Jan Baetens

**Nouveau Roman**

The Nouveau Roman or New Novel is a label used to denote (the work of) a group of writers who set out to reinvent the French novel. In the 1950s, New Novelists claimed that the French novel had more or less missed, Proust notwithstanding, the modernist turn in narrative. Instead, the novel either tended to repeat the stereotypes of the typically French tradition of the introspective, psychological novel, or to follow the strongly ideological stances of the existentialist, communist or Christian 'committed novel' (*littérature engagée*), in which message clearly superseded form. Launched in the wake of the polemical reception of some overtly 'formalist' novels by authors such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Claude Simon, Nathalie Sarraute (who had already published a short book before the War but whose literary career actually started in the 1950s as well) and, to a lesser extent, Claude Ollier, Robert Pinget, and Marguerite Duras, the New Novel was neither a school nor a real movement, although there these texts and authors share many characteristics that go well beyond the fact that most of their work appeared with the same publishing company, Les éditions de Minuit.

During the 1950s, most New Novelists, whose first books did not always obey the emerging group spirit and whose great alleged models are Kafka, Joyce and Faulkner, emphasised a phenomenological approach to the real and focused on the meticulous description of objects and places, sometimes filtered through the consciousness of characters, sometimes presented in a more behaviorist style. During the 1960s and 1970s, however the New Novel became even more experimental in a double sense. First, the phenomenological stance was abandoned in favor of a more formalist attitude, which emphasised the reshaping of the real according to the properties of artificial but always very sophisticated plot construction. Rather than describing the world, the New Novel then tried to invent a World according to specifically literary laws (and here the great models were authors such as E.A. Poe, Paul Valéry, Raymond Roussel, and Borges). Second, through the theoretical writings of Jean Ricardou, who successfully launched a very idiosyncratic yet dominant reading of the group around 1970, the New Novel became known as an anti-representative way of writing, foregrounding the materiality of the verbal items at the expense of their imaginative or mimetic power. According to Ricardou, the New Novels of the 1960s and 1970s no longer aimed at inventing new worlds, but at displaying the generative power of words and linguistic structures as well as the irresolvable tension between these verbal constructions and the traditional building stones of literary fiction, such as character, plot, psychology, time or space.

During the 1980s, the New Novelists went back to more classic forms of narrative, often with a strong autobiographical dimension. In that, the New Novel followed the major tendencies of contemporary French prose, which turned its back to formal experiments and reconciled itself with classic narrative and traditional auctorial positions. The later work by Claude Simon, the 1985 laureate of the Nobel Prize, exemplifies this last tendency by its personal investigation of time, memory, and archive.

References and further reading

Paratextual material