

## **Abstract: Doubt in *Ici* by Nathalie Sarraute and *Dans le labyrinthe* by Alain Robbe-Grillet.**

This study started off as a search for the factors that turn the French New Novel into unreadable, unenjoyable, difficult literature. The most obvious keyword that sprang to mind was “doubt”. This was the effect that we as a reader felt when reading the novels mentioned above. There is doubt in two areas: Firstly we doubt our own ability to comprehend, being fully aware that the French New Novel is *enjoyed* primarily by academics. Secondly we doubt the novelists’ ability to produce what we would call a conventional novel like those developed by novelists such as Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal and Zola in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The search for “doubt” in the New Novel was very fruitful. Although some critics are of the opinion that the novels of Robbe-Grillet are to a certain extent understandable, they all agree that the novels of both Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet are in essence difficult to read and inadequately develop the four basic ingredients of the conventional novel, which are: character, plot, setting and time. These four elements should, in the case of a realistic novel, reflect the reader’s reality in order to create the illusion of being real. Our study has shown that Robbe-Grillet’s development of character and description of setting do not convince the reader that they could be real. They are in fact so inadequate and incoherent that the reader struggles to reconstruct a realistic character from the bits of information provided. Robbe-Grillet further breaks all conventional rules of time and space and leaves the reader disoriented. Sarraute appears to have abandoned convention totally as she has completely done away with character and setting in her novel *Ici*. It requires a great effort from the reader to reconstruct the fleeting abstract conversations that make up her novel. Both Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet have provided works of criticism on their own ideas of the novel in which they clearly state that they broke away deliberately from the form and content of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel in a quest for a new authentic novel.

This study was further able to point out certain mechanisms that the authors use to create instability in their novels. The many incoherent pieces that make up these novels allow the reader to play at reassembling them and often this leads to interesting new discoveries. One of these discoveries is the simultaneous presence of two or three levels of text. Where the surface text normally contains the story line, here the surface is broken, allowing the reader to penetrate into a second level of text. Here we find the metatext where the text comments on itself. We show that the metatext in both these novels often talks about doubt and about the incoherent nature of their own text. We may thus also say that “doubt” is an important leitmotiv in these novels.

We might say that the only real characters in Robbe-Grillet's and Sarraute's novels are the reader and the author between whom there is an active interplay, although it is a delayed interplay. The novel becomes a game much like a board game – an interactive playing field that differs with every reading. This is especially true for Sarraute whose reactions to the reader's initial reactions to the text have been pre-programmed into the novel. The real setting is then this abstract intellectual playing field. However, the reader never reaches the point where he can say that he has successfully unlocked the mysteries of these novels. Any interpretation remains partial and is surrounded by doubt.

