is this baby?—Where is Tony?—points the way to the signification of the passage. We know by that link that the important event of the story has to do with Tony.

At this point in the narrative, the link may seem obvious; the whole plight of the narrator, except for the theft of her belongings during a train trip, which has left her destitute, is linked to the loss of her lover. She was a kept woman; without Tony she has no funds, and not having had a job she has no savings to rely on either. Further, her distressed mental state is attributable directly to her loss of this strong and optimistic man. However, this condition does not constitute the ultimate wrenching that prepares the story's denouement. It is only further in the narration that the true link shows; it is the discovery that Tony is alive that is the critical event, not his loss. We are shown this by the passages involving the babies; M. Martin sends someone to *find* an ambulance, and the narrator wonders if she could *find* her neighbor's child among them. The idea of finding is the dominant gesture in the chain of associations, even in the part concerning Tony; the narrator shows in her decision not to find that she had considered looking. The refusal to look, in addition, foreshadows the disastrous response to the actual finding.

The most pivotal moment comes after the narrator receives the news that Tony is in fact alive; it is the realization that the narrator must show her deteriorated self (in her view) to a lover she believes she had held onto only because of her beauty that provokes the climactic crisis, the belief that she looks too old to continue to attract Tony.⁸ Running into Maître Ferdinand, Tony's lawyer and friend-in-the-know, her interpretation of the look in his eyes—"Comme elle a changé!" 'How she has changed!' (75)—instills in her a ghastly negative idea of her present looks, which

she first tries to repair in a flurry of hair appointments and clothing purchases (75-76), all the while seeing evidence of the hopelessness of her attempts in each action and reaction (78).

As she feels more and more overwhelmed and more and more desperate, she tries at first to attribute her unease to the shock of hearing the good news (79). But finally the appearance of other incongruous strangers—a woman in yellowed white clothes, youths going to a party, an old woman lifting her skirt to adjust her garter (80-81)—people young and old, all pointed reminders of lost youth and advancing age, brings her to realize what is really tormenting her: “Voilà! Voilà pourquoi je ne veux pas revoir Tony! Non, je ne peux pas supporter l’idée de son premier regard sur moi, de cette stupeur vite reprimée: ‘Mon Dieu, mais c’est une vieille femme!’” “That’s it! That’s why I can’t see Tony again! No, I can’t stand the idea of him looking at me, of hiding his stupefaction: “My God, she’s an old woman!”” (81). Through the skewed perspective of this imagined aging, even the sea “se défait,” ‘comes apart a little,’ in her view. It is the crisis harbingered by the search for babies that leads to the death, either accidental or by suicide, of the narrator. Through these small, subtle clues, we end up at linking a shadow in the night to the narrator’s death; from searching we come to finding, and from that to the horror of another find. In this way Triolet spins out the device of the superfluous stranger to create a more woven narrative and arrives at the narrator’s terror in a way that surprises the reader almost physically, thus inviting participation.

Another example of such spun-out construction is in *Le destin personnel*, a novella that contains a veiled description of Triolet’s own clandestine activity (ORC 3: 34). As *Mille regrets*, it is narrated in first person, through the point of view of Charlotte, who has left Paris to stay in the country near the demarcation zone with a couple she has known for a long time, Jean-Claude and Margot. Triolet describes this narrative as a “sorte d’affirmation de la maxime napoléonienne: *Le destin, c’est la politique*; les événements qui bouleversaient le monde ne faisaient qu’une bouché des destins personnels” ‘a sort of affirmation of the Napoleonic maxim “destiny is politics.” The events which were turning the world upside-down made short work of any personal des-

tinies' (ORC 3: 33-34). Although "legal," it was written to serve as a signal to those who did not accept the occupation that there were others ready to resist (ORC 3: 34).

The device as used in "Le destin personnel" starts out differently than in the preceding novella, as the incongruous strangers are present and not remembered in a flashback:

L'autre jour, je suis allée à L . . . , Jean-Claude m'a emmenée dans un restaurant où on mange comme avant la guerre. A la table voisine, il y avait trois femmes élégantes [. . .] Ces dames mangeaient et buvaient ferme, il y avait sur la table des bouteilles de bon vin, et le tout se termina par de l'alcool, servi dans de grands verres à pied. Elles étaient un peu rouges et riaient beaucoup.

The other day, I went to L . . . ; Jean-Claude took me to a restaurant where you can eat like we did before the war. At the next table, there were three elegant women [. . .] These ladies ate and drank a lot, there were bottles of fine wine on the table, and they finished the meal with after-dinner drinks served in big stemmed glasses. They were a little red and laughed a lot. ("Le destin personnel" 191)

These women, minutely described in the passage, divert the narrator and the reader for a moment from the narrator's earlier wartime plight, the sharing of her apartment with an ungrateful brother-in-law and his family. In contrast to the passages in *Zascitnyj cvet*, and in conformity to those of *Mille regrets*, it is the narrator/character herself who leads the reader's gaze to the three women. The parallel gaze is again established, with the character directing the reader. The noise of the dining ladies also forms an opposite extreme to the thin man's silence and forbidding aspect.

As these women prepare for departure, we find the first link of the chain that leads us to the climactic event:

En partant, celle à aigues-marines serra la main du patron, en lui soufflant quelque chose à l'oreille, et elle ajouta plus fort : "C'est pour nos prisonniers . . ." Ainsi demande-t-on une pâtée pour son chien.

Before leaving, the one wearing aquamarines shook the owner's hand and whispered something in his ear, then added aloud, "It's for our prisoners . . ." So that's how people ask for doggy-bags now. (191)

One of the women who has distracted us from Charlotte's present situation leads the narrative to the subject of France's prisoners of war and the effort—feigned or real—of the occupied French to ease their conditions. Charlotte follows this conversational line in her thoughts, and adds her own commentary on the subject.

Mon prisonnier à moi n'est pas gâté, mes colis sont pauvres, comme moi. Georges vivait sur moi, me prenait mes pensées dans la tête, mes mots dans la bouche, il me dépouillait, se parait de mes plumes et s'en allait parader . . .

My prisoner isn't spoiled, my packages are as poor as I am. Georges lived through me, he took the thoughts from my head, the words from my mouth, he plucked me, dressed himself in my feathers, and went prancing about . . . (192)

Charlotte takes the chain formed from the woman in aquamarines and the prisoners and adds the link of her husband, Georges, also a prisoner. She immediately follows this with another, modulative link; Georges is parasitical toward his wife. The idea of "mots de ma bouche" is particularly important as a crucial link in the chain, subtly shifting the theme of discourse from the general woes of the war to Charlotte's own personal anguish, her "destiny." Charlotte expresses the extent of Georges's parasitism and her reaction to it in terms of words, of mouth, of voice. "De temps en temps, j'essaie de penser à Georges autrement que d'habitude, d'oublier qu'il m'a empêchée de chanter, qu'il m'a gâché la vie . . ." "From time to time I try to think otherwise of Georges, I try to forget that he stopped me from singing, that he ruined my life . . ." (192). "Gâcher la vie" is the vital step in the progression of associations that connects the three elegant women to the central event of the story. Georges also serves as an intermediary; Charlotte vents her rage at him in hints and in terms of the past. This anger is a foreshadowing parallel to the real anger she displays in the important event of the narrative—Charlotte's discovery that Jean-Claude, her former lover, has a child by an-

other woman, and her subsequent (failed) attempt to murder him (202-03, 208-12). Just as Charlotte reproaches Georges for having ruined her life by refusing to let her sing, she reproaches Jean-Claude for ruining her fulfillment as a woman by insisting she abort the child she would have had by him:

—Alors, dis-je doucement, quinze ans de ma vie, chaque instant de ma vie, quinze ans de malheur, notre enfant dont tu n'as pas voulu, tout ce que tu sais, tout ce que tu ne sais pas . . . [. . .]

Il ne disait toujours rien, prudent, rusé . . .

—Un calvaire, un chemin de croix . . . Charlotte est bonne, Charlotte pardonne, Charlotte comprend!

“So,” I said softly, “fifteen years of my life, every moment of my life, fifteen years of misery, our child that you didn't want, everything you know about, everything you don't know . . .” [. . .]

He still said nothing, cautious, cunning . . .

“I've been tortured, crucified . . . Charlotte is good, Charlotte is forgiving, Charlotte is understanding!” (210)

In this way the incongruous strangers at the next table of a restaurant guide the reader through sinuous links with prisoners of war to prisoners of life such as Charlotte, “le vilain canard qui n'est pas sorti du milieu canard, [. . . dont] la vie est une torture de soumission, de dégoût” ‘the ugly ducking who never left the duck pond, [. . . whose] life is a torturing one, of submission and disgust’ (ORC 3: 34). The “stranger” brings us from war crimes to crimes of passion. The elegant women lead us to the parallel between Georges and Jean-Claude that makes for the double *calvaire*, of Charlotte's life, and to her final crisis.

The incongruous stranger passage

With all the structural concerns that have been discussed in these pages, a second look at the device of the incongruous stranger is in order, so as to put the device on a more global structural footing. This designation can be used metaphorically to indicate a passage of a work rather than a character. Just as with the character, the passage's single appearance and juxtaposition with other passages are what constitute the passage's identity.

Three different analytical techniques can be used in negative form to establish a passage as an incongruous stranger passage. First, there is the phenomenon of Triolet repetition already alluded to: cyclical patterns of repetitions permeate Triolet's narratives. Therefore the opposite, the lack or scarcity of repetitions, marks a passage as incongruous within this novelistic system (Todorov 128). Second, the amount of framing and alternating structure present in the works (Todorov 140-41) focuses attention on those passages introduced by *enchaînement* and brings into relief certain interpretive aspects of their presence and position. Third, the modern technique of foregrounding and the resulting change of hierarchy give those passages a new position in relation to the whole (Jakobson, *Huit* 83, 84; McLuhan 28). The combination of these different interpretive aspects allows one to extend the phenomenon of the incongruous stranger to include structural elements formed by the prose itself.

Thus, the definition of the incongruous stranger passage, in a parallel to Jakobson's definition of the character, presents itself: a passage of narrative in which Triolet repetition is sparse or nonexistent, which forms no logical narrative link with the rest of the narrative, and which is put into relief by the surrounding passages as it in turn puts into relief a following passage that contains a pivotal narrative event, thus functioning at a structural level. Once this definition is established, one can find several passages in Triolet's works that illustrate it.

The passage in *Zascitnyj cvet* devoted to Dubois is the first to appear in Triolet's work (87-96). In this long passage in Chapter 5, Lucile and her husband Guy invite their respective friends, Varvara and Dubois, out for an evening. Two major elements are contained in this passage: Varvara's first full acquaintance with Guy (which leads her to become his lover for a short time) and Dubois's domination of the evening—and thus of the narration. In this passage much of the focus is shifted from the main characters to Dubois.

However, Dubois himself cannot be considered a superfluous stranger, as he is known to Guy and Lucile, if not to Varvara and the reader. The passage is also devoid of the forty-odd Triolet repetitions that wind through the rest of the text; on the other

hand, it presents a system of internal repetitions of its own, based primarily on Dubois's nervous tics. In addition, the Dubois passage distinguishes itself from the rest of the narrative by its milieu; in contrast to the correctness of Monceau and the bohemian unpredictability of Montparnasse, Montmartre and Les Halles thrust their swarming chic multinationalism and swarming earthy market activity. The passage is significant because the incident with Dubois precedes the chapter in which Lucile first begins to arrive at awareness of her place in life. Dubois distracts both Lucile and the reader from questions of Conrad, and when both Lucile and the reader return seriously to the question, reality appears with it and Lucile must confront it. The main event in the narrative is thus ushered in through a half-chapter of incongruity which intensifies Lucile's thought processes and clears the reader's attention.

L'Inspecteur des ruines contains a triple incidence of incongruous stranger passages that propels Antonin towards his growing "consistency." This novel, published in 1949, was inspired by Triolet's post-war European tour and the haunting view of the ruins left by bombardments ("Préface à la mort dans l'âme" *ORC* 13: 11). These ruins became for her a parallel for the human ruins, those men who came home from the war, prison, or the Resistance to try and function anew in a society returning to normal. Antonin Blond cannot find a way to return to normal, cannot "prendre consistance" 'acquire consistency' (*Inspecteur* 42, 201), but receives no help because his "wounds" are not visible and because people reject the merely psychologically wounded ("Préface à la mort dans l'âme" *ORC* 13: 21). This "image du gâchis" 'image of waste' ("Préface à la mort dans l'âme" *ORC* 13: 25) is offered a "job" by a shyster hoping to profit by the coming reconstruction of Europe: inspection and registering of ruins in Germany. It is through this move from Paris to Germany that Antonin finds a way to move back into life.⁹

But it takes more than this change of scene to heal him. In Germany, Antonin does nothing but pursue an exasperating liaison with the diva Bianca and bring food and company to the human ruin Joë. Taken together, two incidents signal the break-

ing of his focus on the two women and his return to Paris and the path toward identity. First, Antonin is in the destroyed German town that constitutes his base of operations for New Year's Eve, and the townspeople have prepared a show and a dance to celebrate. The "orgiastic" quality that Antonin finds in the dancing is entirely new to the narrative (179). Also new is the chance for Antonin to see Bianca in public; usually he can only be with her in his hotel room, which has a door leading straight to a box in the adjoining opera house. In the middle of the festivities a circus lion-tamer arrives with a lioness on a leash (181-83). Thus, within the incongruous party is contained an incongruous arrival. Again, as in *Zascitnyj cvet's* barman scene, incongruity is established by more than the character; the setting and actions contribute taking the entire passage out of the frame of narrative events.

Antonin reacts with wariness to the arrival of the lioness, fearing that the drunken crowd around her might start teasing her and provoke a violent defensive reaction. In his efforts to have the beast removed from the hall, Antonin leaves Bianca at their table; when he comes back, she is gone. In this way the incongruous appearance of the lioness breaks Antonin's attention to Bianca, and heralds the breaking off of the liaison; the incongruous atmosphere, incident, and animal lead him away from her. Antonin sees her again only to exchange a hello at the hotel desk.

The incongruous lioness announces the rupture with Bianca, but the incongruous reveling in which it is encased also announces a rupture. Immediately after discovering that Bianca is gone, Antonin leaves the party to look for Joë in the ruins of the house she had been working in before its destruction (*Inspecteur* 183-84). She also has disappeared, however, never to reappear. In a single evening Antonin loses the two people who held him in that town.

However, it takes a third incongruity to bring Antonin to decide to leave. He returns to his room; there, by the same door through which he normally welcomed Bianca, a young boy enters, a young Nazi hunted by the American military for having killed an officer (185-87). It is the sight of this continued Aryan

fanaticism that disgusts the normally immobile Antonin enough to think of leaving. This incongruous passage, by forcing Antonin to take a stance, turns him toward rehabilitation and reintegration with the society of which he has not felt a part since the war. A murder and flight announce the return of Antonin to societal "consistency."

A more extenuated chain of incongruity and repetition is formed in *Luna-Park*. This work, part of a trilogy on modern man's mindless consumerism and his enslavement to new technologies with its resulting stress (preface 31: 12; "Postface à L'Age de nylon" 32: 250; McLuhan 20, 34, 69), deals with film-maker Justin Merlin's growing obsession with Blanche Hauteville, a test pilot whom he has never met and from whom he has just bought an already furnished house in which he finds a packet of love letters that had been written to her. Blanche's relation to technology and Justin's to art—he is inspired to film *Trilby* through his vicarious relation with Blanche—take the center of the narrative.

Justin's musings about Blanche and *Trilby* are interrupted by a team of oil prospectors, complete with picks, shovels, and dynamite, who have the right to test for the presence of oil in Blanche's very rose gardens (*Luna-Park* 355-57). Justin is distracted from his reverie by this intrusion and his subsequent attempt to assert his rights to his new property. Ironically, this incident is in itself read by him as an event harbingered by an incongruity; just before the incident he had read a letter to Blanche that referred to her involvement in a political demonstration. Justin puts the two together: "On aurait dit que c'étaient les vieilles nouvelles de l'arrestation de Blanche qui avaient déclenché toute cette folie." 'It was as though it was this old news about Blanche's arrest that had unleashed all this madness' (358). In imitation of literary analysis, Justin looks for harbingers in unexpected events.

On the narrative plane, however, it is the *folie* that announces the events that follow it. The battle against the oilmen presages the entire chain of events that undo Justin: his first real "contact" with Blanche, in the form of a letter that she had written to her husband and is returned to her address, and which cements his love for her; the burning of the love letters to her by Mme Vavin,

mistaking them for trash, which gives Justin a feeling of irreparable loss; the announcement of Blanche's disappearance over the Sahara, which sends him into a desperate delirium of hope for her recovery (360-66, 380-81, 387). The *folie* of the destruction of Blanche's rose garden opens the path to Justin's final madness and despair.

Ecoutez-voir contains a number of incongruous stranger passages. This work is the sequel to *Le Grand jamais* and shares its concerns with man's ability to discern the truth in events (a concern that we today bring to media coverage) through the tale of Madeleine's attempt to correct the public view of her dead historian husband's view of history. In imitation of the nebulous nature of its main subject, the two narratives are fragmented: both contain direct authorial incursions, and *Ecoutez-voir* is narrated from three different points of view, particularly those of Madeleine and of her *ex-clochard* friend Pierre, whom she calls Austin.

One passage in which the author insinuates herself into the narration by evoking a passage of another work, *L'Ame*, besides functioning as a shifter for Triolet's voice, also fulfills that of the incongruous stranger passage (E-v 179). Unconnected with any other passage thematically, it serves to distract the reader's attention from main narrative events. The reader searches through a passage involving Madeleine and Sophie, another homeless friend, to arrive at an event of major importance to the work: Austin announces his plans to develop his clandestine radio network in order to broadcast all the news that is being rejected by the official radio stations.

In another passage, Madeleine recounts the story of a homeless couple; this digression heralds the important revelation of her identity as widow of the famous historian to Austin (197). Again, it is a matter of passage and not character; these two cannot be considered actual incongruous strangers as they are not actually present in the narrative; it is Madeleine's telling that constitutes the incongruity.¹⁰ This passage of revelation leads us in turn to the announcement of the sale of her husband Régis's manuscripts (202), the control of which was at the center of the problem of presenting his true identity to the public; this consti-

tutes a reopening of Madeleine's emotional wound. The device most often manifests itself here in a pattern of incongruity to repetition, an unexpected passage preceding a return to a theme or character already in play: for example, Madeleine recounts an evening spent at Le Drugstore (226-28) as a prelude to a visit with Jean, Régis's best friend and her old ally in the struggle, whom she tries again to recruit in vain (230-38). On the whole, the structure of *Ecoutez-voir* is so open that it consists in fact of steady alterations between incongruous stranger passages and the events they announce.¹¹

Conclusion

The incongruous stranger passage is a minor structural element in the Triolet novel, but its origin in Russian realist characterization makes it of interest as an additional thread of Triolet's origins woven into French prose fiction. Jakobson has observed that "l'arrivée d'un matériau nouveau . . . devient nécessaire si l'on veut que les constructions poétiques irrationnelles réjouissent, effraient et touchent de nouveau" "the arrival of new material . . . becomes necessary if one wants irrational poetic constructions to rejoice, frighten, or move people again" ("Fragments" 293). One can easily form a parallel between this idea and the presence of the incongruous stranger in Triolet's novels, adding novelistic "consistency" to her work in relation with many other modernist elements inspired by her contact with the Futurists in order to form a poetics which moves or disturbs the French reader.

Whether the device of the incongruous stranger is direct or indirect, straightforward or subtle, through a character or a passage, it proves to be an effective technique for the construction of the Triolet narrative. The examples here show just some of the rich uses for this device used by Russian nineteenth-century novelists, analyzed by Russian theorist Roman Jakobson, and propelled by Russian-French author Elsa Triolet into modern French literature. Triolet's spinning out of the original device takes it beyond its first uses, gives her a framework for a variety of narratives, and constitutes a useful contribution to her novelistic structural techniques. Its influence on French fiction can be seen in

Aragon's novels, particularly *Blanche ou l'oubli* and *La Mise à mort*. It is an excellent example of a situation in which the "magic" of Russian oral traditions combines with the alchemy of twentieth-century techniques to form a particular style, known to Trioletists as *réalisme fantastique*.

Notes

1. Detailed analyses of the modern and traditional influences on Triolet can be found in Birden, "Ella"; Birden, "*Cheval blanc*" 255-77.
2. For the interchange with Camus, see Todd 327-28; Triolet, "ontrebände," ORC 3: 38-39. Triolet wrote *Quel est cet étranger qui n'est pas d'ici? ou le mythe de la baronne Mélanie* in Lyon in the spring of 1943 as a direct response to *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Links to the *nouveau roman* have been suggested by Dr. Sandra Johnson of the University of Massachusetts; see also Boisdeffre 111.
3. One could also consider the peasant that Pierre meets during his time as a war prisoner to function in this way (*Vojna i mir*, chap. 55).
4. For more on this aspect of Triolet's style, see also Abraham, "Elle" 8; Madaule, letter 14; Petit 118; Matic 8; Bosquet 8.
5. In the passages quoted from Triolet's novels, the ellipses contained in brackets represent cuts from the text, while those not in brackets indicate Triolet's own inclusion of these pauses in her text. As this is a device she was very insistent about with her publishers, the distinction has been respected here. A separate study of these silences in Triolet's novels could prove to be quite fruitful.
6. For further study of another aspect of this phenomenon, see *Ecoutez-voir*, in which the main character, Madeleine, openly refers to herself and to the other characters as novelistic characters (14, 49, 144-47).
7. For a discussion of verbal repetition as a structural element in Triolet's fiction, see Birden, "Verbal Repetition" 125-51.
8. This question of perception is also central to Triolet's narrative construction. See Birden.
9. It is also a novel that Triolet had considered publishing under the name of Antonin Blond in order to facilitate her own move to literary

normalcy. Her outspoken criticism of the hypocrisy of France's post-war purge had earned her enemies, and anti-Communist sentiment also contributed to a blackballing effect. She wished for the narrative to be read without the preconceptions attached to her name, and even hoped to submit it to the Goncourt Committee under the assumed name, as the prize would have reestablished the purely literary merits of her work. The project came to naught, as the Committee made a pre-selection before she had the chance to submit the work. *L'Inspecteur des ruines* was in fact refused by Triolet's publisher of the time, Denoël, because of the extra-literary concerns mentioned, creating a rupture which brought Triolet to Gallimard (ORC 13: 23-24).

10. As a sub-theme of veracity, narration is itself problematized in *Ecoutez-voir*, as Madeleine narrates passages of the novel only to explain afterward that nothing of the sort ever happened (see for example 175-77).

11. Triolet's final work, *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*, offers other appearances of the device. For example, in this novel (in which black-ink passages of narrative description alternate with red-ink dream sequences) the culminating dream of the narrator as her own daughter (196-201; 202-05) and the culminating moment of her death (208) are foreshadowed in a passage in which the dinner guests arrive at a discussion of normalcy in the modern world and the importance of May 1968 (190-95). A work that dwells for almost all its length on memories and musings shifts unexpectedly to considerations of the present and the future. These traits mark the penultimate passage in black ink as the incongruous harbinger of death.

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