



Claude Simon

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General Editor's Preface

Modern Literatures in Perspective is a series of collected critical essays on post-1800 European-language authors, works or concepts. It is designed to help the reader study these literatures in isolation and in context by selecting and presenting the most representative and inspiring reactions to the works in question from the time of their first appearance to the present day.

A crucial feature of the series' approach is its open recognition of the critical revolution which has taken place this century and in particular in the last thirty years. Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytical, deconstructionist and feminist theories have utterly transformed our assessment of literature. *Modern Literatures in Perspective* takes full account of the general issues raised by the revolution in theory, together with the practical effects which these theories have on the reading of the literary canon.

Recognizing the need for direction within this plural field of perspectives, each volume offers a high degree of critical guidance and advice in addition to presenting its subject in a methodical and accessible manner.

A substantial introduction outlines the historical and cultural contexts within which the literature in question was produced. It explores and explains the conflicting critical reactions to the literature in perspective and suggests ways in which these critical differences may be put to work. Each essay is prefaced by an introductory headnote setting forth the significance of the piece. A glossary of critical terms and cultural references provides further background information.

Modern Literatures in Perspective offers much more than textual analysis, therefore. It openly examines the relationship between literature and a range of wider issues. At the same time, its approach is more concrete than any history of literature. Rather than impose a synthesis or single methodology, the volumes in this series bring the reader into the heart of a crucial critical debate.

New critical insights, teaching practices and reading publics continue to transform our view of modern European-language writings. *Modern Literatures in Perspective* aims to contribute to this continuous transformation by disseminating and analysing the best modern criticism on the best modern literatures.

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CELIA BRITTON

Note on Translations

The articles which have been translated here contain many quotations from other French texts: above all from Simon's novels but also from a wide range of other authors. Equally, some of the English articles also quote in French. All these quotations appear in this volume in English translation. Where the original French wording has been retained in the body of the text because of its importance to the argument, the translation is given in a note. Published English translations have been used where they exist; in these cases the page reference following the quotation is to the English translation. Where previously published translations do not exist and we have therefore supplied our own, the page reference is to the original French text. (Additional material of this kind in the English articles has been translated by Celia Britton except in Chapter 15 where it has been done by the author.) Some slight alterations have occasionally been made to the published translation; these are indicated by 'TA' ('translation amended'). Translator's or editor's interpolations are enclosed in square brackets. Terms and significant figures on first mention in the text are in bold type and these are explained in the Glossary at the back of the volume.

Introduction

Simon's career

Claude Simon has been writing novels for more than forty years. In that time he has produced a body of work which is now recognized as one of the most significant contributions to post-war French literature; yet for a long time he was less well known than many of his contemporaries, and he continues to be a controversial figure. The complex, enigmatic construction of his texts and the rich density of the writing has earned him the reputation of a 'difficult' writer – a difficulty compounded, ironically, by the fact that he is less cerebral, more intuitive and emotional in his approach to writing than the other novelists with whom he is compared. His work has attracted a great deal of attention from critics both in France and abroad. The first part of this introduction will give a simple chronological account of the main stages in Simon's career, while the second part discusses the theoretical context within which his books have been interpreted.

Simon's father was born into a peasant family, but made a career for himself in the army and was thus, as an officer, able to marry a woman from the minor nobility. His postings took him all round the world, and Claude was born in Madagascar in 1913. The following year, however, they returned to his mother's family home in Perpignan because his father had been mobilized to fight in the First World War. He was killed very early on, in August 1914. Then Simon's mother, too, died after a long illness, when he was eleven. He went to boarding school in Paris, and then studied painting for a while; his first ambition was to be a painter, but he gave up because he decided that he would never be good enough. One consequence of his parents' early death was that at the age of twenty-one he inherited an income sufficient to live on: in *L'Acacia* (The Acacia), he describes himself as having been first a dilettante Cubist and then a dilettante revolutionary. The latter reference is to his journey to Barcelona to join, briefly, in fighting for the Republicans when the Spanish Civil War broke out in

1936; he returned bitterly disillusioned with the realities of war and Marxist politics. The following year he travelled around Europe with a fellow art student, visiting Fascist Germany, Poland, Stalinist Russia, Turkey and Greece. In 1939 he started his first novel, *Le Tricheur* (The Cheat), before being called up to fight in a cavalry regiment. In May 1940 he took part in the battle of the Meuse in Belgium – in which the soldiers on horseback were ordered to charge the German tanks – and, after the massacre of most of the regiment, was captured and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. In October of the same year he escaped and made his way back to Perpignan. Here he finished *Le Tricheur*, which was published at the end of the German occupation of France.

The events of this early part of his life are relevant not only in so far as they shaped his adult sensibility, but also because they form the basic material for his novels. Simon has often said that he is incapable of inventing anything: from *L'Herbe* (*The Grass*) onwards, all his novels are based on his own lived experience – not, of course, reproduced *en bloc* but fragmented, rearranged, and (as he says to Marianne Alphant in the interview reprinted here) distorted first by the effect of memory and secondly by the dynamic of the writing process itself. Many of the people, places and incidents summarized above appear in the fiction. We find his father's sister, and the countryside of south-west France, in *L'Herbe*, the fighting and imprisonment of 1940 in *La Route des Flandres* (*The Flanders Road*), the Spanish Civil War in *Le Palace* (*The Palace*), his parents' engagement and his mother's death in *Histoire*, his journey through Greece in *La Bataille de Pharsale* (*The Battle of Pharsalus*), and so on. Less directly, the loss of the father recurs in various forms – in *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*) for instance, and again in *Le Vent* (*The Wind*). The reader is also struck by Simon's continuing interest in painting, and the visual arts in general; descriptions of paintings occur in many novels (but especially *La Bataille de Pharsale*), along with postcards, photographs and sculptures. On a more abstract level, Simon often *composes* his texts according to pictorial rather than narrative principles; Françoise van Rossum-Guyon's article here analyses this aspect of his work.¹

Above all, however, it is the impact of war that has marked both his life and his fiction most deeply. The experience of living with the probability of imminent violent death recurs obsessively throughout his writing. It is all the more traumatic in the parallels that it creates between himself and the father he never knew: for Simon, to live through the horror of 1940 is in a sense to *relive his father's death*. *L'Acacia* juxtaposes the two experiences, whose parallels are underlined by an ironic coincidence of dates: the father killed on 27 August 1914, and Simon called up on 27 August 1939.

War – in Belgium but especially in Spain – is also a major determinant of Simon's *political* views. In Flanders in 1940 he observed the entirely cynical way in which his regiment was written off in a hopeless situation. In an interview in *Les Nouvelles* in 1984 he says: 'I belonged to one of those regiments that are cold-bloodedly sacrificed in advance by the staff headquarters, and of which, after eight days, there was practically nothing left'.² His response is not, as it might have been, political outrage and protest but simply a profound sense of impotence at the absurdity of life; a little later in the same interview he concludes: 'To my great shame, through all these ups and downs, I have, at the age of seventy, still not made any sense of all this, unless it is that, as I think Barthes has said, "if the world has any meaning, it is that it means nothing" – except that it exists.'³

In fact the roots of this pessimism lie in his earlier encounter with war, in Spain. As a student he shared the left-wing idealism of the 1930s which was unreservedly committed not only to the Spanish Republican cause itself, but also to the international Communist support for the Republicans as they, the legitimate government of Spain since 1931, defended themselves against the revolt of the generals under Franco. Large numbers of intellectuals, artists and trade unionists from many European countries, and even from America, went to Spain to fight for the Republic in the International Brigades. Simon went too, having joined the Communist Party in order to be accepted. But his reaction to what he found in Barcelona was violently negative. On the one hand, he felt that the indigenous Spanish struggle was being manipulated and, ultimately, betrayed by the Soviets. The Republicans were defeated, and the predictability of their defeat simply underscored the futility of the loss of life incurred. On the other hand, his naive desire to participate in a glorious, or at least significant, moment of 'History' was frustrated by the realization that individual experience is never transparently historical but merely confused, sporadic and almost pointless. The hiatus between a *particular* street battle at a particular time and place and the generalized abstraction of 'the Spanish Civil War' creates a kind of opacity which for Simon devalues the whole concept of political action. Revolution is an inevitably futile attempt to alter the course of history, which itself merely 'revolves'; that is, history does not advance or progress but goes round in circles – cycles of oppression, exploitation and violence. Hence the sardonic epigraph to *Le Palace*, the novel most centrally concerned with the Spanish experience, is an entry from the *Dictionnaire Larousse*: 'Revolution: the locus of a moving body which, describing a closed curve, successively passes through the same points.' Such political fatalism is, as Michel Deguy remarks in his article on *Le*

Palace, difficult for many readers to accept; and it is certainly untypical of the generation of writers to which Simon belongs.

For a long time after the war – in the period, in other words, in which Simon was beginning to establish himself as a writer – the political climate of the progressive intelligentsia, including the literary avant-garde, in France was dominated by anti-Stalinism. With the revelations of labour camps and purges in the Soviet Union, the French Communist Party lost most of the prestige it had acquired from its leading role in the Resistance during the war and became increasingly discredited and marginalized. Simon was wholly in sympathy with this shift of opinion. But whereas the dominant response was to build up a 'new left' outside the Party, he saw this as futile. He has said that the most crucial feature of the end of the war was the discovery of the Nazi concentration camps, since this revelation of the essential barbarity of mankind effectively disqualifies *any* political or philosophical system of belief: 'In my view the biggest thing was Auschwitz. I'm not a sociologist, or a historian, or a philosopher, but after Auschwitz ideologies collapse, the whole of **humanism** begins to look like a farce.'⁴ To him, therefore, the formation of a new non-Stalinist socialist movement could only be yet another dangerously illusory and self-congratulatory attempt to achieve the impossible: that is, to *make* history. The epigraph to *L'Herbe*, quoting the Soviet dissident Boris Pasternak, states flatly that 'Nobody makes history, you cannot see it, any more than you can see the grass growing' (TA).

It should be said that Simon's actions have not always been wholly consistent with his stated position. For instance, he was one of the signatories to the manifesto condemning the French army's use of torture in the Algerian war, organized by **Sartre** in 1960 and banned by the government. When asked why, he replied: 'I signed this manifesto and I have been charged. Because of beliefs I have held since I was sixteen or seventeen. Perhaps I am a fool, but for me it is an emotional response. I have never been able to bear injustice, that someone should be beaten, or humiliated, or made to suffer.'⁵ In general, however, although throughout both his life and his fiction he has demonstrated his emotional solidarity with the victims of oppression, he has shown no interest in, or sympathy with, left-wing political *action*.

This has also had an effect on his conception of literature. Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, appearing in 1948, was a dominant influence on the literary scene of the post-war period, and its central idea was that fiction and drama should be politically committed (albeit in a much less crude manner than that propounded by the doctrine of socialist realism to which the French Communist Party writers subscribed). Simon was of course totally opposed to this view of literature: not only because he believed that political commitment in any area was

pointless, but also because of his equally strong feeling that the value of art was dependent upon its freedom from any external directive.

Simon was not, however, the only writer to be antagonistic to the Sartrean ideal of committed literature. **Alain Robbe-Grillet** and **Nathalie Sarraute** held the same view. Moreover, Robbe-Grillet's novel *Les Gommages* was published in 1953 by Editions de Minuit, the publishing house founded clandestinely (hence its name) under the Occupation by Jérôme Lindon; and, in the mid 1950s, Lindon was beginning to assemble the stable of novelists who were to become known as the **Nouveau Roman**. He appointed Robbe-Grillet as editorial adviser, and together they set about creating and publicizing this new school of novelists, which included Nathalie Sarraute,⁶ **Michel Butor**, Robert Pinget and, in 1957, Simon himself. That is, whereas Simon's four previous books had appeared with very minor publishers (Le Sagittaire and Calmann-Lévy) and had received little attention, *Le Vent* was accepted by Minuit who also, having taken over Le Sagittaire, republished *Le Tricheur* and *La Corde raide* (The Tightrope). From 1957 onwards Simon thus benefited from the resources and reputation of one of France's most prestigious publishers. By the same token, he was also able to participate in the inception of the Nouveau Roman. This was not in fact entirely a Minuit creation (although they were known for a time as the 'Midnight Novelists' – as in the number of *Yale French Studies* from which Jacques Guicharnaud's article, reprinted here, is taken). The movement's first manifesto was Sarraute's *L'Ere du soupçon*, published by Gallimard in 1956; and the newspaper *L'Express* also played an important role in establishing the group's identity: in 1955 and 1956 they published a series of nine articles by Robbe-Grillet in which he set out his views on the future development of the novel. Simon's attitude towards the group, at least judging from comments made much later, was always rather ambivalent; although he appreciated the stimulating exchange of ideas he also felt that they were more theoretically sophisticated than he was, or wanted to be.⁷ But he and they had in common two ideas of fundamental importance: that the new novel should effect a radical break with the realist tradition of the nineteenth century, *and* that it should reject the notion of political commitment. This latter position was defended vigorously by Robbe-Grillet in for instance, his article 'Sur quelques notions périmées' (reprinted in the collection *Pour un nouveau roman* (Minuit, 1963)). The literary text must be *autonomous*; it must be free to proceed under its own momentum, unconstrained by any ideological values imposed on it from the outside.

This view brought the Nouveau Roman into direct conflict with the still influential figure of Sartre. A lengthy and often bitter polemic ensued, with Sartre accusing the Nouveau Roman of sterile formalism.

It even reached the pages of *Playboy*, in whose issue of May 1965 Sartre states that 'the practitioners of the "New Novel" bring us absolutely nothing except a justification of our technocratic, politically sterile French social order' (p. 75). But its climax was another interview with Sartre, in *Le Monde* (18 April 1964, p. 3), in which he accused Robbe-Grillet of ignoring the social problems of poverty in the Third World, and of writing for the comfortable bourgeoisie. This brought a furious response from Simon who, in an article in *L'Express* entitled 'Pour qui donc écrit Sartre?' ['For whom is Sartre writing?'] restates the Nouveau Roman's position on the essential *unpredictability* of the literary text, castigates Sartre for his self-righteousness, and accuses him of failing to understand anything at all about art:

intolerant, full of his own importance and his mission . . . the moralist sternly reduces the problem of the artist and the writer to a simple economic function. Insensitive to the value of the nourishment which they produce (who, though, would be so absurd as to think of damning painting, for example, on the grounds that the blind cannot gain anything from it?) he cries anathema against them. Since for him painting and writing in themselves count for nothing, studying a picture or a book will result in all the different types of analysis imaginable except, precisely, analysis of their pictorial or sculptural values.

The fact that it was Simon whom *L'Express* invited to reply on behalf of the Nouveau Roman itself suggests that by 1964 he had become a far more prominent figure than in the 1950s. The key to this breakthrough was the appearance of *La Route des Flandres* in 1960. In fact *L'Express*, as well as their support for the Nouveau Roman in general, did a considerable amount to promote Simon's work: they awarded their own prize, the 'prix de l'Express' to *La Route des Flandres*, and printed both an extremely enthusiastic review of it by Maurice Nadeau, who compared Simon to **Proust** (22 September 1960) and a long interview with him by Madeleine Chapsal (10 November 1960).

But this is not to say that they presented him as a *popular* writer, or one who deserved a mass audience. Nadeau writes that 'once the chronological thread of the narrative is broken, once events which have taken place at different times or in different settings, involving characters who take each others' place, appear in an arbitrary sequence, or even overlap within a single sentence, it is difficult for the reader who is untrained in this kind of gymnastics to find his bearings'. The Chapsal interview, while introducing him as a 'hot favourite for the literary prizes', is noticeably careful to stress the difficult nature of his writing. Thus Chapsal's first question is 'How do you write? *La*

Route des Flandres is such a complex work that one rather wonders how it is constructed.' Later, when Simon has been explaining how he deliberately leaves gaps in his **representation** of reality, she asks: 'But don't you think that to leave the reader faced with these gaps is sometimes to make reading rather difficult?' Simon's reply to this is revealing: he says: 'Look, what if Van Gogh and Picasso had worried about whether the man in the street was going to be able to contemplate their paintings without any difficulty? I think a writer should not ask himself this sort of question. If you try to bring yourself down to the level of the general public, you've had it!' In other words, he now has an arena which allows him not only to explain and justify the more disconcerting aspects of his novels, but also to present an image of himself as, precisely, a 'difficult writer' – to aim, that is, for an élite market of intellectually confident readers.

This in turn implies greater confidence on his own part: the confidence to evolve his own style and vision in writing, which characterizes what critics often refer to as his 'middle period'. In fact this started with *L'Herbe*, but is developed further through the 1960s. It is a vision of human beings as physical – sexual and mortal – creatures, vulnerable to physical hardships (exhaustion, poverty, hunger, lack of shelter); and also existentially vulnerable, both to the unintelligibility of the world around them and to their own lack of any stable, definite identity. The 'middle period' novels share a very distinctive style; Guicharnaud notes the long, densely proliferating sentences, the parentheses, the constant comparisons and the present participles, and concludes that in *L'Herbe* 'the style itself . . . brings out a conception of life, of space-time, of the gravitation and modification of individuals . . . [Simon] has tried to grasp and reconstruct not only the passing of time in its irregular flow but the direct experience of it – not linear but, rather, voluminous' (pp. 33). But this concern to represent the exact quality of subjective experience, through memory and perception, is accompanied by an increasingly powerful *non-representational* impulse based in the purely textual **generativity** of word-play and word associations. By *Histoire*, this has become the dominant factor; in an interview given much later Simon comments that 'it was only when writing *Histoire* that I began to be more clearly aware of the powers, and of the internal dynamic, of writing, and to allow myself to be guided more by what the writing *was saying* – or "discovering" – than by what I wanted to make it say – or "cover up"'.⁸ With *Histoire*, Simon's reputation grew significantly; it was greeted by *La Quinzaine littéraire* as 'his richest and most beautiful book' in an interview by Ludovic Janvier which concluded: 'It is difficult to discuss a totality as perfect, and as rich as *Histoire* . . . words cannot do justice to this simple, heavy work, which enlarges our lives, and to which all the

usual approximations and exclamations cannot apply. A world. A great book' (1 April 1967). It was awarded the Prix Médicis.

The move away from representational writing – a discourse, in other words, still residually connected to the realist tradition – became an important issue in the theory and practice of the Nouveau Roman as a whole in the mid 1960s. Indeed by this time the novels of Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Pinget, Claude Ollier and Jean Ricardou were already far more systematically constructed as attacks on realist writing than were those of Simon. The Nouveau Roman was now, via the work of critics such as **Roland Barthes**, heavily influenced by **structuralism**: the traditional humanist conception of meaning as **referential** – referring to objects in the world – was giving way to a structuralist definition of meaning as *differential* – the result of a formal play of relations between linguistic elements.⁹

This also acquired a political dimension. As early as 1953, Barthes had argued that realism was by definition bourgeois and reactionary,¹⁰ – and from 1966 onwards this idea was taken up, amalgamated with the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser, and developed by the journal *Tel Quel* which had, at its inception in 1960, been an enthusiastic supporter of the Nouveau Roman and especially of Robbe-Grillet. In the highly politicized atmosphere surrounding the events of 1968 in France, *Tel Quel* argued that representation inevitably reproduces, not objective reality, but the dominant ideology's version of reality; and they introduced the notion of textual **production** to define an anti-representational mode of writing which foregrounds its own process of production and, by working on and transforming language, subverts the very structures of ideology. This, in other words, is a completely different conception of the political effectiveness of literature from the type of commitment envisaged by Sartre.

One member of the editorial board of *Tel Quel* was Jean Ricardou, who also belonged to the Nouveau Roman group. Considerably younger than the founding members, he published his first novel, *L'Observatoire de Cannes*, in 1961. But he was more important for his critical and theoretical writing than his fiction: throughout the 1960s and 1970s he produced numerous articles both on individual writers and on issues of general literary theory. Whereas other members of the *Tel Quel* collective (and notably **Philippe Sollers**, the editor) became rather hostile to the Nouveau Roman, Ricardou tried hard, and with some measure of success, to convert his fellow novelists to a more radical abandonment of representation than they had hitherto formulated. This is evident in the conference, entitled 'Le Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui' that he and Françoise van Rossum-Guyon organized in 1971 at Cerisy-la-Salle. A major turning point in the history of the Nouveau Roman, this large and turbulent meeting

enabled Ricardou to impose his programme of textual production on most of the *nouveaux romanciers* for most of the next decade. Ricardou's main target was in fact less the ideal of objective representation than the psychological or *subjective* realism that he associated with the 'dogma' of **expression** – the writer transferring the contents of his psyche as directly as possible on to the page.

Much of Simon's writing was, of course, expressive in precisely this way. Even the greater emphasis on 'the internal dynamic of writing' in *Histoire* did nothing to cancel out the *expression* of an intensely personal, emotional vision of reality. But his next novel, *La Bataille de Pharsale*, begins to move towards a very different kind of text, which is systematically developed in the novels of the 1970s. These are written in a flat, impersonal style and constructed in such a way as to exclude any possibility of them being read as realist representation. *Les Corps conducteurs* (*Conducting Bodies*), *Triptyque* (*Triptych*) and *Leçon de choses* (*The World About Us*) are formal constructions in which, as in an abstract painting, it is the overall *spatial* organization and the relations between elements that are important. It is also only in the 1970s that Simon starts to *theorize* his own work. He gave a paper (extracts of which are reprinted here) at the 'Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui' conference, and, the previous year, wrote a preface to his *Orion aveugle* (*Orion Blinded*) (an early version of *Les Corps conducteurs*) in which he describes, more coherently than in the various interviews he had given in the past, what the process of writing involves for him.

Ricardou's influence undoubtedly played an important part in motivating these changes. He wrote a number of articles on Simon's novels – one of which is reproduced in this volume – and Simon was, for a time, very impressed by his approach. In 1974 Ricardou organized another conference at Cerisy, entirely devoted to Simon's work.¹¹ His introductory paper emphasizes the theoretical advances of Simon's last two novels, and concludes by praising the most recent, *Triptyque*, in these terms: 'through a new impulse given by theory to practice, we now have the impossible mosaic of *Triptyque*, typology of an irremediably multiple space . . . the pure novel of dis coherence finally achieved, a perfect example of acute modernity' (p. 19). And in his own comments at the conference, Simon defines the anti-realist and quasi-theoretical nature of his conception of *Triptyque*: 'My project was to write a novel which would not be reducible to any realist schema, that is, a novel in which the relations between the different "series" (or "sets") would not depend on any kind of linking or determinism of a psychological order' (p. 424).

At the same time, however, Simon constantly stresses his non-intellectual attitude to writing, his 'artisanal' approach and his lack of theoretical competence. His views on the novel, he says, are entirely

derived from 'a difficult practice based on trial and error, in the course of which the knowledge I have acquired is essentially empirical' (p. 406), and he warns his audience that he will not answer questions on subjects he knows nothing about – for instance, linguistics, semiology or philosophy (p. 406).

This ambiguous attitude towards the value of theory is finally resolved in a sudden and vehement break with Ricardou at the end of the 1970s. At a conference held at New York University in 1982¹² he expresses fierce contempt both for Ricardou personally and for structuralist theory. The previous year had seen the publication of *Les Géorgiques* (*The Georgics*), hailed by many critics as a welcome return to the richly expressive themes and narratives of the 1960s. For several years Simon's name had been frequently mentioned as a contender for the Nobel prize; and the glowing reviews of *Les Géorgiques* in the press – *Le Monde*, for instance, called it 'a magnificent book, at once epic, poem and novel' (4 September 1981) – were perhaps the deciding factor: he was finally awarded the Nobel in 1985.

In one sense this established him as a writer in his own right, independent of the Nouveau Roman which was in any case beginning to disintegrate as a collective entity. And yet it also served to make him more controversial than ever. The reaction of the French press was by no means unanimously celebratory: while in *Le Monde* Jacqueline Piatier describes him reverently as 'one of our great modern writers' (18 October 1985), Angelo Rinaldi in *L'Express* wonders sarcastically whether the award is part of a plot to undermine the prestige of France: how otherwise can one understand this glorification of 'the most boring and artificial writer of our time'? (25–31 October 1985). (In England, too, *The Times* was somewhat less than enthusiastic: 'M. Simon, a wine grower in the Pyrenees, has produced few major works in the last decade' (18 October 1985).) Thus far from consecrating him as part of the canon of great world literature, the award of the Nobel prize perpetuates the general public's view of Simon as an uncompromising writer committed to experimentation at the cost of accessibility.

His work since 1985 has moved further in the direction of autobiography. In 1987 he published the short *L'Invitation* (*The Invitation*), recounting a visit which as a result of the Nobel award he made to the Soviet Union and a meeting with Gorbachev in the company of, among others, the unnamed but highly recognizable British entertainer Peter Ustinov. But it is *L'Acacia*, in 1989, that represents his most significant work since *Les Géorgiques*. It can be described as an autobiography; and yet it also contains long sections which reconstruct the lives of his parents before he was born, as *Histoire* had already done twenty years earlier. Equally, the thematic constants of his fiction – war, death, history, nature, identity,

sexuality – are prominent in *L'Acacia*. It is important, finally, that Simon himself refuses to recognize any clear distinction in his texts between autobiography and fiction. As he says in the interview with Marianne Alphant, all his novels are based on his own experience, but in all of them that experience is reworked and transformed by the process of writing.

The critical field

The scope and diversity of Simon's fiction are considerable. Indeed Serge Doubrovsky claims that 'From the writing of the "collage" that is *Orion aveugle* to the still humanist, occasionally Camus-like tones of *The Wind* – to read through Simon backwards is like retracing the history of the ideologies of our time.'¹³ Literary theory, too, has undergone intensive change, development and diversification over the same period. For both these reasons, Simon's texts are open to, and have received, many different types of literary analysis, and the present volume attempts to reflect this range. The headnotes to each article give specific contextual information and explain some points of detail. But it also seems useful to provide a more general overview of the 'field' of Simon criticism and to situate the various theoretical approaches in relation to each other. There are connections and overlaps between them, but also disagreements; in an attempt to clarify both, I have organized this section of the introduction on the basis of six key conceptual areas.

I Perception, memory and meaning

Most of the early critical work on Simon concentrated on these themes. Simon was seen as being influenced by Proust – the novelist of memory *par excellence* – and by William Faulkner, in his attempt to reflect in his actual style the subjective chaos of experience. Much attention was paid to perception: the way Simon *sees* the world, literally as well as figuratively. Hence 'le regard' – the look or the gaze – is a central feature of this type of approach.¹⁴ Guicharnaud's article 'Remembrance of things passing' on *L'Herbe* and *Le Vent* is a good example: its title refers us to Proust's *Remembrance of time past*, but the shift of emphasis to 'things passing' refocuses attention on perception of material objects in the continuous flow of present time. Simon aims to 'render living experience *present* to the reader' (p. 33), and to get as close to the raw immediacy of perception as possible: his writing 'takes up experience at its most elementary level' (p. 34). Moreover, this grasping of experience takes place primarily through *sight* (p. 31).

When he describes what the activity of seeing involves, and stresses its complexity, Guicharnaud is in fact giving a recognizably *phenomenological* account of it. **Phenomenology** is the dominant influence in Simon criticism in the 1960s; it is present in a more explicit and developed form in Michel Deguy's article on *Le Palace*. It originates in the work of the German philosophers Husserl and Heidegger, but its main proponents in France were Sartre, in his early work (especially *L'Imaginaire*) and, above all, **Maurice Merleau-Ponty**, whose *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) and subsequent works were important for French literary criticism. In Simon's case, the relevance of phenomenology was intensified by the fact that Merleau-Ponty himself was extremely interested in Simon's novels – as is clear from the 'Five notes on Claude Simon' and the letter to Simon reprinted here – and quoted them to illustrate his lectures at the Collège de France.

Phenomenology stresses the importance of *experience*, rather than either scientific empiricism or abstract rational deduction, as a means of understanding man's situation in the world. It aims to 'bracket out' all the preconceived ideas that we habitually interpose between ourselves and what we see, and to focus on the immediate reality of how the world appears to us. This is not, of course, objective reality: my body is situated in space and I see the world from that particular point of view. Nevertheless, the *activity* of perception – it is not a passive or mechanical process – surmounts the limitations of perspective to give me a sense of the world as a connected whole. Even in the most straightforward cases, perception is always an act of synthesis and interpretation: to look at the front of a building is to know that it also has a back and sides, and 'looking' and 'knowing' happen simultaneously and inseparably.

This, however, does not mean that we as subjects 'give' meaning to the objects of our perception in a one-way process. Rather, we respond to the fundamental experience of 'being-in-the-world' by discovering meaning in it: we make sense out of the world *from within it*. Merleau-Ponty writes: 'The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions.'¹⁵ Moreover, we also make sense of *ourselves* from this position: our subjectivity is implied in, and inseparable from, our experience of the world: 'there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself'.¹⁶ Guicharnaud quotes from Simon's *La Corde raide* to make the point that 'the process of seeing is indeed complicated . . . It does not mean establishing a difference between the thing seen and the person who sees, but on the contrary means grasping the synthesis of the two in space and time' (p. 105).

Phenomenological criticism, then, explores the relationships

between the writer as subject and the objects of his perception – material objects, but also time and space. These relationships express themselves in themes and recurring patterns of imagery, and constitute the writer's *particular* vision (experience, interpretation) of the world. Deguy, for instance, argues that Simon perceives the real *as image* rather than as solid three-dimensional reality. Doubrovsky's approach to Simon's writing is also partially phenomenological, in his interpretation of the look and of the texts as responses to an initial experience of the world as fragmented and meaningless.

Guicharnaud, Deguy and Doubrovsky all stress that Simon's style is a direct and necessary consequence of his 'being-in-the-world'. He writes in the way he does because he experiences the world in the way he does. As Deguy puts it: 'an author, not being "free" in the usual sense of the word, can only speak on the basis of the fundamental emotion which sets language in action within him. This first language is "intuition", if you like – in it the world is revealed as it is; and this first language is what the act of writing seeks to recapture and display' (p. 60). Language, by implication, follows on automatically from the writer's vision of reality, of which it is simply the spontaneous, *unchosen* expression. Thus it is not a separate issue. Language *per se* has no determining role either in the writer's subjectivity or in the construction of the text. Merleau-Ponty himself, however, in his later work,¹⁷ paid more attention to the specific importance of language. In the 'Five notes', one aspect of being-in-the-world is being 'in' language: language is the 'circle' within which self-consciousness is defined – a formulation which has been quoted by later critics such as Stephen Heath.

II *The space of the text*

In complete opposition to the thematic approach of phenomenological criticism is a conception of the text as a *formal composition*. This, essentially, asks: according to what principle are the component elements of the text related to each other? – or, more informally, what is the 'shape' of the text? Such questions imply that the text is seen as a spatial rather than a temporal entity; rather than a sequence of words which takes a certain amount of time to read, it is a structure whose elements are all simultaneously present in a certain configuration. Simon's later novels lend themselves particularly well to this conception of spatial organization, and he himself discusses them in these terms; 'Fiction word by word', for instance, includes diagrams of *La Route des Flandres*, *Le Palace*, *Histoire*, *La Bataille de Pharsale* and *Les Corps conducteurs*, representing them literally as abstract two-dimensional constructions. The similarities with painting are obvious: grasped as a **synchronic** whole, the text in a sense becomes a picture.

This point of view minimizes the realist dimension of the novels. In 'Fiction word by word' Simon argues that the way in which the text is put together should not be based on its fictional content (plot, characters, etc.) but, instead, determined by an 'internal', qualitative logic, 'inherent in the text, stemming both from its music (rhythm, assonances, cadence of the phrases) and from its material (vocabulary, "figures", tropes . . .)' (p. 42). In this way an element occurring at one point will recall all the others to which it is linked by similarities of form, so that the whole structure of the text is always virtually present to the reader. Simon's account is based on an explicit comparison with the procedures of painting: 'Like the painter, and despite the fact that instead of a surface he only has a duration at his disposal, the writer can nevertheless succeed in . . . assembling [elements] in a sort of mechanism or system which is not, of course, optical, but **scriptural**' (p. 44). Françoise van Rossum-Guyon's article on *La Bataille de Pharsale* adopts the same perspective, locating the 'deep meaning' of the novel in its composition rather than its content, and showing how the composition works, in part, by transposing pictorial principles into the written text: 'for chronology the author substitutes a spatial arrangement of the elements and for narrative logic a plastic logic' (p. 90).

The spatial conception of the text is thus underpinned by Simon's own closeness to the 'spatial' visual arts. But on a more general level it is also determined by the theory of *structuralism*. That is, it defines the literary text as a structure, in the sense established by the linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure's** conception of language as a self-regulating system of interdependent elements.¹⁸ The structure is synchronic – the elements are all simultaneously present – and it is *autonomous*, i.e. it is not affected by anything external to it. It is determined solely by the interplay of its constituent elements. Saussure's dictum that 'in language there are only differences, without any positive terms' is carried over to literature. This means that the text is by definition non-referential: its *meaning* is generated by the comparisons, contrasts, etc., that the structure constructs within itself, and not by reference to any extra-textual reality that it might or might not represent.

One aspect of the Nouveau Roman's incorporation of structuralist ideas into their fiction (see above, p. 8) was a proliferation of **reflexive** devices whereby the text, turning away from representation, 'reflected' its own status as artefact and construction. Perhaps the most common of such devices is the ***mise-en-abyme***. This term, originally taken from heraldry, denotes the inclusion in a structure of a replica of itself. In other words, the text contains within itself a small-scale image or model of itself or (more often in practice) an aspect or part of itself, which acts like a mirror reflecting and condensing the structure of the whole.

One classic example is the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, referred to in Lucien Dällenbach's study of *mise-en-abyme* in Simon's novels. Dällenbach quotes Simon's comment: 'The idea [is] that the novel should be a play of internal mirrors', and traces its development from a single centred reflection to the more complex, dynamic multiplicity of 'mirrors' in later texts such as *Triptyque*, where each of the three fictional locations appears as *mise-en-abyme* – as a picture of some kind – in the other two, so that none of them has any firm status as the fictional 'reality' of the novel.

'Reflection' and 'mirror' are of course visual metaphors, reinforcing the spatial conception of the text that characterizes structuralist theory. This has been criticized (by David Carroll here, for instance) as excluding too much from consideration: the incidence of duration, and of external or absent factors. Also, the idea of the text as autonomous and self-generating marginalizes the role of the writer. Structuralism explicitly and cogently rejects the notion that the text simply expresses the writer's ideas or his sensibility; but the question of what his position then is – *where is the writing subject, in the text?* – is not addressed.

III *Bricolage*

The concept of *bricolage* is part of the overall structuralist perspective outlined above, and is not in any way incompatible with the notion of the text as quasi-pictorial space. Indeed, Simon brings them together in 'Fiction word by word'. But *bricolage* places greater emphasis on the text as an *activity* of construction, as a process rather than a fixed end product. The term was introduced by the structuralist anthropologist **Claude Lévi-Strauss**. In ordinary French usage, the *bricoleur* is the amateur handyman who makes or repairs something with whatever odds and ends he has to hand, recycling parts taken from one gadget to make something else. Lévi-Strauss recycles the concept itself, giving it a new usage as a description of the way myths are constructed.¹⁹ Myths, he claims, do not invent new ideas or images but draw on and re-utilize an already existing, finite, 'stock' of material. The recycled elements from earlier myths are rearranged to form a new pattern and thus to embody a new meaning. *Bricolage* is by definition a never-ending process, as each new structure will in turn be dismantled and its components used to make yet another one.

Myths are collective oral narratives; but the concept of *bricolage* has also been used to characterize the work of individual producers of written texts.²⁰ (Simon himself seizes upon it enthusiastically, claiming in 'Fiction word by word' that it describes exactly the way in which he works.) It serves in the first place to counteract the Romantic concept

of artistic creation *ex nihilo*; as *bricoleur*, the writer is not magically producing something entirely new out of nothing, but combining existing bits and pieces of cultural meaning in order to produce a new construction. His possibilities are limited by the elements available to him, and, like the myth-maker (see *La Pensée sauvage* p. 28), he enters into a *dialogue* with these materials. Above all, he does not proceed according to a preconceived plan, but experiments as he goes along, trying out different arrangements until he finds one that 'works'.

The aim of this activity in the sphere of myth is to make sense of people's experience of the world; and Doubrovsky analyses Simon's writing along the same lines. For Simon, he argues, there is no theoretical solution to the perceived chaos of the world, and *bricolage* represents the only possible alternative strategy: a kind of muddling through, somehow or other assembling a representation of the real that is at least relatively more solid than the initial experience of it.

Simon's own use of *bricolage* in 'Fiction word by word' is more concretely concerned with the way the actual text is put together: the 'internal logic' referred to in the previous section. It enables him to stress the particular character – at once workmanlike and intuitive – of the process of construction. The text does not, in other words, result from the application of pre-established theoretical principles: literally, he *makes it up* as he goes along. *Bricolage* thus provides the double advantage of being itself a fashionable structuralist theory while also allowing him to distance himself from the view, prevalent at the 1971 conference, of writer as theorist. It fits with his conception of himself as an artisan engaged in an almost physical work of construction: he refers to 'the completely craftsmanlike ("artisanal") and empirical character of this labor which consists of assembling and organizing . . . all the components of the vast system of signs that is a novel' (p. 46). Equally, he is guided by his materials more than by his own initial project – constraints which 'turn out to be eminently *productive*, and in themselves *generative*' (p. 46). *Bricolage*, that is, situates the writing subject within the generativity of language and images in the text; the writer is involved in the process of construction but not in total control of it.

IV *Textual production and intertextuality*

Textual production is not unlike *bricolage* in so far as it conceives of the text as having a 'raw material' which is not the 'reality' that it *represents* but a collection of signs or meanings that it transforms. However, the concept is not derived from the classic structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, but from the work of *Tel Quel* (see above, p. 8). It combines a political critique of realist literature with a political programme for