

Claude Simon: The Artist as Orion

'blind Orion hungry for the morn'

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SUMMARY

Since the nouveau roman became established, some fifteen years ago, as the dominant literary movement in France, Claude Simon has emerged as the most considerable writer of that group, although he has not attracted the critical interest devoted to Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Nathalie Sarraute. This thesis is a general chronological essay on Simon's development, from his earliest published work, Le Tricheur (1945), to Les Corps Conducteurs (1971). The first chapter of the thesis groups together Simon's early writings, which are heavily derivative, owing much to the example of the American novel in general. Subsequent chapters take each novel since 1957 in turn, and show that Simon, if still giving signs of his indebtedness to William Faulkner, soon begins to establish his independence as an artist of considerable stature. The distinctly autobiographical novels of the 1960s are succeeded by texts which, like Orion Aveugle, are the culmination of Simon's long-standing belief in art for art's sake, and are concerned above all to display pictorially the artist's apprehension of the world.

Throughout the thesis, attention is paid to basic and recurrent themes, time and death in particular, but the aim is to see how language itself emerges as the principal theme of Simon's writing, both in relation to the characters themselves, and to the novelist who is their creator. Simon is constantly preoccupied with the limitations of traditional novel form; his evolution, particularly since 1957, is that of a writer trying to circumvent the obstacle of linear prose in order to achieve a spatial representation of consciousness, where memory, perception, and imagination interact incessantly. Simon's novels are based on sensorial rather than intellectual constructions, and this tendency becomes more strongly defined the longer his career goes on.

A constant feature of his work is the attention paid to artistic representations of one kind or another, and to paintings in particular; the title of this thesis is based on Simon's remarks concerning Poussin's Paysage avec Orion Aveugle, the central figure of which is seen by Simon as an apt metaphor

for the empirical way in which he approaches the task of writing, treating each book as a discovery in itself: the artist as Orion does not use words for a didactic or informative purpose, but explores the synthetic and pictorial potential of language.

Claude Simon: The Artist as Orion

Introduction

Although Claude Simon is generally considered as one of those luminaries of the nouveau roman who came to sudden prominence in France in the late 1950s, it has to be remembered that his career as a writer spans a period of some thirty years. Born in 1913, Simon had finished his first novel, Le Tricheur, in 1941, but publication was deferred until after the war, in 1945.¹ Simon went on to complete a book of essays and souvenirs, La Corde Raide, and two further novels by the time that Les Gommages, Alain Robbe-Grillet's first literary venture, sparked off the flurry of critical reaction which contributed so much to the growth and consolidation of France's latest 'movement'. Only in 1957, however, when Le Vent was published by Minuit, did Simon begin to find favour with a wider public. Since that date he has emerged as the most considerable writer of the nouveau roman group with whom, despite his considerable independence of spirit, he is most often associated, and as one of the most important French novelists of the post-war period.

When he began writing in the 1940s, Simon's tendency was toward a consciously but artificially modernistic approach; his first novel owes much to the example of the American novelists in particular. Each of his early books differs quite significantly from the others, La Corde Raide standing on its own as a strange and brash source-book for many of the obsessions found in Simon's more mature work.

¹ The editions used throughout this thesis are as follows: Le Tricheur, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1945; La Corde Raide, Minuit, 1947; Gulliver, Paris, Editions Calmann-Lévy, 1952; Le Sacre du Printemps, Calmann-Lévy, 1954; Le Vent (1957), L'Herbe (1958), La Route des Flandres (1960), Le Palace (1962), Histoire (1967), La Bataille de Pharsale (1969), and Les Corps Conducteurs (1971), all in Editions de Minuit; Femmes, Paris, Editions Maeght, 1966; Orion Aveugle, Geneva, Skira, 1970.

A turning-point is reached in 1957 with Le Vent where, in a powerful and moving novel, Simon devotes himself to the themes of death, dissolution, and time, and to an attempt to resuscitate the past through artistic reconstruction. Only with this work does Simon become a genuine novelist of memory; the search for the appropriate form now begins to take precedence over the story-telling aspect of his writing. As his pre-occupation with form and technique develops, so Simon begins to take his place in the twentieth-century tradition of the novel.

The evolution of the novel in the twentieth century has not made it any easier to define this most variable of literary forms; indeed, it seems that the term has expanded to include any literary production not clearly recognizable as poetry or as drama. Broadly speaking, the growing complexity of the novel's structure and capacity may be traced back, in Simon's own country, to Flaubert and his constant concern with formal perfection, to Edouard Dujardin, whose Les Lauriers sont coupés (1887) was later to inspire the experiments of Joyce, and of course to Proust, his masterly orchestration of themes, and his exploration of the world of memory and imagination: Proust has always figured prominently in Simon's approach to writing.

Three major European figures — James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Franz Kafka — also contributed to the transformation of the novel. The publication in 1922 of Ulysses, which did so much to liberate the novel from the limitations of conventional structure and style, still rivals the appearance of A la recherche du temps perdu as the decisive literary event of this century. Virginia Woolf introduced into the novel the element of 'poetry', with the expansion of moments of pure insight and a vibrant prose style, while Kafka's relentlessly tragic masterpieces announced the key themes, the estrangement of the individual in the midst of a senselessly hostile experience.

A generation of Americans took up the challenge next. The history of the novel in the 1920s and 1930s is largely a

catalogue of the successes of Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Hemingway, and Faulkner, a fact which is acknowledged in the title of Claude-Edmonde Magny's book, L'Age du roman américain (Paris, 1948). As far as the subsequent development of the novel in France is concerned, the last-named of these American writers has proved the most important; the establishment of Faulkner's reputation was due in large part to the volume of enthusiastic criticism devoted to his work by French reviews and journals, and to the regular translations of M.-E. Coindreau in particular, which began in 1934 with Tandis que j'agonise (As I Lay Dying) and cover all the major works. Claude Simon has been amongst the most receptive readers of Faulkner, to whom a number of references must be made when the Frenchman's style and technique, and a number of his early themes, are discussed; Faulkner's ornate and often difficult prose played a definite part in the forging of Simon's own style at a transitional stage in his career.²

The 'new novelists' have not been slow to acknowledge the debt they owe to these major figures. Contrary to the opinion of that critic who described the nouveau roman as 'une plate et triste machine conçue pour aboutir à la destruction totale de la littérature',³ they all — and Simon more than any — claim only to be making their own contribution to the development of the novel form: their work is not a break with the past, but a continuation of it. One recurrent criticism levelled at these writers has been the 'absence of man' from their books, but in Simon's case this cannot apply; novels such as La Route des Flandres and Histoire bear witness to his

² While a number of reviewers have touched on this aspect, a systematic and sustained examination of Faulkner and his influence on Simon is made by Alastair Duncan in his article 'Claude Simon and William Faulkner', to be published in a forthcoming number of Forum for Modern Language Studies. I am most grateful to Mr Duncan for allowing me to read the typescript of his article.

³ Kléber Haedens, Paradoxe sur le roman (Paris, Grasset, 1964), p.147. /e

concern with a number of fundamental human problems, to which novelists have traditionally applied themselves. In the main, Simon's characters are dominated by their fear of death; his novels show men attempting to cheat time, yet brought constantly face to face with the evidence of their mortality. Unlike other writers of the nouveau roman, he has not been reluctant to incorporate into his works those major events which marked his generation. The conflict in Spain, the French military disaster of 1940: Simon was personally involved in both of these, and they recur throughout his writings, at least until the turning-point reached in 1969 with La Bataille de Pharsale, since which time Simon has turned with increasing rigour to the problems of purely artistic composition which govern such a text as Orion Aveugle.

While there is a thematic basis to Simon's work which distinguishes him from other nouveaux romanciers, the key to his success as a serious artist lies in his resolution of the problem of form posed by each successive novel since Le Vent. Simon refers quite frequently to Joseph Conrad's preface to 'The Nigger of the "Narcissus"',⁴ aligning himself firmly with the artist's objectives as Conrad sees them:

All art . . . appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music — which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of

⁴ See for example André Bourin, 'Techniciens du roman: Claude Simon', Nouvelles Littéraires, 29 décembre 1960, p.4; Madeleine Chapsal, 'Entretien avec Claude Simon', L'Express, 10 novembre 1960, pp.30-1; Claude Simon, 'Contre un roman utilitaire', Le Monde, 8 mars 1967, p.v.

magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the common-place surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.

There could scarcely be a more assiduous craftsman than Simon: the uninterrupted rhythm of L'Herbe, the tripartite structure of La Route des Flandres, the sensitive language of Histoire, all demonstrate his single-minded pursuit of new forms for the novel, in accordance with his reverence for words. In this respect, and more intensively perhaps than any of his contemporaries, Simon is putting into practice the intention voiced by the doyen of theorists on the nouveau roman, Alain Robbe-Grillet:

Il n'est pas question . . . d'établir une théorie, un moule préalable pour y couler les livres futurs. Chaque romancier, chaque roman, doit inventer sa propre forme. Aucune recette ne peut remplacer cette réflexion continuelle. Le livre crée pour lui seul ses propres règles. Encore le mouvement de l'écriture doit-il souvent conduire à les mettre en péril, en échec peut-être, et à les faire éclater. Loin de respecter des formes immuables, chaque nouveau livre tend à constituer ses lois de fonctionnement en même temps qu'à produire leur destruction. Une fois l'oeuvre achevée, la réflexion critique de l'écrivain lui servira encore à prendre ses distances par rapport à elle, alimentant aussitôt de nouvelles recherches, un nouveau départ.⁵

As he has turned away from the conscious elaboration of pre-conceived themes to explore the creative resources of language itself, the stimulus provided by the actual process of writing has become increasingly important to Simon's method.

Strange as it may seem, therefore, to juxtapose, in the title of this thesis, the name of a post-war French novelist with a quotation from an English poet of the Romantic period, Claude Simon and John Keats find common ground in their admiration for Nicolas Poussin, the supreme French Classical artist of the seventeenth century. The line taken from the

⁵ Pour un nouveau roman (Paris, Collection 'Idées', 1964), pp.12-13.

second book of Endymion (1817) seems to have been inspired by Keats's recollection of the very painting which occupies a central position in one of Simon's most recent works. Poussin's Paysage avec Orion Aveugle (1658) is only one of several artistic representations around which Simon weaves the dense text of his Orion Aveugle (1970), but it is of fundamental importance to his conception of the novel:

C'est un tableau que j'ai toujours beaucoup aimé; son titre complet, c'est 'Orion aveugle se dirigeant vers la lumière du soleil levant'. Et j'ai trouvé que c'est une image — comment dire, je n'aime pas le mot symbolique — mais enfin qui représentait assez bien ma démarche quand j'écris. Comme je l'ai dit dans la petite préface d'Orion Aveugle, j'avance à tâtons, sans savoir exactement où je vais, vers un but que je ne distingue même pas très bien moi-même et que probablement on n'atteint jamais, puisqu'un livre est toujours, d'une façon ou d'une autre, une déception.⁶

The relevance of the Orion figure begins to emerge from the double nature of the search involved in Simon's best writing. While the narrator seeks to establish his own identity in a hopelessly fragmented world, a crowded composite of memory, perception, and imagination, the writer goes in pursuit of that world through his inventive encounter with language, his artistic material.

From novel to novel, a certain element of continuity is introduced by this desire to create a coherent pattern. In Le Vent the narrator seeks to understand an episode from the recent yet inexplicable ~~past~~, while the central character of L'Herbe is puzzled by the past's tendency to shape the present and to dictate her own actions; in each case the search for such knowledge produces a new kind of self-awareness. In the three novels which follow L'Herbe, a narrator more and more closely identifiable with the author struggles with the welter of impressions and recollections defying organization in his consciousness. The nature of the search itself is

6

Quoted in Gerhard Dörr, 'Biographie oder Bildersprache? Claude Simon über sein neuestes Werk Les Corps Conducteurs', Die neueren Sprachen, Heft 5 (Mai 1972), pp.294-6.

modified again in the third of these novels, Histoire, as the intensification of sensorial associations is allied to the purely descriptive and generative capabilities of language in general. Although the novels of 1969 and after display a greater semblance of surface order, they are more than ever evocative of the dazzling multiplicity of the artist's apprehension of the world: Orion Aveugle may be taken as the culmination of Simon's development, which his subsequent writing has confirmed rather than altered.

As he has continually reappraised his work and his approach to writing, there is an equivalent variety in the forms of Simon's novels. For this reason, and in view of the highly complex internal patterns of each book, the treatment of themes and techniques under certain headings, with constant cross-references from one novel to another, seemed likely to involve a great deal of repetition and a certain lack of clarity. The method adopted is therefore that of discussing the novels in chronological order, while attempting to relate each step in Simon's career to those that have gone before. Although such outstanding criticism as that of Jean Ricardou must be taken into account⁷ — it is particularly rewarding where La Bataille de Pharsale is concerned — this thesis is a general essay which does not follow the quasi-scientific approach of linguistic or semiological analysis, but prefers to consider Simon in that novelistic tradition outlined in Joseph Frank's brilliant essay, 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature';⁸ working against time, the writer seeks to achieve the artistic arrangement of the elements of his novel in spatial patterns rather than in strict temporal sequence. While the main problem is to weigh Simon's methods and success in overcoming the 'obstacle' of language, it is also essential

⁷ Problèmes du nouveau roman (Paris, 1967); Pour une théorie du nouveau roman (Paris, 1971).

⁸ In The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature (New Brunswick, 1963), pp.3-62.

to examine a number of basic and recurrent themes, and to realize that in the later works language itself has become the dominant theme: in other words, to see how Simon gradually solves the problem so succinctly formulated by A.A. Mendilow:

Language . . . is a medium consisting of consecutive units constituting a forward-moving linear form of expression that is subject to the three characteristics of time — transience, sequence and irreversibility. How can the novelist working in such a medium convey an impression of simultaneity, of backward and forward movement, of immobility? How can he communicate immediacy, and the sense of the flow of living, and duration in all its modes?⁹

The chronological approach makes possible a detailed examination of each stage along the way to what is an artistic achievement of the highest order.

⁹ Time and the Novel (London, 1952), p.32.

Chapter I: Prolegomena to Le Vent:
Early Writings 1945-54

Je suis tellement différent de ce que j'étais il y a vingt ans qu'il me semble faire des découvertes sur un autre.

Stendhal

By 1954, when Le Sacre du Printemps was published, Simon was already a writer of no little experience. His early novels deserve attention, not only because they afford a helpful introduction to his later work, but also because their relative failure does not conceal signs of genuine artistry. Moreover, it is in the reasons for their failure that the sources of later success may be discovered: Le Vent will contain no drastic change in the stuff, only in the manner, of Simon's writing. If these early books are too overtly thematic, if they tend to lapse into arid and often wordy philosophy, they nevertheless reveal some of their author's more positive characteristics: the power to create atmosphere, the ability to work from the particular to the universal, and an insight into the essential ambivalence of people and their actions. As far as technique is concerned, Simon, from the outset, is not content to adopt a rectilinear time-scheme; jumbled chronology, extensive use of flashbacks, constant variation in the point of view — all are indicative of his refusal of straightforward narration. The early works do not, however, approach the strength and vitality of Simon's best writing, because he has not yet liberated himself from the shackles of convention, and is still concerned to work out recognizable plots. These books, more traditionally fictive than reconstructive, more consistently narrative than exploratory, are very much the work of a talented author in search of the appropriate literary mode.

As its title suggests, Le Tricheur is based largely upon the conception of life as a protracted game of fortune. In describing its central character's attitude to gambling, Ludovic Janvier says: 'Il voit tout de suite en lui la forme la

plus expressive de la croyance, donc de la soumission, au hasard'.¹ Louis, a distinctly anti-heroic figure, attempts to circumvent the workings of a haphazard existence by performing some meaningful individual action as the authentic expression of his will:

Je pense que tôt ou tard, il faudra faire la preuve que l'on a été, que l'on est, autre chose qu'une suite de loteries...

(Le Tricheur, p.41)

But the development of the novel reveals the shallowness of his attitudes and leaves him with an almost tragic awareness of failure. In order to point up the inevitability of Louis's defeat and disillusionment, Simon employs an extended retour en arrière involving characters of an earlier generation who, in their temperament and their relationship with each other, can readily be compared with Louis and his girlfriend Belle. The situation of the girl's parents, Gauthier and Catherine, anticipates that in which the younger couple will eventually find themselves. Louis is close to Gauthier in his professed refusal to abdicate control over his life; finding a convenient excuse in the so-called bad luck of a troublesome war wound, Gauthier is constantly planning some great work, but his projects somehow fail to mature:

Il avait toujours l'intention de faire tant de choses que c'était probablement la quantité même de ces projets accumulés qui était devenue tellement embarrassante que l'on ne faisait jamais rien et que l'habitude se prenait peu à peu de se laisser aller et de ne plus rien attendre, de n'espérer seulement que le hasard veuille bien ne pas envoyer de catastrophe!

(61)

The peculiarly masculine penchant (the contrast here is with Catherine, whose words those were, and with Belle) for fruitless meditation on the problems of living, is nowhere better illustrated than in the section of Le Tricheur dealing with Gauthier's own point of view (pp.81-127), where Simon's use of style indirect libre effectively conveys the tenuous reasoning with which the failed artist justifies his attitudes:

¹ Une Parole Exigeante: le nouveau roman (Paris, 1964), p.92.

On ne pouvait pourtant pas se transformer en forçat pour gagner sa vie. Si les choses avaient, par le plus miraculeux des hasards, une raison d'être — ce qui, à première vue, n'apparaissait pas précisément comme une évidence, bien loin de là — si soi-même on avait une raison d'être, ce n'était tout de même pas pour le seul et unique but de s'échiner jour après jour, une simple addition, une suite inutile de peines jusqu'à la mort.

(81)

Gauthier is obsessed not only with self-justification, but also with a bitter sense of his own impermanence, which emerges from his thoughts as he cycles home one evening:

Il fallait que cette fichue mécanique aux rouages encore plus usés que ceux du vieux vélo, continuât à s'agiter sans repos jusqu'à l'épuisement total, jusqu'au jour où tous les organes, arrivés à la limite de leur résistance s'immobiliseraient pour toujours. Alors il cesserait d'être. Il cesserait d'être et la rivière et ces pierres et ces arbres et ces collines continueraient d'exister. Seul, lui ne serait plus là, il disparaîtrait de l'univers palpitant sans que rien y soit changé.

(93)

This is the central truth which all of Simon's characters have eventually to recognize. With typical self-indulgence, Gauthier seeks to avoid it by seeing himself like Empedocles, as a being of superior insight, so making a virtue of his failure.

If her husband uses the war as an excuse for his inadequacy, Catherine too looks to a kind of confused fatality to explain her own impoverished circumstances. She is a martyr to her guilt over a brief wartime infidelity:

C'était comme si une sorte de fatalité malfaisante s'acharnait sur elle, s'obstinait sans répit et sans trêve depuis cette nuit dont la honte lui avait fait tout accepter depuis, comme si tout ce qui était venu par la suite avait été une vengeance du destin, une punition qu'elle avait supportée sans espérer rien d'autre sinon que le châtement ne devînt pire encore.

(69)

In the case of Catherine and Gauthier, this is a convenient philosophy for people seeking to eradicate their awareness of insignificance and failure. Their willingness to invoke destiny as the cause and justification of their particular form of suffering is less an explanation than an abdication.

The themes of failure and resignation are equally important to the developing relationship between Louis and Belle. Each in his own way, they are determined to escape from the stifling conformity of the lives led by their elders. Seeing in the pari mutuel a ready-made opportunity to earn money out of nothing, Belle allows her enthusiasm to blind her to the role of pure chance in her schemes:

Pourtant après on aurait fait ce qu'on aurait voulu, on aurait eu assez d'argent pour prendre le train pour Paris et même pour s'acheter... S'il avait voulu m'écouter, on aurait pu par exemple jouer cinq cents francs. L'oncle Jacques a dit qu'il pourrait faire dans les quatre-vingt-dix francs gagnant.

(12)

While Belle sees money as the key to material comfort, Louis will not let himself become a victim without a say in the organization of his own affairs. As in the case of the girl's parents, this basic difference translates itself as a repeated verbal fencing, and even as a certain hostility in their physical relationship. Yet despite their ability to appreciate each other's shortcomings, Louis and Belle are forced in the end to admit that they form a mutually interdependent couple.

Belle, no less than her mother, is mistrustful of the masculine love of fine words and profound thought; she sees Louis's inadequacies as very similar to those of her father. Language as gloss over reality will become a more important theme in Simon's later novels. Even in the first section of the novel, Louis cannot bring himself to abandon Belle and, like Gauthier, contrives to justify his irresolute behaviour in his own mind. As Janvier has pointed out,² the pattern of this first section thus anticipates Louis's movements on the night of his eventual decisive action; leaving Belle alone and unaware of what he is about to do, he nevertheless returns, as if by instinct, after he has acted. As the girl is quick to realize, his greatest need is the basic consolation of her company:

² Une Parole Exigeante, pp.92-3.

Je crois qu'ils sont tous comme ça, je pense que c'est un besoin qu'ils éprouvent de faire les guignols avec des mots, comme Louis. 'Est-ce que tu peux seulement comprendre quelque chose?' Comprendre quoi? Leurs profondes pensées et ensuite il est comme un enfant, après, couché contre moi comme un enfant. C'est peut-être pour cacher ça et nous faire croire je ne sais quoi qu'alors ils inventent toutes ces histoires. Oh c'est bien malin, oui! mais il faudrait vraiment être trop bête, comme maman.

(150)

Given this perspicacity, it is ironic that, rather than face having to make her own way, Belle is eventually content to stay with Louis, even after he has lapsed into an unimaginative routine: she is trapped in the very situation she was determined to avoid.

Louis's real problem seems to be that he craves attention, while fearing the consequences, for his independence, of any sincere human commitment. He is characterized by a remarkable degree of lucidity in his self-analysis:

Ainsi ma pensée toujours ramenée vers elle. Elle ou Philippe, accaparants, quand donc me reprendrai-je contre les voleurs? Moi poursuivi de rêves, aux mains qui se referment sur le vide, mains bernées incapables d'atteindre ce qui n'est qu'une tache de soleil sur un mur. Leurre. Se résoudre donc à poursuivre d'insaisissables ombres jusqu'à...

(52)

Once again, it is highly ironic that when Louis does commit his important action, it comes about as the result of a chance encounter, and as the climax of a sequence of events beyond his control.

The ultimate expression of Louis's desire to rebel is in fact his decision to murder a priest who tries to befriend him. John Sturrock has made a brief but interesting comparison between Louis and Meursault, the hero of Camus's L'Etranger, which was written almost at the same time as Simon's novel.³ The difference between the two characters,

³ The French New Novel (London, 1969), p.70.

however, is that Meursault's crime remains an inexplicable absurdity, because he has accepted alienation before the novel begins. In Louis's case, following the rigours of his education in a religious school, and his sarcasms about a naval career like his father's (pp.41, 46), his gesture has the double significance of violently refusing organized dogma as a useful force in the structure of society, and of condemning the 'uniform' smothering the individual who has chosen to wear it. But Louis flinches from the reality of his act, which is accomplished in the most cowardly manner: this, for him, is the true absurdity. So far from being the violent culmination of his attitudes, this murder is a grotesque acte gratuit which changes nothing in Louis's life. Finally the act leaves character and reader alike with a sense of futility. In a different way from Gauthier, but no less forcibly, Louis is made aware of transience and insignificance, and the intimations of mortality in the novel's ending are emphasized by the durable splendour of nature.

In this first novel, in fact, it is made clear that in Simon's eyes the principal source of human anguish is the awareness of the effects of time. A tension is set up between human, mechanically regulated time, and the very different time-scale of nature:

Temps. Succession des temps, écoulement impossible à arrêter. Teuctacteuctacteuctac, balance courte à travers l'éternité grise, lentes nuées qui se dissolvent et se désagrègent dans l'infini...

(43)

Louis himself is keenly aware of this contrast, but the character in this novel who has the most highly-developed sense of passing time is Gauthier. Troubled by an intense feeling of the present constantly becoming the past, the older man continually looks over his shoulder:

C'était ainsi que les choses vous suivaient. Même quand il y avait des nuages. Avec cette immobile et persévérante ténacité d'ombre fluide, comme si l'air qui se souvient gardait intacte les paroles, encore vivantes du son des voix qui les ont portées. Les voix éteintes continuent à traîner, lourdes de l'obscur pesanteur du passé.

(82-3)

His weakness lies precisely in his readiness to let this sense of the past stifle all initiative.

Gauthier's wife also allows past events to dictate the course of her life. Simon words his descriptions of this couple in such a way that they become applicable to the human condition in general, revealing the relativity of time to the human spirit, which emerges most forcefully with regard to the sexual act and its interpretation as an attempt to deny time. This supposedly most intimate of moments is often one of profound tragedy, because of its implications of escapism and delusion: escape from the feeling of solitary insignificance, and a desired suspension of clock time and its reminders of finitude. In Le Tricheur this theme is quite explicit, as Catherine and Gauthier share a few brief hours together in wartime:

ces jours hâtifs fébrilement disputés à la mort dans la chambre où, couchés côte à côte, Gauthier et Catherine écoutaient passer dans la nuit d'août les minutes comptées et se raccourcir le temps vertigineux. Côte à côte, silencieux, les yeux ouverts dans le noir, le rectangle de la fenêtre empli du bleu épais de la nuit, et cette présence tragique du temps qui ne leur appartenait plus et de l'inéluctable domination qui pesait sur eux de tout le poids de l'univers hostile. Tous les deux écrasés au fond de l'illusoire refuge de cette chambre et de ce lit.

(95)

As Simon's novels repeatedly show, the human spirit clings to these shared moments of respite. How disappointing, then, that when Gauthier returns from the front, time should slow down again to the point of mere stagnation, with the couple at loggerheads over their conflicting attitudes to the demands of life.

If time is an important force governing the lives of the parents, it is no less powerful where Louis and Belle are concerned. The girl thinks she must succeed where her mother had failed:

Il y a quelquefois des chances, mais il faut savoir les prendre, il faut savoir oser les choses au moment où on peut, sans ça on ne fait jamais rien, et on n'arrive jamais à rien.

(163)

Ironically enough, the opportunity which presented itself in the shape of Louis turns out no less frustrating than her previous way of life; her existence is as banal and colourless as the next person's. Louis it is who says:

On peut arrêter les aiguilles d'une montre avec le doigt, on peut aussi détendre le ressort pour ne plus entendre le bruit de ses pieds. Mais pas le soleil.

(240)

This urge to kill time is recognizably Faulknerian in derivation, bringing to mind the Quentin episode of The Sound and the Fury, though falling far short of that novel's powerfully sustained evocation of despair. It also underlines the references in Le Tricheur to Joshua:

Josué arrêtant le soleil.

(227)

Il est maintenant posé un peu au-dessus de l'horizon, déjà presque arrivé au terme de sa course inflexible, inexorable, rapprochant l'heure où... Je pense à Josué arrêtant le soleil, le fixant de son index pointé comme une flèche, un clou le crucifiant au mur du ciel.

(238)

Similar references will recur in Histoire and La Bataille de Pharsale, demonstrating how basic this understanding of the problems of time is in Simon's writing; here it is used to bring Louis steadily closer to the reality of action.

In the last analysis, the most admirable quality shown by the 'cheat' is his honesty in admitting defeat:

Quand le jour se lèvera je sais ce qu'il éclairera, pareil à hier, pareil à tous les jours, si loin que je regarde au delà des toits, tout autour, devant et derrière, ces murs.

Et de nouveau je respire une seconde fois, mais redressé, mon corps tout droit, s'emplissant de silence et de ténèbres, comme si ça ne devait jamais finir, comme si ça ne devait jamais plus être que cet illusoire et apaisant afflux.

(250)

The key word is illusoire; the calm of night is no more definitive an escape for Louis than it had been for Gauthier and Catherine. This point has been succinctly made by Ludovic Janvier:

Parti d'une morale de la lucidité que son attitude et son échec final font apparaître passablement abstraite, l'anti-héros de ce premier récit aboutit

donc à l'échec consenti. De la nostalgie de l'histoire à faire, il en arrive au classique constat individualiste de l'histoire subie. On voit aussitôt pourquoi cet ouvrage est capital pour apprécier l'oeuvre tout entière: c'est qu'il y sera toujours question de cet individu problématique que le flux des événements finit par entraîner avec lui.⁴

The problem of understanding one's experience in a rapidly and constantly changing reality is one of the themes which inform the whole body of the novel in the twentieth century. If it appears only in a muted form in Le Tricheur, this is principally because Simon is only just beginning the search for the appropriate way of representing what is essentially a chaotic experience.

The most obvious technical feature of this first novel is its refusal to present events in a straightforward chronological sequence. Simon prefers to adopt the system of recounting incidents from different points of view, with the concomitant repetition and addition of detail. In the first section, for instance, the mental worlds of both Louis and Belle are alternately laid open to the reader by the combination of several narrative techniques. Here, Belle is thinking back to something said by her uncle:

Elle fit une grimace de dégoût et se détourna.
Si seulement j'avais pu savoir où l'oncle Jacques a
caché l'argent, pensa-t-elle. Il a compté les
billets sur la table. Il y en avait pour vingt-
cinq mille francs.

'Et dimanche prochain j'en aurai le triple!
Je ne suis tout de même pas si bête pour me laisser
rouler jusqu'à la fin du monde par toutes ces fri-
pouilles de jockeys avec toutes leurs combines,
malgré qu'ils se croient si malins!

Il pouvait parler. Pour toutes les fois qu'il
avait perdu. Mais où est-ce qu'il a bien pu les mettre?
(11)

These underlinings help to show how the narrative tense changes with the technique, from the straightforward Past Historic to the Perfect of reported conversation, and then

⁴ Une Parole Exigeante, p.91.

to the direct transcription of another character's remembered words, to the Imperfect and Pluperfect of what amounts to style indirect libre, and lastly to the Perfect necessitated by the rendering of Belle's thoughts immediately, as in an interior monologue. This combination is used effectively again in the account of Louis's perambulations prior to his action, as well as in describing Gauthier's thoughts during his night-time journey home. Once Catherine's point of view has been presented (pp.59-80), it is followed by that of her husband (pp.81-127), before the third chapter resumes the interest in the younger couple, Belle's reminiscences leading to a constant oscillation between past and present.

The two time-schemes are allowed to interchange incessantly, the one opening up new perspectives upon the other, and dream-like sequences of introspection alternate with passages of straightforward narrative. Thus the plot of Le Tricheur is never allowed to become rectilinear, but builds up in loops to the climax of Louis's cheating. A good example of this circular movement is that the final scene of the novel is prefigured some seventy pages before it actually takes place. Ephraim Rosenblaum, a salesman who lives in the same hotel as the young couple, sees Louis lean dangerously far out over his balcony, and thinks he is about to witness a suicide; the pages which follow (from p. 182 on) build up to the revelation of the circumstances which have caused Louis to do this, and which Ephraim, for his part, can have no way of understanding. The final fifty pages are related by Louis in a first person narrative, taking a point of view in time after he has committed the murder and come to terms with its failure; this technique bears an obvious resemblance to the sustained Passé Composé employed by Camus in L'Etranger.

Overall, however, the impression is that Simon has perhaps been too keen to establish his own modernity by doing away with strict chronology and building up an incomplete picture of events. This as yet tentative technique comes nowhere near the fascinating power of such later novels as La Route des Flandres, although it does prove the writer's

anxiety to experiment. It is helpful to remember what another French novelist wrote, in an article for an American journal in 1946:

These American authors have taught us that what we thought were immutable laws in the art of the novel were only a group of postulates which one might shift about without danger. Faulkner has taught us that the necessity of relating a story in chronological order was only a postulate and that one may use any order in telling the story as long as that order allows an author to evaluate the situations, the atmosphere, and the characters.⁵

The echoes, thematic and technical, of Faulkner, and of the clipped narrative prose of a Hemingway, in this first novel, are as yet indicative of the kind of relationship existing between pupil and master; moreover, Simon weds these American techniques to a peculiarly French type of introspection in the consciousness of his central character. But the novel is at least strong enough to presage the more authentically experimental and successful departures of the later Simon.

For at a very few points in Le Tricheur, there are indications of those elements which are of major importance in Simon's mature writing. The value of language as an instrument of communication is called into question:

Les gens réclamaient une explication raisonnable aux choses, tout disposés à les admettre pourvu qu'elles soient déjà du passé avant même que de naître et que ce soit, avec des mots, un agréable bruit mort qui résonne familièrement à leurs oreilles, accompagné de l'odeur rassurante et inoffensive des cadavres.

(108)

But brief passages also suggest the multiplicity of language, anticipating Simon's later word-games:

Flèche d'Orient. Or riant, tapis, coupoles, parfums. Oui! par exemple l'avant-port de Beyrouth et toutes les fumées puantes que le vent nous rabattait dessus!

(38)

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'American novelists in French eyes', Atlantic Monthly, 178, No.2 (August 1946), pp.114-18. This article, translated by Evelyn de Solis, appears in English, and the original has proved impossible to locate.

Simon is at his best when describing sensorial impressions:

Bouteille vide: un 'cadavre'. Par leurs bouches offertes aux lèvres, leur désaltérante ardeur répandue murmurante dans sa chevelure touffue au-dessus des plis odorants de son épaule ronde.

(104)

In a more overt manner than in later novels, Simon also demonstrates the facility of transfer from one sensorial experience to another, particularly when the play of light is being evoked:

Le pont de fer éclata en fracas sous le train. La lumière et tout le paysage éclatèrent comme une avalanche de verre brisé par les poutrelles entrecroisées. La lumière hachée, découpée en triangles aigus frappait à grand bruit contre la vitre du compartiment.

(154)

In order to communicate the force of such impressions, the controlled syntax of such passages will be deliberately sabotaged in later writing.

It is also interesting that a failed artist should be one of the principal characters of Le Tricheur; the one positive feature of Gauthier is that he introduces two insights which anticipate much of Histoire and La Bataille de Pharsale in particular:

Il pouvait entendre leurs piétinements invisibles, suivant la route autour de lui, et sentir la poussière soulevée par leurs jambes multiples. Quelque chose comme le bas du tableau de la bataille de San-Remo, d'Ucello, un piétinement serré de jambes rouges, vertes ou blanches, mêlées aux lourdes pattes des chevaux parcourant les plaines autrefois sonores de leurs galops.

(93)

Less clearly perhaps than in Simon's best writing, art is seen as the crystallization of essential moments of experience, and the tangible presence of the past weighs heavily upon the character concerned. Simon's preference for Poussin also makes itself felt:

Dans certaines esquisses au lavis de Poussin, on devine ce souffle d'épouvante parmi les membres brisés des divinités d'airain abattues sur les dalles, et la terreur des personnages se couvrant la tête de leurs manteaux, fuyant en tous sens comme des possédés au long des murs des villes pestiférées, jonchées de

cadavres aux bouches ouvertes sur des cris éteints,
dans un poudroiement aveuglant de lumière d'orage,
déchirant leurs vêtements mouillés de sueur.

(124)

Gauthier, then, is a useful spokesman for a novelist who has never concealed his disappointment at having failed to become a painter: 'La peinture — c'est ce que j'aime le plus au monde. Je suis un peintre raté'.⁶ Simon's best novels abound in references to paintings and other works of art which appear as the encapsulation of human emotions or obsessions. Le Tricheur is an interesting, sometimes rich novel, with some acute observation of human foibles, and several admirable passages of description which bear witness to the talent of its creator. Although three more books soon followed, that talent was not to approach its fullest expression until some twelve years later.

Not until 1952 did the second novel, Gulliver, appear, although Simon did publish a collection of essays and souvenirs, La Corde Raide, only two years after Le Tricheur. Despite containing, in germ at least, many of the situations to which Simon will return with greater profit in the later novels, La Corde Raide remains on the whole an aggressively assertive book whose tone eventually antagonizes the reader, its very brashness forming a parallel to the wilful modernism of the fictional work which preceded it. Only in those passages dealing with death and solitude, or with life as refracted through art, is there anything approximating to Simon's best writing. As John Sturrock has suggested,⁷ it is in Cézanne's 'implicit mode of communication' that Simon finds something to admire, saying of the artist:

6 Quoted in Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Claude Simon', Kentucky Romance Quarterly, 1969, No.2 (1970), pp.179-90, (p.180).

7 The French New Novel, p.46.

Il pouvait sentir quelque chose qui ne ressemblait à rien de ce que l'on avait déjà peint, écrit ou dit. Quelque chose qui, si l'on parvenait à le saisir... Du monde l'image se faisait et se défaisait sous l'incessant passage des nuages, des saisons, se défaisant et se reconstituant sans trêve . . . Il y avait, chez Poussin, un commencement de cela, une rumeur, comme les échos sans fin d'une secrète et multiple résonance, avec le martellement multiplié des pas, les voix que se rejettent les murs, les branches contrariées dans le ciel, un monde cadencé, ordonné.

(121-2)

References to other painters — Delacroix, Ingres, Renoir, Picasso — show the force of this concern with art, which is not enough, however, to rescue La Corde Raide from mediocrity.

Perhaps in response to adverse criticism of these two books, Gulliver is without question the most limitedly traditionalist of Simon's novels. Essentially, however, the main themes are unchanged: life is seen as a sequence of defeats or illusory triumphs, its prime motive self-interest inspired by a feeling of individual insignificance. Much is done to expose the vanity of philosophy, and to establish general patterns of hostility between characters. As in the first novel, there is a distinct absence of meaningful communication; each of the characters is immured in solitude, and even the best intentions are confounded.

Again as in Le Tricheur, there is a dichotomy between the human time lived by the characters of Gulliver, and the universal time of nature which outlasts their frenetic activity. This is brought out both on the local and the more general levels; while there are reminders of the background of the Second World War — the periodic eruption of chaos — in which the action is set, there are also moments at which the individuals feel that time and events are in fact passing them by:

On entendait la course ployante des rafales dans les hautes branches. On pouvait entendre le passage du temps formidablement vite.

(76)

Le vent s'effiloçait en longs écheveaux,
longues bandes stridentes, horizontalement tendus
dans une fuite vertigineuse.

(77)

Effroyablement vite, irrattrapable, le temps passait,
s'engloutissait avec le vent redoublant dans la nuit
sans fond au delà des branches gémissantes.

(79)

Such flashes of poetic prose are intended to highlight
human ephemerality, as opposed to the durability of the
natural world:

Dehors c'était la nuit, la campagne couleur de
cendres sous la lumière lente de la lune, figée dans
l'attente sans impatience des recommencements.

(175)

Almost without exception, the characters in the novel become
aware of this transient condition, until what they do is
often simply the expression of their desire to extirpate
feelings of smallness, or at least to achieve a temporary
reprieve.

No less than the anti-hero of the first novel, the
protagonists of Gulliver come to see themselves as the
puppets of a blind system of chance, for which the card-
game is an effective symbol. Some of them will be dealt
with more harshly than others, but what seems important
is the extent to which they are hapless victims, rather
than the arbiters of their own existence. In each case
'le hasard' is the name given by the losers to what Simon
calls the rich indifference of life, 'sa magnificence in-
soucieuse, meurtrière et prodigue' (p.16). Significantly
enough, the central characters of the novel, Max Verdier
and Eliane de Chavannes, meet in a gaming-club, where
Verdier realizes that his life has been changed:

percevant dans son dos le silence tendu ponctué
par les monotones annonces des croupiers, le
silencieux cérémonial du mystère ardent, sinistre,
qui agglutinait les dos autour des tables éclairées
d'où s'élevaient par intervalles les voix prononçant
les formules rituelles et fatidiques

(275)

What is true of the casino can also be applied to life as

a whole; the player is attracted, as by a magnet, to the wheel, or the card-table, despotic symbol of a haphazard fate to which he has a treacherously ambiguous attitude, depending upon his good or bad fortune.

Other characters in Gulliver feel the effects of a drastic change of fortunes: the grandmother of the de Chavannes family, seeing in the giant twin grandsons, Jo and Loulou, and their criminal activities, the final evidence of a fall from nobility; Bert, the reporter, whose dreams of love and celebrity evaporate in the light of hard facts; and most of all the old Jew Herzog, once in a post of academic prominence in Paris, and now victim of the twins' crass and inhumane profiteering, as they sell him information about his daughter, captured by the Nazis. In this character Simon gathers most of his power to portray solitude and suffering; in the midst of one of Herzog's awkward gestures of friendship, reality catches up with him:

Quelque chose d'incompréhensible et de lointain, le son venant de partout et de nulle part à travers les épaisseurs mortes du silence où l'on entendait comme un murmure de bulles crevées, la lente agonie des fleurs dans la senteur pourrie de leur sève se répandant, s'infiltrant lentement par les fissures de la terre, exhalant parmi les visqueuses décompositions la plainte monotone des pleurs et des sanglots. Inconsciemment, il s'appuya de l'épaule contre le mur. Incapable de bouger il perçut alors distinctement le bruit timide, tenace, de la souffrance, comme une vieille mécanique rouillée et familière occupée à grincer sans espoir de cessation sur son axe martyrisé, quelque part dans la profondeur obscure du monde, dans la perspective infinie des jours, des siècles passés et à venir, patiente, acharnée, vigilante.

(112-13)

This virtuoso passage announces one of the main characteristics of the later Simon: his ability to evoke the presence of death in the midst of life, and to portray suffering on a universal scale, as will be the case particularly in La Route des Flandres. It is fitting that Gulliver should end on the note of Herzog's continued alienation from the very people with whom, out of the profound humanity of his own suffering, he tries to sympathize. In this novel,

intolerance is not diminished even by death and mutual sorrow; the old and stereotyped hostilities persist.

But in several respects — his humanity, his intelligent sensitivity, his paradoxical habit of creating disorder and provoking animosity — Herzog is the forerunner of Antoine Montès, the enigmatic hero of Le Vent. Herzog it is who provides one of the central insights of Gulliver, summarizing a profoundly Faulknerian theme which Simon has adopted as his own: the polar antithesis between man and woman, both in physical and emotional make-up:

'Aussi on ne devrait jamais avoir de filles. Ou bien il les faudrait imputrescibles. Mais elles sont justement faites de tout ce qui pourrait: je ne dis pas les corps, mais les voix, les regards... L'essence des garçons, des hommes, elle est pour ainsi dire minérale, vous savez: les tranquilles cimetières avec leurs milliers de croix où les noms des conquérants apaisés s'effacent lentement, s'effritent dans la mémoire sans idée de souillure. Mais ces fragiles existences faites d'emprunts à ce qu'il y a de plus corruptible, comme les parfums, les murmures, les séves...'

(62)

The reader is reminded of Light in August and the initiation of Joe Christmas into the nature of woman, by way of a more intimate physical knowledge, for which Faulkner finds the symbol of the cracked urn, the marble image of beauty with a vital flaw:

He reached the woods and entered, among the hard trunks, the branchshadowed quiet, hardfeeling, hardsmelling, invisible. In the notseeing and the hardknowing as though in a cave he seemed to see a diminishing row of suavely shaped urns in moonlight, blanched. And not one was perfect. Each one was cracked and from each crack there issued something liquid, deathcoloured, and foul. He touched a tree, leaning his propped arms against it, seeing the ranked and moonlit urns. He vomited.⁸

The difference between the two situations is that Herzog

⁸ London, 1960 (first published 1933), pp.177-8.

speaks from the anguish of an elderly man and father, while Christmas is a youth coming face to face for the first time with the hard facts of life.

The significance of Gulliver's title is that each of the major characters is hampered by his own impotence. Max finally commits suicide, the twins achieve nothing, for all their physical superiority, Eliane leaves with Tom as an escape rather than as anything more positive; and certainly Bert is not a man apart, despite his pretensions as a writer and his ludicrously pompous adoption of the pseudonym Fouquier-Tinville. Each of the characters is a Gulliver in the sense that the volatile life of the mind and the emotions is tied by the limited endurance of the body, and that each of them is basically helpless. Already there had been a hint of this in Simon's first novel:

Il ne pouvait pas bouger. Son corps était lourd,
cloué par terre, immense, Gulliver.

(Le Tricheur, p.16)

On the level of the characters and their relationships in Gulliver, nothing positive emerges. The last words of the book, 'Sale juif! dit-elle. Sale cochon de Juif!' (p.381) provide an effective ending, not only because they summarize the blind prejudice from which Herzog suffers, but also because they synthesize the basic theme that Simon has been discussing: the absence of humanity, and the isolation of individuals in an enduringly hostile community. Though never falling into the category of a novelist of the absurd, Simon, in this novel as in his first, portrays people trying and failing to make some sense of their lives. In the end the plot is left unfinished, and any note of hope is counterbalanced by realistic acceptance of the unchanging in human nature.

Some of the stylistic features of Le Tricheur reappear in Gulliver. Again Simon uses the technique of incomplete revelation, suggesting a particular event as already past before he describes the circumstances leading up to it. Deliberate confusion is created by the adoption of the multiple point of view, examining events as they appear to various characters in turn, while the use of protracted flashbacks

again provides a wealth of background information and does away with strict chronology. Professor John Fletcher has summed up Simon's second novel:

The principal interest of Gulliver is the style, which marks a clear departure from that of the two previous books published in the nineteen-forties. For the first time, in fact, Claude Simon adopts one of Flaubert's devices and begins to make extensive use of the present participle instead of the more usual present indicative in narrative passages, and of what one might call the 'dramatic colon' -- that is, the abrupt pause in the middle of a period, usually at a colon, to pull the reader up short and rivet his attention on what follows. On the whole, however, his style still remains close to that based on the American novel and used by many other French novelists in the early nineteen-fifties: drab, brutal and deliberately non-interpretative, with a strong tincture of slang.⁹

Gulliver sees Simon marking time rather than making any real progress, but on the other hand, while passages of dialogue do at times exasperate with their clipped jargon, the language of the novel seems on occasion to be getting away from the 'drabness' of the Americans.

This difference emerges most clearly, as it did in Le Tricheur, in two types of situation. Firstly, when Simon is describing nature, a vibrant kind of poetry is introduced; in such passages Simon juxtaposes human ordure with the splendour of nature, in a way which anticipates the magnificent language of Le Vent, though lacking the full tragic force of that novel:

Au dehors il faisait une matinée radieuse, ensoleillé. A travers les vitres du café on pouvait voir les ombres des maisons se découpant sur les façades de l'autre côté de la rue avec une netteté éblouissante, et au-dessus l'azur sans un nuage, comme lavé, comme si le ciel, l'air, avaient la transparence cassante du verre, étaient peints avec ces couleurs de faïence lumineuses et glacées,

⁹ New Directions in Literature (London, 1968), p.117.

nettoyés de tous les miasmes, de toutes les salissures, par le vent qui emportait horizontalement les fumées blanches au-dessus des cheminées.

(339)

A real sense of exhilaration comes out of such a passage, a feeling of liberation while the painter's eye revels in the colours of the natural world; in all respects it is a welcome breath of fresh air in the novel, and one of its successful features.

Secondly, there are some points where Simon is suggesting the latent chaos beneath the surface of human activity, in which case the language becomes tense and highly atmospheric. A major contributory factor is the writer's repeated use of adjectival paradox, later one of his favourite devices. It is used to describe the giant twins in a moment of deflation:

De nouveau ils se turent et de nouveau il les sentit tous les deux, guettant, sournois, dociles et meurtriers.

(180)

It appears again to capture the strange impression made by a woman crying: 'le bruit grelottant et dompté des sanglots orgueilleux' (212); and it caricatures the inbred viciousness of people knowing that they are at a disadvantage:

Dans la pénombre du couloir le visage camard se distendait découvrant les dents carriées dans un sourire de complicité servile et meurtrière.

(354)

Such intelligent use of what amounts to oxymoron makes for a telling economy of style, particularly well suited to recording those fleeting glimpses of the forces at variance within the human character; it is also symptomatic of Simon's anxiety to counteract the limitations of language.

Another effective means to convey the particular impression made by a character is to turn to the world of art, which Simon does in describing Bert:

le visage . . . dans la lumière avare semblait sortir tout droit, yeux enfoncés, nez en coupe-vent, d'une de ces peintures de Daumier: un de ces comédiens au menton bleu, encore jeune mais usé, au facies sculpté par les quinquets de la rampe en avant du fond obscur et poussièreux des décors, à la fois désolé et sarcastique, capable d'incarner, selon les besoins, des personnages aussi divers que le Cid, Sganarelle ou Tartufe.

(71)

As in Le Tricheur, it is in purely descriptive passages that Simon is most at ease:

Sur l'épaisseur de la nuit la fenêtre du premier étage plaqua soudain un rectangle citron pâle, devint le centre d'un monde insoupçonné aux fibres multiples se ramifiant en un réseau de branches mêlées, encore mouillées et luisantes. Puis, tout rentra dans l'ordre et les choses un moment bousculées par la nappe laiteuse se mirent d'accord, organisèrent un nouveau mystère, un nouveau silence.

(209)

At times, however, the language of Gulliver breaks down into a disappointing verbosity. Often this makes the writing too obtrusively thematic:

Il fait trop noir maintenant pour distinguer les caractères qui se confondent, ne forment plus que deux rectangles grisâtres portant en eux, comme ces figures d'idoles au regard introuvable, le redoutable verdict de toute parole et de tout langage depuis que cette folie et cette malédiction qui pèsent sur l'homme le forcent à inventer des signes dans lesquels il enferme pour toujours les éphémères balbutiements de ses angoisses et de ses terreurs.

(255)

While it is clear that Simon takes a dim view of literature as a didactic or informative medium, his attitude will be much more forcefully communicated in the mocking pastiche of La Bataille de Pharsale, for example, than in these fine phrases. With its patiently long descriptions of stereotype, and its accumulation of background detail, Gulliver, which the novelist himself has called an 'excellente et fertile erreur'¹⁰ in the sense that it proved his inability to compose a traditional novel, is too artificially contrived in plot, too deliberately 'Balzacian' to be a successful, or even a truly Simonian work.

The section of Le Sacre du Printemps headed '10, 11 et 12 décembre 1936' is possibly Simon's most accomplished piece of writing before Le Vent, and certainly the most

¹⁰ 'Réponses à quelques questions écrites de Ludovic Janvier', Entretiens, No.31 (1972), pp.15-29, (p.17).

atmospheric. It sees the real beginnings of his concern with the major events of a lifetime, those cataclysmic occurrences like war and revolution, which take the writing on to a universal rather than a narrowly individual scale. This section also marks Simon's successful attempts to describe, for the first time, the frustrations involved in examining the past from the vantage-point of the present. Simon emphasizes the fallibility of memory, at the same time trying to capture the essence of those moments that stand out as meaningful insights into the realities of life. But it is only after the event that these moments of heightened understanding can be grasped and evaluated, and in Simon's novels hindsight is usually the source of self-disparagement rather than self-congratulation. This will be an essential aspect of such novels as Histoire, particularly in the dialogues between uncle and nephew, two characters who are to some extent prefigured by the stepfather and stepson in Le Sacre du Printemps.

The three days from 1936 give an account of the stepfather's activities on the fringe of the Spanish Civil War; they are also intended as a parallel, on a far more dramatic level, for the three days — also 10, 11, and 12 December — of his stepson's transition from the adolescent to the adult world, sixteen years later, which are related in the novel's first, second, and final sections. Bernard, the younger man, rebels against the stepfather's constant cynicism, the reasons for which are withheld, in familiar Simonian fashion, until the third section of Le Sacre du Printemps. As the episode unfolds, it becomes clear that the older man has acquired his knowledge of human nature by experiencing violence at a much more intense pitch than anything his stepson eventually has to encounter. Ludovic Janvier has given an accurate summing-up of the importance of this mature character, and his place in the context of Simon's work:

La vraie résignation, qui est devenue une sagesse, intervient pour la première fois avec ce type de révolutionnaire-amateur vieilli du Sacre du Printemps.

Nous le voyons revenu de tout espoir, il a atteint ce degré de scepticisme où, rien ne signifiant plus rien, ce que nous sommes prêts à condamner au nom de la morale ne témoigne que bêtement de l'impuissance de l'homme: il sera toujours 'refait' par la 'Vie'.¹¹

This is another way of stating that 'impuissance devant le destin' which the novel's epigraph, taken from Trotsky, advances as the tragic in life. The tension between action and contemplation, which stems from this very powerlessness, is given terse expression here, anticipating the later confrontations in such novels as Le Palace or La Route des Flandres. Each of the two men undergoes a ritual initiation into the basic truths of life, and they differ only in the degree of cynicism which their disillusionment induces.

An essential feature of the Spanish episode is that it brings together enthusiastic amateur and hardened professional. As it becomes obvious that the first revolutionary ardour has cooled, a protracted struggle dissolves the important community of spirit, allowing individual ambitions and motives to re-establish themselves. The little group which Simon describes reflects this disintegration: Suner, still a passionate fighter for the cause, despises Ceccaldi, while each in his own way is the antithesis of the young Frenchman, there only as a well-meaning outsider, who is not prepared for what he finds in the company of such men:

Ce n'était pas cela. Mais entre les mots et ce qu'ils recouvraient, il venait de découvrir quelque chose qui le laissait perplexe, démuné, en proie à un inexprimable malaise, s'interrogeant maintenant en face de ce vide, ce trou d'ombre d'où s'exhalait l'haleine fade, glacée, insoutenable, de l'incertitude, de ce qui se fiche éperdument et des mots et des principes.

(150)

There is an unbridgeable gulf between his reading and his theorizing, idealistic though it may be, and the actual involvement in revolutionary action. Here is one of the

¹¹ Une Parole Exigeante, p.101.

essential themes of Simon, which will reappear much more forcefully in Histoire and La Bataille de Pharsale: the conviction that experience always confounds preconceived notions, and that theories and principles are remorselessly destroyed by the realities of action. For the young Frenchman, it soon appears that all his good motives count for nothing:

moi qui n'avais jamais eu faim ne savais ni hair ni aimer si je pouvais me dissoudre dans la nuit le temps l'oubli mais tout homme est obligé de tricher avec lui-même dès l'instant qu'il agit putain en dehors du rien pour rien, le seul mot tricherie impliquant l'idée de jeu et celui de jeu de gratuité, alors qu'il s'agissait de tout le contraire et moi m'accrochant m'agrippant au ventre du sommeil démasqué la putain refusant l'argent de l'imposture...

(189)

He has merely been playing an idealist's role, and the mask is stripped from him by people who are not acting out their theories but fighting for their lives; this lesson will also be learned by the student-narrator of Le Palace.

This Spanish episode, concerned with gun-running, political intrigue, and death, is considerably different from the story of Bernard's own activities, yet the two men react alike to what is fundamentally the same lesson. Bernard too begins to understand the ruthlessness of life and its organization on the basis of exchange and violent confrontation. When he tries to sell a ring for the young woman, Edith, not knowing that she needs the money for an abortion, he sets in motion a chain of events which escape his control; his eyes are opened, like his stepfather's, to the three realities on which life is based: commerce, sex, and the fear of death. At one point he finds himself in a bar trying to enlist the help of a former school friend, and, observing the group involved in pseudo-political discussion, he finds a very apt metaphor:

On dirait des marchands. Ou plutôt un marchand, et autour de lui, instinctivement réconciliés, instinctivement solidaires, irrités, agressifs, peureux, ceux auxquels il chercherait à refiler quelque chose dont ils ne voudraient à aucun prix, s'efforçant tous de deviner, déceler la ruse, tellement sûrs, tellement

persuadés par avance d'être finalement roulés qu'ils suspectent la moindre, la plus anodine de ses paroles, suspecteraient sans doute leurs propres paroles si par hasard ils les entendaient prononcées par sa bouche, et pour un peu se suspecteraient eux-mêmes, eux, leur sens, leur raison et leur esprit, comme ces insectes affolés tournoyant, éblouis et fascinés, autour de la flamme où ils se précipiteront.

(82)

What is supposedly a friendly meeting to draw up a plan of concerted action becomes instead a miniature of life in commercial terms, each camp determined not to cede to the interests of the other. There is an element of inevitability about it, reinforcing the conviction that this, in Simon's fictional world, is one of the durable traits of human nature.

Similarly, a truly climactic moment for the naive Bernard, who thinks of Edith in terms of purity and virginity, arrives at the end of the first part of the novel, when he has to face the truth as exposed in the girl's brutally realistic question:

'Oui: enceinte, en-ceinte. Et alors, espèce de crétin! Qu'est-ce que vous vous figurez que j'ai entre les jambes?'

(136)

His dealings with minor criminals, unscrupulous traders, and even his own brother, whose help he would have to pay for, leave Bernard aware of the full force of money as the basis of men's lives:

il fut sur le point d'éclater de rire, songeant tout à coup à la bague, à Josie, à Edith, à son frère, à l'argent, songeant qu'aucun homme ni aucune femme, aucune créature humaine sur la surface de la terre ne peut faire que de sa naissance à sa mort elle ne dépende de lui, bien que son premier souci soit de le nier, même si elle feint de le mépriser, même si elle le hait, parce qu'elle ne peut pas plus s'en passer que de l'air qu'elle respire — la seule chose au monde que l'on puisse avoir sans payer — et encore.

(221)

This is only one aspect of his increasing knowledge of the individual's subjection to a larger pattern, confirmed by his brief sexual involvement with the unprincipled Josie, girlfriend of a minor underworld figure. This is not the random coupling of two adolescents, but a form of initiation

into a ritual as old as humanity. In the girl, Bernard sees reflected his own predicament, and the evidence of his full involvement in life:

scrutant au-dessous de lui le petit visage à ce moment débarrassé, lavé de tout artifice, enfantin, naïf, (et l'instant d'avant râlant, sanglotant, fou, dans cet au-delà du plaisir qui est comme le reflet fidèle et symétrique de ce qu'avec acharnement celui-ci s'efforce de nier: solitude, souffrance et mort, l'ancestrale terreur apprise en même temps que la connaissance de leur destin par tout esprit et toute chair, hérissés, glapissants et solitaires).

(120)

With honesty, if somewhat overtly, this passage describes the ferocious clinging to moments of intimacy such as this — a symptom of man's cheating, an act of the body attempting to cancel out an inherited state of mind. Bernard is no different from other men, and the events in the novel set out to destroy his youthful illusions and to draw him into the real world.

The accident which terminated Edith's pregnancy is a triumph, against the youth's arrangements, for what Simon calls 'le luxuriant, anarchique et impétueux désordre de la vie' (p.241). The novel's final confrontation takes place in the hospital where Bernard and his stepfather wait for news of Edith; in an institution where death is a commonplace, the younger man is taught the tragic realities of life by one of Simon's 'Wise Old Men',¹² who knows that everything a man undertakes to do is simply a 'protestation contre sa condition' (p.263). Bernard learns that he is not free, but the object of an irresistible process whose only certainty is its conclusion.

A crucial aspect of Le Sacre du Printemps is the attention it pays to the consternating divorce between language

¹² This phrase is used by John Sturrock in The French New Novel, p.83.

and reality, which is of some importance in two respects. It causes a breakdown of communications generating intolerance and hostility among the characters, and it helps frustrate the individual in the attempt to express either his immediate feelings, or his memory of experiences and sensations which are now part of history. While Bernard's allegiance, as a student of mathematics, to the magic of signs is revealed as chimerical, it is the older man who is more keenly aware of the frustration:

De nouveau la voix resta suspendue, mais cette fois pas pour attendre quelque chose du dehors: seulement pour permettre à ce dont elle n'était que l'instrument, l'imparfaite, rugueuse et approximative traductrice, de compter, de remonter, s'enfoncer dans le cours ou plutôt la masse accumulée du temps.

(259)

What is new in Le Sacre du Printemps is the growing concern with time as a problematical sense of the past which becomes an enigma for the intelligent individual, who feels the weight of the past as an accumulation of experience to be examined and organized from the viewpoint of the present. The stepfather is conscious that the Spanish episode is now full of gaps and uncertainties which he is unable to complete from the distance of sixteen years in time: 'souvenir confus, douteux' (p.201). But even the recent past is subject to confusion, as Bernard discovers for himself. This novel approaches the later ones in pointing out the inadequacy of perception, which then magnifies the role of memory as the instrument for evaluating experience, leading only to frustrations because of the imperfections of memory itself.¹³ For the first time a truly Simonian metaphor appears:

Père. Un mot. Souvenir dans ce brouillard, cette irréelle perspective d'où (était-ce moi?) la mémoire doutant d'elle-même ramène, moi et pas moi en même temps, des fragments de vitres cassées à travers lesquelles je peux prendre conscience ou plutôt ranimer

¹³ For an interesting discussion of the interrelationship of perception and memory in Simon's later works, see Sturrock, op. cit., pp.58ff.

un monde à l'échelle de l'enfant que je sais moi dans la mélancolique lumière, le mélancolique, poussiéreux, amer parfum des choses qui furent.

(31-2)

Nostalgia for the past is increased by the incapacity to recapture anything but the most fragmentary knowledge of it; many of the most striking passages in Simon's later novels will appear as the delineation or even the reanimation of static scenes.

A favourite phrase of the later Simon also crops up with some regularity in Le Sacre du Printemps: the plus tard which translates a failure to make sense of reality in the moment of its being experienced, and the reliance on memory to provide insight only when the experience is irrevocably past. In the end Bernard looks back, from the calm of the hospital, to the last few bewildering days:

Au long d'une perspective déformée comme par une de ces glaces aux reflets grotesques des parcs d'attractions, les quarante dernières heures qu'il venait de vivre lui apparaissaient en une sorte de raccourci où les acteurs successifs . . . surgissaient l'un après l'autre comme portés par un tapis roulant, gesticulant en une parodie outrée de leur propre personnage (mais pas volontaire, pas forcée: simplement, comme dans ces films où l'opérateur facétieux a changé brusquement le rythme des images, par le simple effet de l'accélération, de la précipitation échevelée des mouvements: comiques, pitoyables et risibles marionnettes vues à travers cette compression, ce télescope du temps où nos actions, des plus futiles aux plus graves, n'apparaissent plus que sous la forme d'une agitation désordonnée, absurde et hilarante), grossissaient vertigineusement, et s'évanouissaient.

(226)

The emphasis here is on the essential deformation which results when the past is subjected to such scrutiny, an aspect which will be vital to the conception of Le Vent. Memory's bringing the past into the present again serves only to highlight the near-buffoonery of Bernard's actions, and to make possible a lucid and damaging self-appraisal.

It is the older man who refers to the processes of memory in terms evocative of fluidity:

remontant le cours figé du temps où il pouvait se voir, les regarder de nouveau agir et se mouvoir comme des nageurs, comme ces plongeurs aux gestes ralentis par l'épaisseur, la densité de la matière transparente, se rappelant cette nuit.

(201)

Et il pouvait plonger dans ce temps gélatineux, transparent, remontant cette chose sans dimensions ni perspective.

(202)

Memory abolishes order and perspective, bringing on to the same plane events which may be widely separated in actual time; the effort to restore chronology is like floundering in a vast reservoir, but it is one of the habitual activities of the intelligent mind with which the Simonian narrator is always endowed.

With Le Sacre du Printemps, rather than with Gulliver, an authentic style begins to develop, in which there are several important characteristics. Here are the beginnings of the grande phrase that characterizes not only Le Vent but all the later novels until La Bataille de Pharsale; for example, in the massively long description of the commercial quarter (pp.93-5), where detail follows detail to build up a depressingly immediate picture, and in the first section of the novel, narrated often in the form of Bernard's interior monologue and containing several sentences of unusual length (e.g. pp.48-9), sometimes completely free of punctuation. This is again the case in the third section, with its transcription of the stream of consciousness of the stepfather; at one stage, as he falls asleep (p.189), his thoughts merge into one another and finally run down into unconsciousness, a technique that will reappear in more striking form in La Route des Flandres and in Histoire.

As Professor Fletcher has suggested,¹⁴ the present participle begins to impose itself as the instrument for describing action, particularly as it is remembered —

¹⁴ New Directions in Literature, p.119.

that is, as seen happening again in the mind of the person remembering, a point made by Brian Fitch in his seminal article on Simon's use of this device:

Chaque participe présent évoque un mouvement dont la durée n'est pas indiquée. Ce mouvement se trouve donc isolé de son contexte temporel . . . On dirait que le temps s'est arrêté, figeant l'action en pleine évolution sous forme d'image.¹⁵

This technique may therefore be interpreted as an antecedent of Simon's use of art works as a form of perpetuation of action:

se détachant alors de la porte, s'avançant vers lui, se penchant, lui parlant à voix basse cependant qu'il me jette des regards embêtés, et je la vois tendre la main derrière la table, et lui de plus en plus embarrassé, me regardant de nouveau, bredouillant, et à la fin se décidant, me montrant . . .

(38)

The present participle is used to bring different time-schemes together as if the narrator were participating again in the action so described. One more feature of this developing style is the recurrent use of phrases such as 'Il pouvait l'imaginer', or 'C'était comme s'il pouvait le voir', which are an extension of Simon's exploitation of the present participle to create an effect of immediacy.

Once again, however, it is in occasional passages of description, particularly of light or rain, that Simon is most impressive:

Au dehors, les façades des immeubles, les toits de zinc mouillés, commencèrent à se dessiner dans une lumière grisâtre, incertaine, qui presque aussitôt cessa de croître, se figea d'une façon irrémédiable, à la limite du jour et des ténèbres, et ne changea plus. Il avait cessé de pleuvoir mais toute la ville semblait encore ruisseler, dégorger lentement comme une éponge distendue son trop-plein d'eau, sous

¹⁵ 'Participe présent et procédés narratifs chez Claude Simon', Revue des Lettres Modernes, Nos.94-99 (1964), pp.199-216. See also Sturrock, op. cit., pp.101-2.

le ciel bas, les nuages se traînant au ras des cheminées, menaçant à tout instant de crever de nouveau. (89)

More often than not, light is associated with time, thus reminding the young man of its rapid passage or, paradoxically, lengthening his days and tending to make of them what Gauthier had called 'une suite inutile de peines' (Le Tricheur, p.80). The calm neutrality of nature serves again as ironic contrast to the frenetic life of men. In describing the almost incessant rain which accompanies the action of Le Sacre du Printemps, Simon demonstrates the ability to assimilate this natural phenomenon to his conception of time, anticipating the brilliant metaphor of La Route des Flandres. Even to Bernard its qualities are unmistakable:

Il pleut toujours. Dans l'auréole du réverbère je peux la voir, grise, impalpable, inlassable, striant de fines vergetures la tache de lumière, mais invisible dans le noir humide troué de reflets, et c'est comme si d'ici . . . je pouvais entendre s'écouler avec la pluie le silence patient, les multiples, soyeux, imperceptibles ruissellements, les lentes processions des gouttes le long des chéneaux, des auvents, des branches noires, luisantes et nues. (36)

Acquiring almost a Proustian cadence, Simon's language is used to give the natural symbol an important thematic function which will remain in much of his work.

In Le Sacre du Printemps these qualities begin to combine and stand out from the pure story-telling elements, as the essence of the coming Simon. The novelist himself has acknowledged the importance of this book in his development:

C'est sans doute Le Sacre du Printemps qui fait l'axe, le pivot autour duquel tout tourne, devient autre, cesse apparemment de ressembler à ce qui précède. Vous savez, cette mutation, c'est la maladie. J'ai vécu durant cinq mois allongé. Avec pour seul théâtre une fenêtre. Quoi? Que faire? Voir (expérience de voyeur), regarder avidement. Et se sou-

venir. La vue, la lenteur et la mémoire...¹⁶

This admission helps to explain the brilliantly detailed descriptions which fill the pages of subsequent novels, and the impassioned attention to what is often a highly personal individual 'history' rather than to the contrived adventures of a more completely fictional character. Simon's best writing does in fact stem from an extraordinarily retentive memory, inspiring descriptions of a most revealing and evocative kind.

By 1954, then, the thematic basis of Simon's oeuvre is established. His picture of the human condition, with its evocations of pointless cruelty, its relentless exposure of self-delusion, is a bleak and fairly comfortless one. In their overriding fear of time and death, men find the spur to all their actions, but the crucial problem is the individual's inability to impose his will upon events, and his eventual submission to a broader set of circumstances in which basic tensions recur unchanged. Where these early novels fall down is in their attempt to put into cut-and-dried terms a vision of life as consistently perplexing in its ambiguity. Simon fails, in fact, to live up to the precept laid down in La Corde Raide:

Tout être qui s'exprime, ne fait que donner une forme à l'informulé, éclairer un peu de ce brouillard sans langage, sans mots et sans vocabulaire dont il donne une traduction, un aspect visible et communicable. C'est tout ce qu'il peut faire, cela et pas autre chose. Du fait qu'en outre, il se préoccupe du résultat de ces paroles, ce ne sera plus cette parcelle de vérité découverte à travers lui qu'il exprimera, parce qu'il cherchera à la rendre attrayante en la travestissant, l'altérant et la déformant à l'aide d'un fatras de raisons laborieuses, de ruses et d'artifices qu'il suppose à votre goût ou à votre portée et capables de vous séduire.

(70)

¹⁶ Quoted in Hubert Juin, 'Les secrets d'un romancier', Lettres Françaises, 12 octobre 1960, pp.1, 4.

Simon also fails to support his own heavy-handed irony about 'philosophical' novels, expressed in the stepfather's attack on such works (see p.57: surely this is directed against Camus and La Peste?), and the impact of his more accomplished pages is therefore diminished.

But there is a discernible shift of emphasis in the last novel of this early phase, as Simon moves towards that preoccupation with memory which typifies his best writing. The clue to the success of the later novels lies in the subtitle to Le Vent: — tentative de restitution d'un retable baroque — which indicates Simon's concern with the purely artistic possibilities of the novel. By adopting a style which epitomizes bewilderment, by presenting, not a narrative, but a collection of vivid scenes, Simon begins to find the appropriate expression for his vision of the 'impetuous disorder' of life. At the same time, he turns his attention definitively toward the past, and the fascination it exerts over the individual who seeks in it the explanation of an experience defying understanding. The development of his work from now on will be dictated by his search for the situations which convey that fascination, particularly as embodied in works of artistic representation, and by his exploration of the possibilities of language to organize and give satisfying shape to a complex reality.

Chapter II: Chaos and the Semblance of Order:
Le Vent 1957

Far off events, transformed by memory, acquire a burnished brilliance because they are seen in isolation, divorced from the details of before and after, the fibres and wrappings of time.

Lawrence Durrell

The peculiar impact of Simon's fourth novel derives mainly from the originality of its conception, which is dependent upon the exploitation of compromise and the statement of ambiguity. Its enigmatic central character, one of the most curiously appealing in modern French writing, is shaken out of his innocent complacency by an experience of chaos which threatens to destroy him; tragedy arises when his rigorously ordered outlook is confronted with the anarchy of life and an excess of suffering. New importance is also attached to the dichotomy between 'truth' and 'fiction', directly related to Simon's developing attitude to time. From the vantage-point of the present an attempt is made, through the work of memory, to reconstruct an episode from the past. Once the memory reveals itself inadequate to the task, the imagination is brought into play; the novel's narrator openly and repeatedly admits the subjective tenuousness of the narrative he is creating. It is not truthful, in the sense of establishing an unequivocal record of events and characters, but a largely imaginative reconstruction whose purpose is to grope toward a better understanding of them.

The superiority of Le Vent over the early writings is achieved by a deliberate compromise between tradition and modernity: Simon has constructed a novel which oscillates between the poles of order and disorder,¹ avoiding the

¹ Compare the heading of Vivian Mercier's chapter on Simon, 'Order and Disorder, Memory and Desire', in The New Novel from Queneau to Pinget (New York, 1971), pp.266-314.

drabness of factual statement while preventing the threatened breakdown into mere confusion. Le Vent seeks to elaborate a prose style which will do justice to the exuberant disorder of life. If, at one level, the novel is like a detective story, there is never any possibility of bringing a recognizable plot to its logical conclusion, as Robbe-Grillet does so ingeniously in Les Gattes, for instance; this is the first of Simon's novels to display the quality of open-endedness which characterizes all of his subsequent work. Le Vent is therefore important as one of the pivots on which the oeuvre as a whole turns: here Simon begins to explore more profoundly the twin themes of time and memory, and to examine the resources of reconstructive prose as the medium in which to convey his vision of the past as an a-temporal sequence of highly-coloured scenes.

One method of imposing order on the confused events surrounding the central character, Montès, and an indication of Simon's growing concern with works of art, not necessarily as idealization, but basically as crystallization of human experience, is to disengage the principal one of two analogies expressing the duality of people's reactions to him, and the ambiguity of his own character. While there is a comparison with Spanish tragi-comedy, this is used to suggest the more lunatic aspects of Montès's character, and to underline the surprising difficulties which arise when he undertakes some essentially simple business: the settlement of his father's estate in the town in Southern France which his mother had left before Montès was even born:

tout cela . . . ressemblant assez à une de ces pièces à l'espagnole, un de ces trucs de Calderon ou de Lope de Vega, une de ces comédies-drames à multiples journées réparties dans, ou plutôt exhumées, émergeant sporadiquement hors d'un temps vague, d'une incertaine durée trouée d'épisodes burlesques ou macaroniques.

(112)

This is also an apt reminder that the time-scheme of Le Vent is dictated by the chronology of memory; the vivid scenes of

which the novel is made up create a fluid movement backwards and forwards within the period of six months that Montès spent in the town.

But the tragic tenor of Le Vent is better expressed by the allegory of sainthood implicit in the novel's subtitle, tentative de restitution d'un retable baroque; it pays sustained tribute to the patience and endless sympathy of the man at the centre of the novel. The fundamental interpretation of Montès's story as a form of 'trial by existence' provides a pointer to one of Simon's most important intentions, the one which ties Le Vent to the mainstream of traditional fiction: at one level, this tragic novel is to be read as a meditation upon the nature and possibility of sainthood in the modern world. In this way, it may ultimately sound like an intense statement of despair, evoking the paradox that sainthood precipitates the evil latent in the world, and building a powerful case against the innocent optimism of its central character. Here then is the absolute truthfulness of Simon's novel; for Montès's simplistic attitude it substitutes a new awareness of life as the accumulation of suffering, which has enabled at least one critic to establish a comparison between Le Vent and the Bible:

Le drame qui se joue dans ce décor antique est une sorte d'allégorie de la misère humaine, une représentation symbolique d'une humanité souffrante et coupable. Le thème qui ressort entre tous est celui de l'injustice et du triomphe du mal . . .

Mais si, dans le monde que crée Claude Simon, le mal triomphe ce n'est au profit de personne. Il n'est jamais non plus, question de punir les coupables. La distinction entre innocence et culpabilité s'efface dans la vision cosmique de cet auteur, pour qui tout le monde est victime.²

By presenting his novel as an allegory of sainthood, Simon

² Laurent Lesage, 'Claude Simon et l'Ecclésiaste', Revue des Lettres Modernes, Nos.94-99 (1964), pp.217-23, (p.221).

is able to elaborate one of its basic themes; as Montès pursues his goals, not only does chaos confront order, but good is opposed to evil, 'cette insoluble, oiseuse énigme du bien et du mal' (p.11), two notions which are blurred by conventionality and dictated, to some extent, by the feeling for social propriety which the innocent Montès disregards. If the central character of Le Vent tends to resemble the enigmatic Prince Myshkin of Dostoevski's The Idiot, it is the mark both of Simon's admiration for the Russian writer, and also of his desire to work from the particular to the universal, and so to avoid the narrowness of scope which, overall, is one of the chief shortcomings of the earlier novels.³

In order to bring out the allegorical connotations of the story, various minor clues are included, as well as the subtitle, to establish parallels between Montès and such an exemplary figure as a saint, or even as Christ. At one point a reference is made to his age, which is put at around thirty-five (p.15), not significantly far removed from the thirty-three at which the life of Christ ended. More positively, perhaps, there is the Christian name of Antoine, also that of one of the most celebrated of saints; this in turn must be taken in conjunction with a deliberate statement made about Montès by the narrator of Le Vent:

Plus tard il devait me décrire cette période de sa vie où (après s'être vu brutalement — comme si tous les événements l'assaillaient avec la violence de ce pays, de ce vent, de cette lumière à la fois démesurés et agressifs — hériter d'une importante propriété, exposé aux tentations de l'argent, puis de la chair, puis attaqué, violenté, à demi-étranglé, puis, alors qu'il pensait avoir enfin trouvé une retraite, un

³ Simon has expressed his admiration for Russian literature on several occasions; see for example André Bourin, 'Techniciens du roman: Claude Simon', Nouvelles Littéraires, 29 décembre 1960, p.4.

semblant de tranquillité, épié, évalué, et, sans qu'il ait seulement eu le temps de comprendre comment, fourré dans une histoire louche), . . . il se faisait l'effet . . . d'être une sorte de mythe.

(82)

Clearly, then, there is in Simon's novel his own version of the 'Tentation de Saint Antoine', not only because of the temptations put in Montès's way, but also in the evocation of his constant persecution and suffering. Even the natural elements, it will be seen, are against Montès, and stand as Simon's equivalent -- wind and dust in particular -- for the desert faced by the Christian martyr. The violent heat, light, and wind of this Southern community must approximate to a desert for Montès, brought up in the cooler greenery of a Northern climate. The wind effectively hinders his movements around the town, as he cycles out to his property, for example:

(restand entre chaque effort, élan coupé, à peu près immobile, en équilibre sur la route balayée par le vent qui le repoussait avec, de part et d'autre -- le vent et lui -- la même volontaire opiniâtreté, comme si l'ouragan faisait aussi partie de cette tacite conjuration qui semblait l'avoir accueilli ici, ourdie à la fois par les hommes et les éléments pour le rejeter, le refouler, le renvoyer là d'où il venait)

(26)

In Montès and the wind, two obstinate forces clash, one of which has to bend or eventually to break; by the end of the novel, and inevitably, it is the cruel anarchy of life, as symbolized by the furious persistence of the wind, that triumphs over Montès and finally destroys his illusions. The wind is a constant presence at each of the stages in the development of Montès's sainthood and in the eventual denial of it.

There are, however, still more direct suggestions that Montès is to be seen as the central figure in an allegory of sainthood, and that Le Vent seeks to emulate the pattern of a retable by deploying a number of critical episodes from the life of its central character, divorced from the rigorous logic of temporal sequence. The first, and perhaps the most important of these, appears at the beginning of the

novel's third chapter, where Montès is juxtaposed with a representation of the Christ figure rounding off one of Simon's panoramic descriptions of the town:

ses églises flottant la quille en l'air, ombreuses, froides, profondes, emportant leur nuit trouée d'or, leur âcre parfum de cierges clignotant, leurs murmures psalmodiés, leurs vierges poignardées, debout dans leurs somptueuses robes de douleur, tordant leurs doigts chargés de diamants, levant leurs yeux aux pleurs de diamants vers leur fils supplicié, aux pieds polis par les lèvres des amoureuses et des enfants, les reins ceints de dentelle immaculée, nu, noir, et juif. Et lui (Montès) assis là . . .

(42-3)

Echoes of this crucial passage recur at points throughout the novel, and reinforce the allegory in which Montès is the principal participant.

The most deliberate enlargement upon this initial description is the involvement of Montès with his own 'amoureuses', and with children. One of the first things he does on his arrival is to make contact with the children of the town, whom he photographs and entertains for hours on end. Constant emphasis is laid on the childlike qualities of Montès himself: his strange naiveté and his innocence, an unchanging air of astonishment and fascination at the variety of the world around him, a total lack of interest in the down-to-earth dealings of business and administration. One of the principal links between him and Rose, the chambermaid in his cheap hotel, is in fact his affection for her children, and in particular for Thérèse, the elder of the two girls. A deliberate parallel is set up between them by calling the child's eyes 'deux charbons' (p.47), thus likening them to the 'regard charbonneux' (p.61, p.202), which is a major contribution to the enigmatic appeal of Montès. Precisely because he seems more innocent even than a child, Montès is misunderstood and consequently resented by the adults of the town.

After the death of Rose, the compulsory separation of Montès from her orphaned children is the final blow for a man who at all times has been happy for his own 'Suffer

little children' to ensure his continuing contact with the childhood world. What is perhaps even more important for the allegory is the climax of this strange and often moving kinship. When Montès, accused of interfering in the life of Rose and her Gitan husband Jep, a minor criminal, is knocked out by the latter, he is left to explain to Thérèse, trying to gloss over the incident she has witnessed. As he does so, the girl makes a gesture which brings the story of Montès firmly into line with the notion of sainthood as Simon has suggested it:

'Ce n'est rien. Il n'a pas voulu... Enfin c'est-à-dire il a voulu... Enfin c'était pour rire quoi... il...', puis se taisant, reculant, cherchant à dégager sa main sur laquelle l'enfant s'était penchée, puis sentant ses lèvres, leur contact bref, comme une brûlure sur le dos de sa main, tandis qu'elle le lâchait, se détournait et partait en courant.

(125)

The intention in describing this action is to create an unmistakable comparison with the kisses placed on the feet of the statue with which Montès was juxtaposed; the instinctive gesture of the child captures the sympathy and understanding existing between her and Montès, the child in spirit. The central character of Le Vent is, in a sense, even more defenceless than a child, because he has no real forewarning of the adult world; he is quite unique in retaining, for as long as he does, his childlike naiveté, which makes his eventual awakening to reality all the more tragic in its suddenness and brutality.

If Montès actively seeks the company of children, to the point where all his free time is taken up with them, he is not directly responsible for the attentions paid to him by several female characters, those 'amoureuses' who introduce the second element of the allegory. On a visit to the property, Montès is subjected to an attempt at seduction by the steward's daughter, whose parents hope to make an advantageous marriage for her. Montès, however, is unmoved by the display:

Peut-être ne la vit-il même pas, elle, ses seins, son visage peinturluré, ses yeux faits, ou plutôt ne vit-il pas ce qu'elle était, se contenta-t-il de penser que c'était une de ces filles de la campagne qui ne savent pas mettre leur rouge, ou que la coutume, ici, voulait que ce fussent les mères qui servent à table jusqu'à ce que les filles soient assez grandes pour s'habiller de noir à leur tour et prendre place à côté du feu de braises.

(32)

Nothing comes of this meeting except an unexpected decision from Montès — to keep the property — which provokes a violent fit of pique from the girl's father, and a protracted law-suit: once this manoeuvre has proved abortive. It is his utter innocence, then, that preserves Montès from this first temptation; he really does not know that a trap has been set for him, and so avoids it unconsciously.

This in itself is proof of the ambiguity of the man's nature, since he is able to talk knowingly to the narrator of the novel about the relationships between men and women, and to provoke a surprised reaction: 'Eh, dis-je. Vous m'avez l'air d'en savoir plus long là-dessus qu'on ne... — Oh, ce n'est pas bien difficile à imaginer' (p.133).

Less easy to account for is the fascination which compels the two other 'amoureuses', Cécile and Rose, to confide in him as intimately as they do. Cécile, the daughter of a wealthy bourgeois family distantly related to Montès, seems to have nothing in common with this poor and bizarre individual, and no apparent reason exists for her visiting his shabby hotel; but the man's total lack of hypocrisy has appealed to her as a completely new experience which makes her forget the ingratiating mission on which her father has sent her. He becomes a confidant to whom Cécile wishes to reveal her true self — expressed in her antagonism toward her sister Hélène, her repudiation of the family's system of values — which emerges from the sarcasms directed at social conventions and the demands of a false propriety. But, because Montès is unaccustomed to such company, they talk almost entirely at cross-purposes. Cécile fails to realize the ironic aptness of her

remark: 'Naturellement ça doit vous paraître des histoires d'un autre monde!' (pp.65-6); the machinations over his inheritance, to which she refers, do in fact belong to a world foreign to Montès.

The greatest problem he faces, however, is not Cécile, but his relationship with Rose. Perhaps the most vital scene in the book is 'cet étrange et nocturne duo d'amour' (p.101) shared by Montès and the chambermaid, where Rose is seen confiding in Montès and testing his remarkable capacity for sympathy; she tries and fails to shock him out of his calmness and tolerance because she is being faced, not by a hypocritical façade, but by Montès as he really is. Their conversation, reconstituted in terms which emphasize its importance for the novel as a whole, expresses the basic ambiguity of Montès's nature as it appears to other people: on the one hand, he is an embarrassed and confused 'idiot'; on the other, a man of astonishing patience and insight. But Rose catches Montès unawares when she flings an accusatory question at him:

'Pour quoi vous prenez-vous, dit-elle. Pour un saint?'
 Il n'y avait plus trace de faiblesse dans la voix. Pas exactement de l'hostilité. Pas de sympathie non plus. Maintenant il pouvait la sentir qui le devisageait tandis qu'en proie à une sorte d'affolement, le visage brûlant, il bégayait de plus belle, essayait de relever la tête, découvrait dans la pénombre le reflet brillant des deux yeux, rebaisait aussitôt la tête, et finalement renonçait, se taisait, restait là, irrémédiablement perdu, regardant stupidement à ses pieds les ombres noires des branches faiblement remuées.

(101)

These words stop Montès short and force him to reconsider his attitudes, precisely because they imply a presumptuousness of which he has not been conscious. Sainthood is not a condition to which he has wilfully aspired, despite that excessive humility which causes him to forgive sarcasm and violence. The conversation with Rose begins to bring home to him the need to rethink his life in the light of a new, increasingly distressing experience.

The challenge is reiterated soon afterwards by his other 'lover', Cécile. Again the confusing duality of his nature

leads her to ask what kind of game he is playing: 'C'est un numéro de cirque?' (p.150), before the more injurious question provokes an angry reaction:

'Un saint non pas un pourquoi qu'est-ce que ça signifie pourquoi est-ce que vous aussi' (pour la deuxième fois en moins de quarante-huit heures, une bouche de femme, mais cette fois celle d'une jeune fille, et d'à peu près quinze ans plus jeune que l'autre . . . lui lançant avec le même accent de colère, d'exaspération, exactement les mêmes mots) 'je ne me prends pour rien à la fin vous commencez tous à m'em...'.
(152-3)

Made a second time, the accusation hurts Montès because he cannot understand it. Nor have Cécile and Rôse understood that what they interpret as a self-conscious pose is in fact the real character of the man; his attitudes are intolerable to people who do not share his belief in goodness and in order. Because he really is as he seems to be, the eventual outcome of his story gains in tragic impact.

There is also the question of his confidence in the Established Church, which makes him see such implied posturing as a form of sacrilege; this comes out most forcefully in his confrontation with another key figure who will play Judas to Montès's Christ, as the allegory progresses. For there is in fact one character whose company Montès dislikes, and with whom he is more than usually ill at ease: the young commercial traveller Maurice, who forces his friendship upon Montès, and quickly adopts an important role in the drama. With his nervous volubility, he has nothing at all in common with the central character:

Et Montès le regardant toujours, un peu reculé sur sa chaise, éprouvant, me dit-il, comme un vague malaise, quelque chose d'indéfinissable qu'il cherchait vainement à préciser sans parvenir à rien découvrir derrière le jeune visage triangulaire, pâle, pas antipathique, pas sympathique non plus . . . puis il (Montès) comprit, pensant: 'Mais ce n'est que le boniment. Il doit avoir quelque chose qu'il va essayer de me vendre...'.
(70)

As events develop, it becomes clear that this is a case of unlike poles attracting; the representative of good is drawn into contact with the agent of evil, Maurice acting as catalyst

in the drama involving Montès, Rose, and the Gitan.

Maurice first arouses Montès's curiosity and concern about Rose's present difficulties, caused by her husband's criminal activities; then he becomes increasingly familiar with Montès, intruding upon his privacy and even spying upon him. Soon, Montès penetrates to the truth behind the verbose and suave manners:

Pensant encore avec une espèce de surprise, presque de gêne, avec presque une envie de détourner charitablement la tête autant par pudeur que par discrétion, comme s'il était témoin malgré lui d'un spectacle qui n'était pas fait pour être vu: 'Il est malheureux. Il souffre. Mais de quoi?'

(136)

Eventually it is the narrator who pinpoints the reason, blaming the 'soif éperdue de considération' (p.139) that spurs Maurice's efforts to impress. In this respect the placid Montès is a challenge to him, but not until, almost in desperation, Maurice attacks the subject of religion, does he even begin to achieve his aim. The mention of atheism disturbs Montès's confident assumptions:

Et cette fois, au-dessous de lui, Montès avait sursauté, relevait la tête, le considérait de ses yeux ahuris, tristes, comme quelqu'un de réveillé en sursaut . . . , disant: 'Quoi? . . . Vous voulez dire que c'est simplement . . . Un fait? Une croyance? Rien qu...' mais ne pouvant même pas finir, se taisant, très rouge, l'air malheureux.

(139-40)

At this point, sensing a temporary advantage, Maurice commits himself to his role as agent provocateur by revealing his knowledge of Montès's attempts to intervene in Rose's affairs. Even then, Montès refuses to abandon his notion that he is himself at fault for reacting in an exaggerated way to the salesman's insulting remarks about Rose.

At their next confrontation, Maurice's plea for some consideration turns into blackmail over an intercepted note from Cécile, and over Montès's part in looking after jewels stolen by the Gitan (pp.157ff.). But by now things have become too much for the central character:

'Peut-être, dans un autre moment, me dit-il encore, aurais-je marché, aurais-je discuté, ou tout au moins

essayé de ruser, mais ça paraissait tellement bête: que moi... qu'elle... Alors j'ai dit: 'Fichez le camp!' et maintenant il était debout, l'air plus embêté que menaçant quoiqu'il essayât encore de crâner en agitant cette feuille d'agenda, disant: 'Peut-être que si son paternel apprenait...', et j'ai dit encore: 'Fichez-moi le camp! . . . Fichez-moi tout de suite le camp, vous m'entendez? Fichez-moi tout de suite le camp d'ici!...' (159)

This then is the equivalent in Le Vent of the cry 'Get thee behind me!', as Montès tries finally to dismiss the agent of evil recognized in the whining Maurice. Essentially, their meeting has been that of irreconcilable opposites, from which disaster had to result, and in the last analysis neither has any lasting effect upon the other. Montès in fact regrets the departure of Maurice, as the removal of one more familiar if odious element in a world which seems to be crumbling about him. Playing the part of Judas, Maurice has precipitated suffering, but is eventually forgiven by the extraordinary Montès, who more than ever can be seen as the central figure in an allegory combining the temptations of Saint Anthony with the implacable persecution of Christ.

For he suffers, as well as physical violence, a kind of death resulting from his tenacious faith in the ultimate triumph of good. As evil and disorder gain momentum, he seeks a state of suspension and passivity approximating to death. This fact is deliberately stated by the narrator as he develops his mental picture of Montès taking refuge in his room: 'le lit de pensionnaire (presque mortuaire: le drap à peine dérangé, à peine soulevé par le corps, tiré, plat, jusqu'aux aisselles)' (p.172). Here is the culmination of an attitude hinted at in Montès's use of his camera, 'l'appareil qui pendait sur sa poitrine comme, semblait-il, une sorte de troisième oeil, un organe supplémentaire' (p.23). Photography, as Montès practises it, is a means whereby to impose order:

jusqu'à ce que le monde hasardeux et compliqué cesse de tournoyer sans trêve et sans bruit, s'organise, s'ordonne et s'immobilise enfin.

(148)

It represents his personal struggle to become, in Eliot's phrase, 'the still point of the turning world', until the events in the novel destroy his fixed views and force him to admit the triumph of disorder. Montès goes on from his climactic experience of death and disillusionment — the discovery that Rose has been killed by the Gitan, who thinks she has betrayed him to the police — to undergo a rebirth into a world seen through new eyes:

franchissant le seuil sans s'arrêter, quoiqu'à ce moment il perçut avec netteté quelque chose qui se cassait en lui, ou plutôt, dit-il plus tard, comme une déconnection, une rupture (le cordon, pensai-je) . . . clignant des yeux non pour se protéger de la lumière . . . mais pour essayer de briser, d'écailler la mince pellicule qui lui semblait recouvrir son visage, comme une couche de cire le séparant de l'air extérieur devenu pour lui un milieu, un élément étranger où il n'aurait encore jamais pénétré auparavant. .

(189)

Montès, at thirty-five, has been given new life, but this 'resurrection', made possible by his contact with Rose, is the beginning of a much more tragic involvement in human experience. Now that he has seen with his own eyes the violence and futility of death, the whole edifice of his beliefs crumbles, and he is no longer able simply to turn his back on the presence of suffering in the world. He rejects a priest's injunctions to seek consolation in prayer, no longer an adequate outlet for his personal sorrow.

At this vital moment Montès is juxtaposed for the second time with a representation of sainthood, in the form of a statue in a small lateral chapel where he hides from the insistent priest. What he sees is a cheap and tawdry figure:

quelque chose de funèbre, de fastueux, de sordide, et lui, là, toujours immobile sur sa chaise, plus que jamais image de la désolation, mais sans larme, regardant d'un oeil froid, sec, le décor sale et pompeux comme, me dit-il, s'il voyait pour la première fois, n'avait jamais pénétré de sa vie dans un endroit semblable.

(195)

Experience has shattered all Montès's received ideas, not least those on religion. If the accepted channels of religion are inadequate as the expression of suffering, he, as the representative of sainthood, is only too convincing, epitomizing a goodness and humility which is tragically out of place in the world of human affairs, and may even be the source of harm, as the narrator suggests (p.235). In this novel, even the allegory of sainthood plays its part in embodying the threat of disorder. As Ludovic Janvier says, Le Vent is 'le livre le plus touchant de tous'.⁴

Essential to Montès's tragic situation, and one of the great strengths of Le Vent by comparison with the preceding novels, is Simon's success in developing and sustaining the theme of time, which lies at the very core of his intentions as a novelist. Time is here assimilated to the twin themes of nature and suffering, to make it the dominant force in the book, discussed not only for its effects upon humanity, but also in relation to history and the concern to reconstruct a comprehensible picture of time past: in other words, as a force of dissolution against which the writer in the reconstructive mode conducts a despairing rearguard action.

Initially, a tension is established between human time, in the sense of constant and anguished clock-watching, and the unhurried but no less inexorable time-scheme of nature, which offers an ironic contrast to the frenzy of human action. Thus one of the levels at which Simon's novel functions is that of nature poetry, a major factor in the thematic structure of Le Vent and the source of a vibrant prose style.⁵

⁴ Une Parole Exigeante, p.102.

⁵ This is proof of Simon's debt to Faulkner; see for example Michael Millgate, The Achievement of William Faulkner (London, 1966), p.62: 'Faulkner also appears to be fascinated with the symbolic possibilities . . . of natural phenomena'.

For Montès in the early part of his stay, nature is a constant source of pleasure. An element of continuity is introduced into the narrative by the recurrence of the regular movements of nature, as seen through the eyes of the sensitive central character. But with the acceleration of events, the whole of nature involves itself in a conspiracy whose aim is to swamp the bewildered individual:

Le soleil bas, jaune foncé, glissait presque horizontal dans la chambre, projetait sur le mur la tache marbrée virant lentement du citron au chrôme, puis du chrôme à l'orangé, tandis qu'elle se déplaçait insensiblement, et du dehors (tintement des brocs des femmes à la fontaine, appels, et un murmure las, multiple, épuisé) parvenaient les bruits du soir. Comme une exhalaison du jour fané, révolu. Puis un frémissement, un long cri de soie déchirée fendait l'air, se répétant, et Montès pensant: 'Déjà. Les hirondelles. Elles sont déjà...' Et maintenant la barre du soleil comme du bronze en fusion glissant semblait-il de plus en plus vite, au point qu'il pouvait presque suivre sa lente dérive, la lente terrifiante, et irrémédiable dérive du temps.

(85)

Between spring and autumn, Montès's defeat is underlined by the continued presence of the wind, the agent of chaos. If there is a close resemblance between Simon, at this stage of his career, and Faulkner, it is surely expressed by the 'sound and the fury' of which the wind is the symbol. Montès, like Benjy in The Sound and the Fury, is considered an idiot, by some people; in his clinging to an established order he shows the same childish fear as is apparent in Benjy's simple-minded attitude:

Ben's voice roared. Queenie moved again, her feet began to clop-clop steadily again, and at once Ben hushed. Luster looked quickly back over his shoulder, then he drove on. The broken flower drooped over Ben's fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right; post and tree, window and doorway, and signboard, each in its ordered place.⁶

⁶ London, collected edition, 1966, p.324.

The longing for an accustomed way of seeing the world is a link between Faulkner's idiot and the innocent Montès who, childlike in spirit, does not have the mind of an infant; but the dramatic events of Le Vent are just as clearly intended to evoke disorder, and to render untenable Montès's position of childlike simplicity. Because he is an intelligent and sensitive man, he is able to experience the full tragic weight of a new involvement in life. That he is no fool, is shown by his hesitant formulation of a theory applicable both to human life and in particular to the resilience of nature:

'Mais je ne me rappelle plus... Si: mutations. Voilà. Est-ce que ce n'est pas seulement quelque chose comme ça, et rien d'autre. Vous savez: des cellules ou je ne sais quoi qui s'accrochent d'une certaine façon, se désagrègent, tombant en poussière, en miettes, pour s'agglutiner de nouveau d'une autre façon, et à peine y a-t-il une légère modification, un de ces trucs microscopiques en moins ou en plus, mais c'est toujours la même chose puisque ça vit. Alors?'

(234)

This reiterates the novel's basic theme of confrontation between human ephemerality and natural duration; in other words, an understanding of the finality of death and of the insignificance of individuals inspires a tragic nostalgia in the face of nature.⁷

Two extremely poetic passages summarize the importance of the natural phenomenon from which the novel takes its title: one relates to the theme of time and the irremediable, the other to death as privileged release from chaos. Montès, lying in the coffin-like stillness of his room, is drawn back into the world of action on becoming aware again of the wind:

Et seulement, au dehors, de nouveau, le vent oublié, tenace, les sporadiques et soyeux bruissements frôlant les murs comme la course d'un voleur chaussé d'espadrilles, s'enfuyant le long des murs comme le temps

⁷ For a philosophical discussion of the theme of transience, see Sturrock, op. cit., p.74.

même fuyant, filant irrémédiablement, le sang s'écoulant d'une blessure par où le corps se vide, la vie, dans un lent désespoir.

(172)

Simon's sensitivity to language is evident in the series of onomatopoeic and alliterative sounds in this passage, as the wind denies Montès respite and drives him from his would-be sanctuary. But not until the final paragraph of the novel does it become clear to what extent Montès, the exemplary figure, longs for an escape from the senseless violence of the wind. Here, as the narrator reveals his understanding of the strange central character, the full tragic impact of Le Vent is released in language which is uniquely moving:

Dans peu de temps, il serait de nouveau installé et nous en aurions jusqu'à l'été prochain. Bientôt il soufflerait de nouveau en tempête sur la plaine, finissant d'arracher les dernières feuilles rouges des vignes, achevant de dépouiller les arbres courbés sous lui, force déchaînée, sans but, condamnée à s'épuiser sans fin, sans espoir de fin, gémissant la nuit en une longue plainte, comme si elle se lamentait, enviait aux hommes endormis, aux créatures passagères et périssables leur possibilité d'oubli, de paix: le privilège de mourir.

(241)

With the promised continuity of the wind, the novel closes on an affirmation of relative order in the regular rhythms of nature, so rounding off the themes of durability and impermanence.

At this stage in his career, Simon is clearly preoccupied, in a fairly traditional sense, with the melodic possibilities of language. The final paragraph of Le Vent is strongly reminiscent of the closing lines of Dubliners:

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of

the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.⁸

Like Joyce, and no less effectively, Simon exploits the resources of prose as a poetic medium in alliance with the power of a natural symbol. Both writers are sensitive to rhythm: Simon with his sequence of participles, finissant, achevant, condamnée, gémissant, and the subsequent alliteration; and Joyce with the highly mannered repetition of on . . . on . . . on, and of the sibilant 'f' and 's' sounds: soul swooned slowly . . . falling faintly . . . faintly falling. Simon's use of language in this way is unique amongst the writers of the nouveau roman, underlining his position as a novelist who combines tradition and modernity with impressive results. The wind in Simon's novel is a telling device, for two reasons; it synthesizes the book's profoundest themes and releases their tragic potential in its ending, and it is an invaluable element in the novel's form, a unifying motif in a narrative which might otherwise remain disjointed.

Simon's attitude to time is of vital importance where the structure of Le Vent is concerned; its basis is the dynamic process of imaginative reconstruction, governed by the fallibility of memory. Le Vent combines the elaboration of a fiction with consciously tentative efforts at revival of past events. For the first time in Simon, the manner of the telling is as important as the tale itself. As has been suggested, this crucial shift of emphasis is made clear immediately by the intriguing subtitle:

⁸ James Joyce, Dubliners (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books edition, 1956), p.220.

Plot yields to pattern, time to space, when Claude Simon subtitled Le Vent as 'Tentative de restitution d'un retable baroque'.⁹

While the symbol of the retable itself points to the allegorical content of the novel, the other elements in the subtitle are interesting in themselves. By the term baroque is expressed the convoluted and proliferating style and syntax of the novel, while the notion of restoration indicates that this will be a piecemeal investigation of an episode from the past:

Simon sees the novelist's art as being akin to that of a restorer of old pictures; different solvents and cleansing agents gradually remove the dirt and varnish to reveal in all their splendour the original forms and colours the painter created on his canvas, and similarly the novelist must work on the raw material of memory, dissolving away the hard surface coating of laziness and routine to reveal the lively, vivid and remarkably sharp images that lie perfectly preserved underneath.¹⁰

Most revealing of all is the admission implicit in the word tentative: this is no definitive account, but a searching attempt to put together the extant fragments of an enigma which cannot finally be resolved.

Superficially, Le Vent contains all the ingredients of a detective story — theft, murder, investigation — so that the narrator might be seen as an amateur detective trying to find his own solution by gathering evidence from a number of key witnesses. From the outset, however, he realizes that his inquiry is doomed to failure, because the past survives only as an amalgam of several highly subjective flashes of memory. That he is only groping towards a revelation of

⁹ Maurice Z. Shroder, 'The nouveau roman and the tradition of the novel', Romanic Review, 57, No.3 (October 1966), pp.200-14.

¹⁰ John Fletcher, New Directions in Literature, p.120.

the truth, is freely admitted in the frequent use of such phrases as 'Et je cherchais à l'imaginer'. A further betrayal of his intentions comes in his admission that his imagination is not simply helping but superseding memory and imposing possibly false patterns on the past:

Et au fur et à mesure qu'il me racontait la scène il me semblait maintenant la vivre mieux que lui-même, ou du moins pouvoir en reconstituer un schéma sinon conforme à ce qui avait réellement été, en tout cas à notre incorrigible besoin de raison.

(138)

He is creating rather than re-telling, doing the work of a writer of fiction rather than that of an historian, and he can never be fully satisfied with the results:

Simon demonstrates to the reader how memory and imagination work together, and how tempting it is for the narrator to substitute himself for his subject, indeed how it is almost impossible for him not to do so. The result of this technique is to allow Montès' experiences to retain their anarchic independence. Both his and the narrator's attempts to reconstitute the perpetual flux of perception and disentangle the complex web of thought and emotion which accompanies it are rendered absurd by the passage of time: it is always too late.¹¹

A major encouragement to this work of imagination is the narrator's galling failure to obtain a comprehensive account of events from the man most closely involved in them.

Life for Montès has undergone a dramatic change, from calm succession to rapid fluctuation; thus the narrator's account has to be an achronological reconstruction of an already disjointed narrative:

Et autour de lui, ces silhouettes floues, entr'aperçues, incomplètes . . . se dessinant vaguement dans une durée elle-même floue, incertaine, car il n'y avait aucun lien dans son récit entre les différents épisodes ou plutôt tableaux qu'il évoquait, comme dans ces rêves où l'on passe subitement d'un endroit à l'autre, d'une situation à l'autre sans transition.

(82-3)

¹¹ Anthony Cheal Pugh, 'Claude Simon: the narrator and his double', 20th Century Studies, No.6 (December 1971), pp. 30-40.

The narrator is intelligent enough to appreciate that he may well be straining the interpretation of banal and intrinsically uninteresting episodes, given the way in which Montès recalls them:

Seulement voyant, enregistrant sans en prendre tout à fait conscience, de sorte que le récit qu'il m'en fit fut sans doute lui-même faux, artificiel, comme est condamné à l'être tout récit des événements fait après coup, de par le fait même qu'à être racontés les événements, les détails, les menus faits, prennent un aspect solennel, important, que rien ne leur confère sur le moment.

(49)

This in its turn gives rise to one of the ambiguities of Le Vent, since it deliberately undermines the allegorical foundations of the novel; Simon gives with one hand and takes away with the other. The narrator himself is the first to admit the dubious quality of the story, and to remind the reader that what is being presented is at best a number of possible explanations with a varying degree of plausibility, precisely because of their dynamic transformation in the remembering imagination. Montès is content to register impressions; only the most intense, and hence the least explicable, remain with him, and are communicated to the narrator, who is then left to produce an acceptable compromise between imagination and fact. Around the skeletal framework of his knowledge, direct or indirect, he creates an infra-reality composed of the tenuous affirmations of eye-witnesses and his own fictions. As the chronicler of history, he falls victim to the human incapacity to grasp reality in a vanishing present. His narrative is therefore a defeated effort to reconstitute an episode from the irretrievable past.

The narrator is then a kind of novelistic fifth-columnist, destroying the work of restoration even as it takes place. The paradox of this novel, and the point at which it joins forces with the emergent nouveau roman, is that its creator is most sceptical about his own creation. He succeeds, in the last analysis, in clouding not only

his own narrative, but the whole fabric of the past, in impenetrable ambiguity. This in turn is a Faulknerian procedure:

Nous trouvons ici une forme chère au 'nouveau roman' — et avant lui à Faulkner: le récit en gestation. De même, la substitution constante de la vision imaginative à la pure transcription des renseignements recueillis a pour conséquence que le récit, au lieu de faire sienne l'ordinaire prétention des romans à coller à la réalité, rappelle sans cesse sa nature fictive.¹²

The point made by Simon in Le Vent is, of course, that what we are content to call reality is in fact just such a fiction as his novel sets out to be. This obsession with the deforming and fictive nature of any attempt to rediscover the past, even on the most personal level, will subtend Simon's work from now on. In Le Vent he has adopted a Faulknerian prose style which anticipates the emergence of language itself as the major theme of all his research; the style is the subject, designed to represent the shifting reality which is a composite of perception, memory, and imagination, and therefore a highly if fascinatingly disordered world.¹³

The style of Le Vent is the attempt to bring a semblance of order into that chaos. Nothing is allowed to be clear-cut, since that would be a falsification of the material; Simon uses the notion of baroque to translate the purely fragile stability introduced into the narrative. The first indication of this ornateness is the spiralling development of the novel's plot, if such it can be called, designed to

¹² Jean-Luc Seylaz, 'Du Vent à La Route des Flandres: la conquête d'une forme romanesque', Revue des Lettres Modernes, Nos.94-99 (1964), pp.225-40, (p.226).

¹³ For a discussion of Faulkner's style as 'rhetorical patterns, prose movements, or syntactical continuities', see Karl E. Zink, 'William Faulkner: Form as Experience', South Atlantic Quarterly, 53 (1954), pp.384-403.

evoke the baroque images of tourbillon and colonne torse and their implications of whirling unrest. Simon adopts a system of working from effect to cause; frequently an event is announced in the ending of one chapter and more fully described at a later point; thus the narrative is ceaselessly turning back upon itself, and chronology is systematically defied. Not until the seventh chapter, for example, is it explained what connection the narrator had with Montès, nor how he came to be involved with the man. Similarly, in the blackmail episode, events are recounted in reverse order: the arrival of Maurice robbed of Cécile's note, and only afterwards the account of his brush with the elder sister (pp.169-70). At all times the story is subject to the most extreme disorder:

Car, me dit-il, ce fut ainsi que cela se passa, en tout cas ce fut cela qu'il vécut, lui: cette incohérence, cette juxtaposition brutale, apparemment absurde, de sensations, de visages, de paroles, d'actes. Comme un récit, des phrases dont la syntaxe, l'agencement ordonné — substantif, verbe, complément — seraient absents . . . alors, par la magie de quelques lignes tronquées, incomplètes, la vie reprend sa superbe et altière indépendance, redevient ce foisonnement désordonné, sans commencement ni fin, ni ordre.

(174-5)

While giving an almost precise description of his own novel, Simon also anticipates a vital passage from a much later book:

l'oeil non pas voit mais bien plutôt se souvient non de la fatidique succession (ou suite, ou énumération) de parties . . . dans leur ordre monotone, mais d'une combinaison, d'un ombreux et fulgurant enchevêtrement de lumières et de lignes où les éléments éclatés, dissociés se regroupent selon le foisonnant et rigoureux désordre de la mémoire

(Histoire, p.273)

The new importance of Le Vent is the repeated desire to cooperate with this very disorder, which will be confirmed in subsequent novels, where this anarchy is seen as the very essence of life. Free rein is granted to the play of memory and imagination, and the unpredictable turns taken as they dredge fresh details from the encroaching silt of time.

Approximative order is even better exemplified in the construction of Simon's sentences, not the instruments for establishing definitions, but a means to translate the writer's preoccupation with the uncertainty of knowledge. Often syntactical labyrinths spreading over several pages, delving deeper and deeper into the complexity of experience, they seek to circumscribe a reality which ultimately escapes. Instead of offering incontestable fact, they ornament and obscure their material, and in so doing prove themselves well attuned to Simon's new purpose of displaying the ambiguity of subjective impressions. The syntactical structure of Simon's prose in Le Vent signifies the conflict of order and disorder, spinning a complex web of language in which the vital moments of the narrative are caught.

What seems at first a straightforward sentence will suddenly develop into an exacting succession of additions and elaborations. For example, the opening sentence of the eleventh chapter might simply have read: 'Lorsqu'il pénétra, ou plutôt fit irruption dans la chambre de Montès, il avait visiblement bu' (see p.160). But such directness is quite contrary to Simon's aims. The sentence is expanded to cover a full page; once the action is mentioned, an extended parenthetical description tries to capture the impression it created. This necessitates two extra sentences, themselves of unusual length, containing their own subordinate clauses and parenthetical interpolations, as well as an inordinate number of commas and colons. In a deliberate confusing of the order, details of movement and gesture are added to the picture being transcribed, until the syntax arrives at the point of sheer anarchy. At this stage of his career, Simon, like Faulkner, is the most baroque of prose stylists. As Montès is caught in the 'tourbillons baveux du reflux' (p.153), Simon releases his prose from the uneasy constraints imposed in the earlier writings, maintaining a stability constantly liable to dispersal; the anarchical but rhythmically constructed periods represent the troubled composite of a rich mental

reality. As John Sturrock says:

Simon sees the Baroque as the aesthetic expression of minds obsessed with transience. It is in the Baroque that we are made acutely conscious of the instability of forms, which appear to be forever on the point of disintegration.¹⁴

Paradoxically, Simon's prose begins to acquire an extra dimension as its actual narrative capabilities are eroded by the provision of incremental detail; the style is then symbolic of approximation to an ornate but evanescent reality. If ever one or two sentences are allowed to communicate simple facts, they are immediately succeeded by long periods whose emphasis is on tenuousness and fragmentation; the novel's purpose is not to dominate but to embody disorder.

As an additional element in this prose style, Simon begins in Le Vent that extravagant use of adjective and adverb which is a hallmark of his later work. This is nowhere more obvious than in passages which express the experience of time:

et alors Montès ayant tout à coup la sensation que le temps se mettait à couler terriblement vite, comme si quelque chose venait brutalement d'ouvrir une vanne désormais impossible à refermer, entendant le bruissement liquide, puissant, du temps se précipitant, irréversible, impossible à endiguer, se ruant avec un fracas de désastre et d'irréremédiable

(72)

Here Simon combines the ringing words of a Faulkner with a rhythmic flow and sensitivity which bring him closer to Joyce:

In long lassoes from the Cock lake the water flowed full, covering greengoldenly lagoons of sand, rising, flowing. My ashplant will float away. I shall wait. No, they will pass on, passing chafing against the low rocks, swirling, passing. Better get this job over quick. Listen: a fourworded wave-speech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, oos. Vehement breath of waters amid seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks.

¹⁴ The French New Novel, p.52.

In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. And, spent, its speech ceases. It flows purling, widely flowing, floating foampool, flower unfurling.¹⁵

As Histoire will show, Simon finds in the Irish writer a deep and productive sensitivity to language and its multiplicity, which in Le Vent is confined to those passages where the sheer musicality of prose is exploited.

In a revealing passage from 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature', Joseph Frank comments on an essential feature of the Proustian novel:

Proust gives us what might be called pure views of his characters — views of them 'motionless in a moment of vision' in various phases of their lives — and allows the sensibility of the reader to fuse these views into a unity. Each view must be apprehended by the reader as a unit; and Proust's purpose is achieved only when these units of meaning are referred to each other reflexively in a moment of time. As with Joyce and the modern poets, spatial form is also the structural scaffolding of Proust's labyrinthine masterpiece.¹⁶

Transposed to a smaller scale, it is this conception of spatial form which produces Simon's most successful pages in Le Vent. The term tableaux is used at one point by his narrator, to describe the dislocated nature of Montès's narrative and the high points of his experience: 'les différents épisodes ou plutôt tableaux qu'il évoquait' (p.83). This dislocation is important to the structure of Simon's novel, because it demands a pattern of stasis and movement, essential to the writer's purpose of throwing into relief a certain number of dramatic moments. At this point Simon's method is not only Proustian, but once again comes close to a fundamental Faulknerian technique:

¹⁵ Ulysses (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books edition, 1969), p.55.

¹⁶ The Widening Gyre, p.25.

The tableau vivant is a description of human action, sometimes concise and impressionistic, sometimes extended like a conceit. It is an actual stoppage, a freezing of time and motion in order that a certain quality of the human experience may be held and contemplated — made 'ponderable', as Faulkner puts it frequently. This might almost be called a hallmark of Faulkner's prose, for his habit of delineating static scenes accounts for much of the tapestry-like richness of description in Absalom, Absalom! and As I Lay Dying and 'The Bear'.¹⁷

Simon adapts this device so skilfully to his own purpose that a number of crucial scenes in Le Vent stand out quite sharply from the surrounding and deliberate confusion. Chief amongst these, apart from the allegorical passages, are descriptions of certain moments of head-on conflict between characters; not necessarily related in the strict chronological order of their happening, these moments are another indication that the pattern of Le Vent is conceived spatially, rather than as a temporal structure. They are rare moments of stasis which have left an indelible imprint on the mind of Montès, so that their dramatic importance communicates itself with equal force to the narrator. More often than not, they have a direct bearing on the illustration of tensions in society, and their permanent relevance to the human condition; once again, Simon takes his place in a traditional mainstream of fiction, to the extent that his novel includes a certain amount of social comment.

But it is also interesting, from the artistic point of view, that Simon later traces this technique back to another French writer, Gustave Flaubert:

On connaît la fameuse définition de Stendhal et que les romanciers traditionnels ont fait leur: un roman

¹⁷ Karl E. Zink, 'Flux and the frozen moment: the imagery of stasis in Faulkner's prose', PMLA, 71, No.3 (June 1956), pp.285-301, (p.291).

c'est un miroir promené le long d'un chemin. Pour moi ce n'est pas ça du tout. C'est plutôt au contraire une très grande glace fixe où se reflète en même temps tout ce que l'on a à dire. Parce que si l'on essaie un peu de voir ce qui se passe en nous lorsque le passé nous revient à la mémoire, on s'aperçoit que ce sont un tas de choses, d'associations, qui ressurgissent toutes mêlées, en un instant. Il y a à ce sujet dans Madame Bovary, une petite phrase d'une importance capitale, et qui a présidé à tout un aspect de l'évolution du roman contemporain. C'est celle-ci: 'Tout ce qu'il y avait en elle de réminiscences, d'images, de combinaisons, s'échappaient à la fois, d'un seul coup (comme les mille pièces d'un feu d'artifice). Elle aperçut nettement et par tableaux détachés, son père, Léon, le cabinet de Lheureux; leur chambre là-bas, un autre paysage, des figures inconnues.' Comme vous le voyez il introduit là pour la première fois dans le roman les notions de simultanéité et de discontinuité: 'à la fois' et 'par tableaux détachés'.¹⁸

The purely pictorial value of such detached scenes becomes stronger in Simon's later work, but in Le Vent they often have a precise and fairly traditional thematic function.

One of these important moments in Le Vent arrives when Montès describes to the narrator one particular scene which stands out clearly in his memory. It relates to the Gitan Jep and his activities as a third-rate boxer, which include a sordid training session at which Montès was present:

Puis il y fut — un autre repère dans ce temps flou, un autre décor . . . n'osant pas entrer, regardant entre les têtes d'un groupe agglutiné dans la nuit tombante à la porte d'une sorte de remise les deux silhouettes qui sautillaient dans l'éclairage cru . . . Et il me décrivit la scène: ce local qui servait aussi de garage à vélos, encombré de caisses, de cartons vides, à demi occupé par un énorme amoncellement de gravats, et contre un mur deux ou trois de ces grands châssis sur lesquels on colle les affiches des films au-dessus de la porte d'entrée . . . et les ombres noires de la petite foule des spectateurs se découpant sur les murs . . . et il me dit que c'était comme s'il pouvait sentir cette sueur, celle des deux hommes comme celle enfermée dans les vêtements des spectateurs, cette sueur

18 Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Claude Simon', pp.184-5.

triste, morne, refroidie, qui était comme l'odeur du local lui-même, du ciment brut, des affiches violentes et déchirées, et au bout de la petite rue (c'était en plein dans le centre) on pouvait voir les lumières scintillantes, les magasins, les voitures, les gens, mais là c'était le silence et la sueur: seulement cette vingtaine de types dans leurs vêtements imprégnés de sueur qui regardaient sans rien dire les rigoles couler le long des membres nus et bruns du gitan.

(85-7)

The picture is introduced dramatically: Puis il y fut; and it is described in terms of almost theatrical stasis, with the group caught as if in stage lighting and exposed to a detailed examination which picks out the poverty and sharply-defined squalor of the scene. Essentially the point of this tableau is to dramatize the degradation into which the Gitan, once a champion, has fallen; Jep's role in the novel is partly that of victim of poverty. In his own way, relegated to the backstreets, Jep is something of a pariah, cast out in a more fundamentally vicious manner than the central character; his inferiority pertains to a particular social caste rather than to any eccentricity of character.

This vital scene helps to situate the Gitan in a social context of decisive relevance to another tableau, which is crucial to the dramatic exposition of certain tensions underpinning the novel. When the Gitan is challenged by the wealthy bourgeoisie, Héléne, the scene derives its strength from the combination of two themes: the opposition of social classes, and the clash of the sexes, which is portrayed in terms of aggression familiar in Simon even at this early stage. The tableau describes Héléne's discovery of the Gitan one night in her maid's bedroom:

'Ainsi ils étaient en train de faire ça. Elle a un amant. Et sous mon propre toit, à quelques mètres de mes enfants, et avec un de ces gitans...' Non qu'elle ait reconnu, identifié la race de celui qui se tient devant elle, qu'elle ne regarde pas en tant qu'homme, même pas en tant que personne humaine . . . mais parce que pour elle un gitan c'est seulement un terme générique pour désigner tous ceux qui sont capables de s'introduire nuitamment dans des poulaillers

ou chez des gens pour y rafler l'argenterie ou coucher avec la bonne, ou les deux à la fois. Et non pas même indignée ou furieuse, encore moins scandalisée . . . tellement ce genre de choses va pour elle de soi, fait partie des éventualités auxquelles on doit s'attendre, les bonnes, comme toutes les personnes au-dessous d'une certaine condition sociale, étant naturellement paresseuses, voleuses et vicieuses.

(114-15)

This social stigmatization dictates the initial development of the scene, as Héléne is joined by her outraged husband in confronting their two inferiors caught in the sexual act. Héléne, however, is protected by her certain knowledge that she is facing, in the figure of the Gitan, both a social and a sexual inferior. It is the element of direct conflict, not only between rich and poor, but also between male and female, that lends this nocturnal scene its own particular tension and provides one of the novel's most telling tableaux. It is given an almost plastic clarity:

face à face, comme deux de ces statuettes nègres à la précise et sauvage obscénité, violentes, barbares, elle comme une de ces déesses archaïques de la fécondité, lui avec ce membre indomptable, orgueilleux, triomphant.

(116-17)

The inferior members of each couple — husband and maid — fade into the background as these two face each other; because each is virtually naked, the scene has a harsh physical immediacy which brings it down to the most basic level of meaning. Woman faces man in a meeting of body and will, each of them being the archetypal representative of their respective sexes as well as of two irreconcilable social castes.

Clearly, the essential moments of the allegory of sainthood — Montès being struck by the Gitan, or being kissed by the child, or especially in his confrontations with Cécile and with Rose — are also conceived as static pictures, which is precisely the relevance of the retable analogy:

La peinture a une grande supériorité sur l'écriture: la simultanéité. Vous voyez un retable: il représente diverses scènes de la vie d'un personnage que

vous pouvez embrasser d'un coup d'oeil. Il me plairait de parvenir à m'expliquer ainsi.¹⁹

This effort toward spatial representation is nowhere better demonstrated than in the following passage, concerning the discovery by Montès of Rose's dead body:

Lorsque j'ai franchi cette porte, lorsque je l'ai vue — c'est-à-dire le drap: les deux corps étaient par terre et ils avaient arraché un des draps du lit et l'avaient jeté dessus, et je n'avais pas besoin de soulever un coin pour savoir ce qu'il y avait en dessous —, à ce moment-là, tout ce que j'ai été capable de penser ç'a été: Elle est morte. Bon. Très bien. Elle a de la chance.

(174)

Assis là dans le temps aboli à côté de Rose morte . . .
(186; my underlining)

Le Vent is constructed around sudden moments of intense feeling at which time stops, and an essential human experience is communicated. It is also the Proustian role of memory to retrieve such scenes from time, to revive them in the remembering consciousness:

(car ce ne fut que par bribes qu'il me raconta tout cela, et peu à peu, et non pas à proprement parler sous la forme d'un récit mais quand la mémoire de tel ou tel détail lui revenait, sans que l'on sût jamais exactement pourquoi — si tant est que l'on sache jamais exactement ce qui fait ressurgir, intolérable et furieux, non pas le souvenir toujours rangé quelque part dans ce fourre-tout de la mémoire, mais, abolissant le temps, la sensation elle-même, chair et matière, jalouse, impérieuse, obsédante)

(175; my underlining)

The 'abolition' of time, an essential element in Simon's subsequent writing, is foreshadowed by his efforts in Le Vent to circumvent the obstacle of linear narration, and to communicate the immediacy and clarity of memory.

19

This remark by Simon is included in an article from the Tribune de Lausanne, 'Claude Simon: "Je cherche à suivre au mieux la démarche claudicante de mon esprit"' (20 octobre 1959), which appears without signature or page reference in the dossiers de presse kept by Editions de Minuit.

As a novel which weds a number of traditional themes to experimental techniques, Le Vent is almost unique amongst the creations of the nouveau roman; certainly it is the most tragic in tenor, rivalled in this respect only by two other Simon books, Histoire and La Route des Flandres. But it is not only thanks to its powerful human themes that Le Vent stands in the forefront of Simon's achievement; the novel also pays tribute to his developing greatness as a writer of distinguished prose. Proustian in inspiration, often close to Faulkner in style and conception, Simon nevertheless begins to establish his own identity as an artist exploring the rich resources of memory, imagination, and language. Le Vent, perhaps the most important transitional stage in Simon's career, is not only a compromise between tradition and originality; at one and the same time, it is both simple and complex — which is the hallmark of a true work of art.

Chapter III: The Presence of the Past:
L'Herbe 1958

The business of the novelist is not to relate great events, but to make small ones interesting.
Arthur Schopenhauer

After the complex story of Antoine Montès, L'Herbe evinces a definite narrowing of focus; from the broad, if fragmented, canvas of Le Vent, the reader comes to the more claustrophobic world where an old woman lies dying, while a younger woman reflects on the meaning and the bizarre fascination of this death. L'Herbe does not offer a tentative reconstruction of a public fait divers, but the examination of a lucid consciousness obsessed by the real presence of the past, not only in the person of the dying Marie, but also in the assorted debris of the possessions handed down by her to Louise, the narrator of the novel. One of the problems in L'Herbe is in fact to locate the narrative centre of the text, since it alternates between a form of interior monologue, but highly organized, and a third-person narration which is something less than objective. In one of the many debates engendered in the late 1950s by critical reactions to the emergent nouveau roman, Simon made an interesting comparison between his own attitude to the novel, and that of a more traditional writer:

Lorsque au contraire je me pose la même question: 'Que peut et doit être le roman?', je cherche — et en ce qui me concerne c'est par tâtonnement — à savoir quelle forme doit avoir le roman que je vais ou suis en train d'écrire pour satisfaire à ce seul but: exprimer avec le plus d'exactitude possible la minuscule parcelle de vérité que je crois avoir observé, exactement comme un scientifique rédigeant un rapport se pose la question: quelle forme (composition et style) doit être celle de mon rapport pour...

Pour moi (et je crois pouvoir dire pour certains d'entre nous), il y a, au départ, les faits, les lieux, les choses, les impressions ou les sensations, qu'il importe de soigneusement observer et décrire. Peut-être en jaillira-t-il ensuite des idées et une

signification, mais cela est une autre affaire.¹

This is an early indication of Simon's empirical approach to the task of writing novels, and the mention of this tâtonnement points the way to later identification with the figure of Orion. L'Herbe is interesting above all for its combination of the Simonian theme of history with a remarkably Faulknerian atmosphere of death and decay, while at the same time beginning to display that fascination with language which emerges as the major theme of Simon's great novels of the 1960s.

The principal theme of L'Herbe is that of death. This novel illustrates the human tragedy which Simon had so clearly suggested in Gulliver: the simple fact that the mind is ultimately prisoner of the body, and that death is the triumph of matter over mind. The one is rigorously bound by time; the other is only temporarily free to move to and fro within time, through the exercise of memory and imagination. The novel is constructed in part around the oppositions between the spiritual, or mental, and the material, which is most clearly demonstrated in the grotesque figure of Pierre, and in the tension between him and his son Georges. The stress on the theme of death also explains the novelist's strange choice of 'heroine', since it can be argued that the central character of L'Herbe is the old woman who lies dying, and who establishes a strange communication with Louise, wife of Georges. The younger woman comes to appreciate the nature of this old aunt as an actual incarnation of the historical process, not in its usual grandiose meaning, but as represented in the most apparently insignificant existence.

¹ Quoted in Anne Villelaur, 'Le roman est en train de réfléchir sur lui-même', Lettres Françaises, 18 mars 1959, pp.1, 4-5.

Given this basic theme, Simon elaborates a system of contrasts between the attitudes to death and time held by the various characters of his novel. The most obvious of these opposes Marie and the hideous Sabine, her sister-in-law, and in every sense her opposite. From the beginning, Louise emphasizes the fearless manner in which Marie faces death, which is an extension of her acceptance of time, in keeping with the impression left by the old woman's room:

Rien que cet entêtant et sans doute imaginaire parfum de fraîcheur, de virginité et de temps accumulé. Non, pas perdu: vaincu, ou plutôt surmonté, apprivoisé: non plus cet ennemi héréditaire, omniprésent et omnipotent, et que l'on regarde, terrifié, s'avancer et s'écouler avec cette impitoyable lenteur, mais un vieux compagnon de route, familier, peut-être, aussi, craint et haï autrefois, mais il y a si longtemps de cela que le souvenir des craintes et des terreurs ressemble à celui de nos paniques enfantines qui maintenant ne tirent plus de nous qu'un sourire...

(12)

In a lifetime of renunciation and self-effacement, Marie has learned to accept the passage of time and to consider death simply as the natural culmination of life. In contrast to Sabine, she is an entirely natural person, her appearance and dress quite uncluttered and free of all artificiality. With the peasant's sense of economy and necessity, she has acquired the habit of wearing dresses until they can be worn no more. Not so Sabine:

avec ses cheveux rouges, son visage fané et peint, sa chair vulnérable, semblable, dans l'ample, diaphane et suave vêtement de nuit, à quelque personnage d'Opéra, quelque vieille cantatrice échevelée, endiamantée, folle et demi-nue incarnant on ne sait quelle pathétique protestation, quel pathétique et inégal combat perdu d'avance . . . perdu contre le temps.

(168)

Sabine's grotesque attempts to maintain the illusion of youth oppose her diametrically to her sister-in-law. Obsessed by the thought of her husband's infidelity — a ludicrous fear in view of Pierre's age and condition — and by her own sexual fantasies, Sabine muses on the dry virginity of Marie, her apparent sexlessness; but most of all she is baffled by the consistent independence of spirit

shown by the older woman. This perplexity comes out most clearly in the one dialogue which takes place between the two women, in which the differences between them are insurmountable:

. . . la propre soeur de l'homme que j'ai épousé il y a quarante ans et je ne vous connais pas
 Allons donc
 Qui êtes-vous
 Vous le savez vous venez de le dire la soeur de l'homme que vous avez épousé Marie-Arthémise-Léonie Thomas
 Et vous avez
 Quatre-vingt-un ans
 Quatre fois vingt ans quatre fois l'âge de l'amour et sans amour
 Non pas sans amour
 Et vous allez bientôt mourir
 Je le sais . . .
 Et vous ne croyez à rien
 Pas de réponse
 Et vous n'avez pas peur
 Peur de quoi
 Et vous ne regrettez rien
 Regretter quoi

(64-5)

It is the refusal of metaphysical consolation which most distinguishes Marie; her acceptance of life on its own terms, clearly also those to which Simon subscribes, is unthinkable for Sabine:

'Je déteste la mort, l'idée de la mort, je ne peux pas supporter...'

(175)

Throughout the novel, the one is played against the other in Simon's orchestration of the twin themes of time and death.

Ironically enough, it is Sabine who complains of her own martyrdom, when Marie has the only legitimate claim to that condition. At one point Pierre, the 'philosopher' of the piece, sums up the character of his elder sister:

Nous aurons au moins appris cela: que si endurer l'Histoire (pas s'y résigner: l'endurer), c'est la faire, alors la terne existence d'une vieille dame, c'est l'Histoire elle-même, la matière même de l'Histoire.'

(36)

Just as no-one sees the grass grow, so it is unimaginable that the frugal being of Marie should represent the process of history; 'history', here, is not the recollection of the universal experience of war and revolution, Flanders and Barcelona, as in Simon's next two novels, but the personal and inescapable progression through life toward death.² It is fitting that Simon should bring these two irreconcilable old women together, at the end of L'Herbe, in a passage which seems to encapsulate the novel's essential themes:

et dans la maison, invisibles, les deux vieilles femmes, là-bas, en train de mourir, n'en finissant pas de mourir, l'une étendue, silencieuse, déjà réduite à rien, avec cette tête déjà momifiée, ce corps soulevant à peine le drap . . . et l'autre agonisant debout, droite, parée, peinte de la tête aux pieds . . . se mourant lentement sous ses fards, ses robes extravagantes, ses teintures, et, sur sa tête, cette chevelure semblable à un permanent incendie, un permanent coucher de soleil.

(257)

The thematic axis of the novel is supplied by this regular opposition of the two old women, the one carefully balanced in every aspect, moral, spiritual, and physical, against the other, finally and typically rounded off in the shared experience of death. Sabine tries and fails to maintain the presence of the past in the shape of her jewellery — the ornaments of her youth — her make-up, and her wardrobe; Marie herself is, in a strange way, the presence of the past in that she maintains the same bearing throughout her life, preserving her dignity even to the moment of her death. She is an exemplary figure, but one who serves only to heighten the mortal anguish of Sabine. Perhaps it is this lesson of mortality which inspired one critic to say of L'Herbe:

On pourra lire, plus tard, cet extraordinaire oratorio, ce poème de la condition humaine et de l'his-

² Compare the title of a review of Richard Howard's translation of L'Herbe in the Times Literary Supplement: 'Life into Death'. (15 September 1961, p.609).

toire universelle, comme une oraison funèbre de Bossuet.³

This may not yet be as convincing a novel as La Route des Flandres, but it does demonstrate Simon's skill in evoking the weakness of humanity, which is most obvious in the attitudes to time and death.

Yet it is not enough to accentuate the theme of death on its own, because Simon's achievement is to have balanced themes in his novel, so that life is constantly juxtaposed with the presence of death. There is no more striking proof of this than in the frequent descriptions of nature, which present some of Simon's finest atmospheric writing, and in which there is a regular equilibrium between the forces of dissolution and those of renewal — or permanence. The first page of the novel gives the immediate setting in time and place: the September countryside, very apt for Simon's purpose because it is a paradoxical moment of time. Autumn is the period of fruitfulness, but it is also the threshold of barrenness: it is life hiding death, a glorious prelude to decay.

The presence of death in the house is frequently paralleled by word-pictures of the autumnal landscape around it, and the bizarre perfume of Marie with the smells of the fruit outside:

et toujours l'assourdissant tapage des moineaux et, s'exhalant avec la chaleur du jour, de la terre chauffée, montant avec l'air, depuis le bas de la colline, l'odeur sûre des poires tombées, des poires en train de pourrir par milliers sur le sol tiède.

(84)

At other moments in the novel the majesty of nature is held up in ironic contrast to the petty conflicts of humanity. Louise listens to the old couple, Pierre and Sabine, as they squabble in the house, and then to the sound of rain outside:

un simple bruit, monotone, navrant, parmi le chuintement monotone de la pluie, maintenant, elle aussi,

³ Olivier de Magny, 'L'Herbe par Claude Simon', Lettres Nouvelles, 6^e année, No.66 (décembre 1958), pp.764-5.

étale en quelque sorte, installée, paisible, multipliant, semblait-il, la vaste nuit: tout près, distinct, l'écoulement des chéneaux, des gouttières, puis, immédiatement derrière, le jardin ruisselant de larmes, de pleurs, les branches, les feuilles ruisselantes, l'herbe ruisselante, et plus loin encore, tout autour, les prés, les bois, la vallée, les collines invisibles noyées dans l'indistincte et paisible rumeur de l'eau, comme si la nuit tout entière, le monde tout entier se liquéfiaient lentement dans les ténèbres humides, se dissolvaient, s'englou-tissaient, se défaisaient peu à peu, insensiblement, sous les milliers et les milliers de gouttes indé-nombrables, tranquilles, acharnées, en train de le détrempier, de l'user, de le grignoter, entourant la maison de ce murmure formidable et majestueux au-devant duquel ou plutôt au sein duquel la voix de la vieille femme semblait poursuivre dans le vide quelque éternelle et inapaisable plainte, comme une litanie, à la fois désolée, acharnée et languide. (196-7)

Besides being a superb piece of description in its own right, this passage is essential to the understanding of Simon's themes and his attitude to the novel as displayed in L'Herbe. For all the human merit of Marie, and her acceptance of time, her quiet resignation, much attention is paid to the garrulous Sabine, precisely because her dependence on speech is exemplary of the human condition as Simon sees it — an attempt to fill what is in essence a tragic vacuum between the two decisive moments of birth and death.

If Sabine talks incessantly, this is only one manifestation of her reluctance to admit the gratuitousness of her existence. In this respect she is refusing her condition: and it is surely of the greatest significance that Simon uses this very phrase in speaking of the importance of language itself in the lives of men:

c'est-à-dire le savoir, la science, ce que renferment les livres, révolté donc (puisque incarnant cette insatiable et incrédule soif de connaître et de dominer qui est l'expression par l'homme du refus de sa condition) (231)

Everything in L'Herbe is touched by the force of dissolution or dispersal, and it is against this that the artist has to work, just as the characters themselves try to guarantee the survival of what is valuable to them. For some, this ends

in abject failure, for others, in a form of mitigated triumph, and this is made obvious in the contrast between the couples formed by Pierre and Georges and by Marie and Sabine.

Pierre is the son of an illiterate peasant. A purveyor of words — a teacher at University level — he would have liked to see Georges follow in his footsteps. But he knows that this has been made impossible by Georges's revolt against the intellectual life:

' . . . parce que je voudrais n'avoir jamais lu un livre, jamais touché un livre de ma vie, ne même pas savoir qu'il existe quelque chose qui s'appelle des livres, et même, si possible, ne même pas savoir, c'est-à-dire avoir appris, c'est-à-dire m'être laissé apprendre, avoir été assez idiot pour croire ceux qui m'ont appris que des caractères alignés sur du papier blanc pouvaient signifier quelque chose d'autre que des caractères sur du papier blanc, c'est-à-dire très exactement rien, sinon une distraction, un passe-temps, et surtout un sujet d'orgueil pour des types comme lui.

(152)

Georges's own tragedy is in the frustrating failure of his attempts to grow pears, to be a man of the earth: he is defeated by the premature falling of the fruit from the trees, and reminded constantly of his failure by the omnipresent odour of the rotting fruit on the ground. Yet he has the satisfaction of having thwarted his father's desire to see himself, as it were, given further life in the shape of his son. Pierre's tragedy is this revolt on the part of Georges, but also the horrible reminder of his own materiality given to him by his obesity, symbol of his imprisonment in time. Ludovic Janvier has expressed admirably the comparison between this novel and Le Vent, where the theme of time is concerned:

Plus quotidien, plus humble dans son processus, moins facilement lisible, le temps de L'Herbe nous paraît peut-être plus vrai. Une différence essentielle: dans Le Vent, ce temps-élément violent poussait le 'héros' à l'action. Ici, c'est une force acceptée. Le temps, c'est le lent vieillissement irréversible qui 'colle' au réel, que les choses expriment. Ce n'est plus le temps du vent et des horloges, c'est le temps du corps et de la terre. Il est pesamment

incarné, il n'y a plus d'espoir: le voilà qui nous est devenu consubstantiel.⁴

Time, however, is accepted in L'Herbe only by Marie, and to a lesser extent, by Louise, whose mentor she becomes. For Pierre, there is the lugubrious imprisonment within his own encroaching immobility. Here surely is a true 'Gulliver':

(toujours muré dans son écrasante prison de chair, et aucun muscle de son visage ne bougeant, sauf ceux de la mastication, c'est-à-dire que, paradoxalement, tandis que son corps s'active, s'affaire, absorbé tout entier, aveugle, vorace, par l'action de manger, il semble être privé de vie, n'être qu'un poids de matière morte, l'agilité, le mouvement, la foudroyante mobilité de ce quelque chose aux foudroyants allers et retours, aux foudroyantes accélérations et aux foudroyants ralentissements, se tenant tout entier concentré dans le regard immobile, fixe, pesant et morne sous la paupière aux lourds replis)

(146-7)

The man of intellect, for whose benefit Marie and her sister led a life of renunciation, is slowly absorbed by matter as time goes by, and is left only with the partial consolation of his vigilance and presence of mind. As much as Sabine, he is victim of time, and his son's turning his back does no more than confirm this defeat.

The only way in which he can claim to have achieved this prolongation of the self is in the mere fact of having a son: and this points to the role of the sexual act in Simon, as a pretended buttress against the effect of passing time:

Procreation is shown to be an attempt at preserving order, because it is clearly intended as controlling, at any rate in part, the future.⁵

The sex act is also a denial of the brevity of individual life:

⁴ Une Parole Exigeante, pp.97-8.

⁵ John Sturrock, The French New Novel, p.78.

(semblable, assimilable à une courte mort, un brusque anéantissement: en réalité une brève éclipse de cette lancinante conscience . . .)

(144-5)

But where Georges is concerned, it is only the matter that survives, not the spirit of his father; moreover, it is surely meaningful that Georges is also described as being thin to the point of emaciation, and so again the complete antithesis of his father, although passing time may wreak the same frightening change in him. Like make-up and the consolations of alcohol, where Sabine is concerned, the intellectual life and the establishment of parenthood are no guarantee for Pierre against eventual oblivion. No-one actually sees the flesh grow on the old man, but this is as sure a mark of 'history' as the lengthening of the grass referred to in Simon's epigraph and in his actual title. As Dr Sturrock has suggested, Simon carries this account of man's attempts to defeat time into the realm of history on the broader scale by including descriptions of eighteenth-century clocks in L'Herbe, symbolic objects par excellence for a novelist so concerned with time and its effect on the mind:

The historical pattern that he alludes to in . . . L'Herbe, by showing the clock itself to be the product of a doomed and frivolous age, shortly to be followed by the stern rectilinear morality of the French Revolution, is the same one as appears in Le Palace. The final flowerings of a desperate aesthetic like the rococo must inevitably lead, so it would seem, to a total revolt against the human condition; after which the whole cycle can start all over again.⁶

If this remark tends to exaggerate the sense of historical perspective afforded by Simon's novel, it remains true that human artefacts and human artifice are equally incapable of prolonging individual life, and this is perhaps the bleakest truth to emerge from L'Herbe, as from other Simon novels.

⁶ The French New Novel, p.55.

But there is some consolation to be found in the fact that against the failure of the Georges-Pierre heritage is set the more successful relationship between Louise and the dying Marie. On three occasions any real link between them is denied. By Louise's lover:

Mais elle ne t'est rien.

Non, dit Louise.

Elle ne t'est rien.

Non', répéta-t-elle docilement. Mais elle continuait à regarder devant elle quelque chose qu'il ne pouvait pas voir.

(9)

Right from the beginning, there is 'something' about Marie which fascinates Louise: presenting this already established situation, the novel goes on to examine the reasons for this strange kinship. Later, the family doctor questions Louise in his turn:

'Après tout, elle n'est rien pour vous.

Non.

C'est seulement la tante de Georges, pas la vôtre.

Au fait, où est-il?'

(82)

Blood relations are not all that matters where Marie is concerned, and although she is visited on her death-bed by several of her kin, it is to Louise that she leaves her little store of private possessions. Finally it is the young woman herself who tries to deny any communication or connection between them:

elle se tient immobile maintenant, sortie, échappée au rôle, luttant, la colère, la révolte, luttant contre l'amère saveur des larmes, répétant, Non non, répétant, Elle ne m'est rien elle ne peut pas elle n'a pas le droit . . .

(125)

But the validity of this denial is destroyed by Louise's inability to leave Georges and the family home, even once Marie is dead. She cannot carry out her resolution to run away with another man; the notebooks and jewellery given to her by Marie become the objective correlative of a strange force of continuity holding her to the house and to her past. Paradoxically, it is the seemingly characterless Marie who finds in Louise an intelligent and sensitive 'inheritor', while the successful Pierre is left only with

the son who wants nothing to do with him.

Although this presence of the past is most tangible in the shape of the notebooks, it is hinted at much earlier in the novel, when the young woman refers to a ring given her by her husband's aunt:

Quand je partirai, je lui (je leur: à lui et à sa mère) rendrai tous leurs bijoux . . . mais, celle-là, je dirai 'Je la garde'. Parce que c'est elle qui me l'a donnée. Tu comprends? Elle ne m'a rien demandé et elle m'a donné cette bague, elle m'a aimée, et simplement parce que j'étais la femme de Georges.

(13)

This first indication of Louise's attachment is confirmed much later, when she recalls being given the box containing Marie's notebooks and other belongings.

More than anything else, it is the notebooks which impress Louise, seeming to sum up in so few words the whole of an eighty-four-year long existence. Here is to be found the very centre of Simon's novel: the fascination with language and its paradoxes which is the major theme of his subsequent work. So impressive is his own manipulation of language, as for instance in the descriptions of the nocturnal landscape, that it is only with something of a shock that the reader understands that Simon is in fact beginning to subject language to a very searching examination, an exploration of its potential, although this is still done with reference to the theme of dissolution and dispersal, and in the light of a very marked reaction to human anguish which is practically expunged from later novels such as Orion Aveugle itself. Or rather, the profoundly human relevance of Simon's attitude to language is made explicit in L'Herbe, remains fairly overt in the major novels of the following decade, and is then alluded to only in the important preface to the descriptive prose of Orion Aveugle. From the moment that Louise becomes their owner, the language of the notebooks fascinates her and, when all is said and done, it is language that occupies the stage in the novel itself. The terms in which it is mentioned are an indispensable guide to the novelist's own

attitude toward the medium in which he is working.

First of all it appears that language falsifies experience. This is a vital theme of Histoire and La Bataille de Pharsale, but it occurs clearly in this novel, written ten years earlier:

. . . sans doute parce que le propre de la réalité est de nous paraître irréelle, incohérente, du fait qu'elle se présente comme un perpétuel défi à la logique, au bon sens, du moins tels que nous avons pris l'habitude de les voir régner dans les livres — à cause de la façon dont sont ordonnés les mots, symboles graphiques ou sonores de choses, de sentiments, de passions désordonnées —, si bien que naturellement il nous arrive parfois de nous demander laquelle de ces deux réalités est la vraie.

(99-100)

This is an extension of the struggle between order and disorder which characterized Le Vent, and which is now a part, and an integral part, of any Simon text: how curious that such a virtuoso should be concerned to display in his novels his feeling of the inadequacy of language itself, which is the acknowledged gulf between words and the ineffable:

Il y a chez Claude Simon un sens aigu de la tragédie bien connue de tous les créateurs qui utilisent le langage comme outil de création ou de re-création: l'écrivain se débat contre la réalité qui le pénètre par tous les pores et qui tend à l'étouffer; et son écriture n'est qu'une tentative pour surnager et dominer. Mais dès le moment où il surnage et domine, il ne pénètre plus: le réel lui échappe, il s'en sépare; et là n'est pas la moindre difficulté des tentatives du nouveau roman qui voudrait précisément pénétrer et rendre compte de tout, en prenant ses distances avec tout considéré exclusivement en tant qu'objet.⁷

This dichotomy between language and experience, it should be said in passing, brings Simon quite definitely into line with Faulkner as the American writer expresses himself in that superb novel, As I Lay Dying. It is surely no coincidence that it is also a woman, in Faulkner's book, who

⁷ Charles Camproux, 'La langue et le style des écrivains: Claude Simon, L'Herbe', Lettres Françaises, 7 mai 1959, p.9.

refers to the frustrating evanescence of the verbosity with which the human mind claims mastery of the world:

And so when Cora Tull would tell me I was not a true mother, I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other; and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words.⁸

Language is not a revelation, but a cloaking of reality, and as such it is profoundly mistrusted by Simon. It is also deeply mistrusted by Marie, and for this reason she eschews words in her notebook, reduces them to a bare minimum, and concentrates instead on the financial ciphers which are a true reflection of her intimate experiences. This prefigures Simon's attention to matters commercial, in novels such as Histoire, and serves to undermine even further the value of language as a durable medium in which to perpetuate experience. That Louise herself is a very appropriate mouthpiece for her creator, is proved by the words she speaks to her puzzled lover, questioning the human urge to verbalize:

. . . ce minimum de cohérence qu'il est obligatoire de donner à ses paroles pour se faire comprendre, c'est-à-dire, en y réfléchissant, pour ne pas se faire comprendre, parce que c'est tout de même assez comique et même complètement absurde d'être obligé, de se croire obligé de s'exprimer d'une façon cohérente quand ce que l'on éprouve est incohérent, ainsi moi, par exemple . . .

(207)

Aware of the inaccuracy of language, she tries nevertheless to shape her experience and her feelings in the attempt to exteriorize, and so perhaps to understand — like Georges in La Route des Flandres. This too is an aspect of Simon's own intentions, and one way of interpreting the symbolic

⁸ London, 1958 edition (first published 1935), p.162.

canvas in which Orion may well be said to represent the artist stumbling toward the light, the sudden illumination of his experience in the artistic form which he discovers through language. In so far as her own speech is an attempt to fill the vacuum of her present incomprehension of experience, Louise is an exemplary Simonian narrator. Her monologue is to be understood as a parallel for that controlled verbosity through which the novel comes into being.

Much is done, in L'Herbe, to undermine language, not only through the reservations of the central character by whose consciousness the narrative is partly formed. There are several references to the sheer ephemerality of language, which will again recur frequently in the four novels of the 1960s. These references highlight the difficulty of the task facing a novelist working with such reservations in mind. In the space of a few pages at the centre of the novel, three allusions to the evanescence of words are made in quick succession. The first is in the context of Sabine's voluble speech at the dinner-table:

la bouche ouverte, donc, comme si, elle aussi, cherchait à avaler quelque chose (peut-être simplement l'air, rien que l'air invisible qui avait servi de véhicule aux paroles, les paroles invisibles qui l'avaient traversé sans y laisser de traces . . . prêt à resservir de nouveau, subtil, redoutable, énigmatique et transparent messenger, la pensée — les mots — n'ayant pas besoin, comme sur le papier, d'y prendre forme, de se matérialiser au moyen de lignes, de signes apparents et durables.

(137)

This points directly to the difference between Sabine and Marie, in that the one leaves nothing behind her, while the other leaves the notebooks which are language, in a sense, materialized, and as such a tangible reminder of the presence of the past. This is paralleled in a minor way by the comical scattering of Sabine's impressive collection of jewellery (see pp.133-4), while the few bits and pieces belonging to Marie, and that one ring in particular, are jealously preserved by Louise.

The second reference to language relates to books themselves, and further establishes the paradox against which Simon is working. It comes in a reflection about the hands of Pierre, which are as 'material' as can be:

de sorte qu'il ne peut même pas savoir comment elle est faite en réalité, si elle ressemble à l'autre, cette peau blanche et lisse qui n'a jamais — ou alors depuis si longtemps — touché, été au contact d'autre chose que des livres, c'est-à-dire quelque chose d'aussi dépourvu de réalité et de consistance que l'air, la lumière.

(147)

Again this underlines the tragedy of Pierre's failure to leave behind him any evidence of the presence of the past, and again it will find a counter-balance in the notebooks of Marie, and by extension in the novel L'Herbe itself.

The final reference occurs in the midst of the tense conversation between Georges and Louise, which in itself shows two aspects of language as Simon sees it. One of these is the strange aggressiveness which can be conveyed by speech:

Puis de nouveau le dialogue, les deux voix alternées, pas mélangées maintenant, mais en quelque sorte face à face, l'espèce d'aller et retour, comme un échange de coups.

(160)

la voix de Georges la frappant cette fois par le côté.

(161)

Words are used as weapons and not as a means of communication. But words are also as inconsistent as smoke — another area where the themes of L'Herbe come close to those of Faulkner:

Tilting a little down the hill, as our house does, a breeze draws through the hall all the time, up-slanting. A feather dropped near the front door will rise and brush along the ceiling, slanting backward, until it reaches the down-turning current at the back door: so with voices. As you enter the hall, they sound as though they were speaking out of the air about your head.

Each of these writers is intensely concerned with language and its potential as a durably illuminating artistic medium. Simon seems to divest language of all substance when, in the same dialogue between Georges and Louise, he makes this direct comparison:

la fumée se détachant de ses lèvres, les paroles se détachant de ses lèvres, restant comme la fumée un instant suspendues au-devant de ses lèvres, une boule grise roulant sur elle-même, les sons prononcés, les mots roulant les uns sur les autres, c'est-à-dire montrant leurs diverses faces, leurs diverses combinaisons — ce pourquoi l'on dit sans doute 'tourner et retourner des paroles' —, puis (les mots, l'assemblage de mots) s'effilochant, se désagrégeant, se dissolvant dans l'air nocturne.

(156-7)

This passage is absolutely central to Simon's approach to the process of writing at this stage of his career. It shows the basic immateriality of language, which he is fond of reiterating, but at the same time it hints at the rich potential of words in their variety of shapes and possible meanings, a potential which will be exploited to increasing effect in the ensuing novels. Tourner et retourner des paroles: this is the method used by the artist as Orion in elaborating his own assemblage of language. If L'Herbe is less striking than the later novels, it is perhaps because Simon is here at pains to express, by comparisons and contrasts, the paradoxical character of language, rather than to demonstrate it in practice in the convincing fashion of Histoire, La Bataille de Pharsale, or Orion Aveugle.

This reservation about L'Herbe must however be mitigated by an acknowledgement of the skill and tenacity used by Simon to express the capacities of language. As the epigraph to the novel suggests, this cannot be dissociated from the theme of history; that is to say, language can be taken as a medium in which to counteract the effect of passing time, and so to ensure the survival of the past. In order to appreciate how Simon works round to this goal, it is essential to examine the appearance in his novel of those objects or representations whose material presence seems to

act as a buttress against time, and of which the ultimate example, in the novelist's terms, is language:

Louise's narrative is intensely concerned with time, with its accumulation, its relation to myth, its timelessness; it is, in effect, an attempt to re-create History.¹⁰

It will be seen that this narrative is one tentative means of illumination and preservation, amongst several others in the novel.

Perhaps the most obvious link with the past, apart from the older characters themselves, is supplied by photographs, which are from now on a recurrent point of interest for Simon's narrators. Even for Gauthier, in Simon's first novel, photography implied a poignant stasis:

Il fallait que le momentané se perpétuât. Cette succession de momentanés qui n'existait que dans la perspective glauque de glaces poussiéreuses des passés additionnés. De là l'amertume des photographies d'autrefois et leur puissante saveur, leurs personnages morts aplatés dans leur immobilité gracieuse, souriant quand même.

(Le Tricheur, p.100)

Photographs offer the irrefutable and shocking evidence of the passing of time, in the contrast between a distant 'then' and the immediate 'now'; in the enormity of this disparity they achieve their own kind of spectral irreality, almost as striking as that of language itself. This fact is brought home to Louise in her scrutinization of a photograph which falls out of one of the notebooks:

pensant: 'A peu près dix, douze ans, donc elle...', puis sursautant, regardant plus attentivement encore, pensant: 'Mais ce n'est pas possible, il... Mais ce n'est pas Georges, c'est... c'est...', retournant brusquement la photo, lisant alors, moulée dans la même écriture consciencieuse et penchée, la date, 'Août 1896', regardant de nouveau la tête ronde du gamin sagement assis . . . tandis qu'im-

10 Morton P. Levitt, 'Disillusionment and Epiphany: the Novels of Claude Simon', Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, 12, No.1 (1970), pp.43-71, (p.52).

possibles à apparenter, à réunir, les deux images se superposaient maintenant: l'enfant sage aux genoux noueux, au petit visage studieux, un peu triste, et le vieil homme, envahi, écrasé, étouffé par le monstrueux poids de sa propre chair.

(225-6)

This depressing proof of materiality, of passing time, is directly related to the contrasts of character within the novel, when it is set against another photograph showing Marie, also many years previous to her present situation:

elle (Marie) regardant l'objectif en face, avec ce visage déjà à peu près semblable à ce qu'il devait être par la suite, pas aussi ridé, bien sûr, mais reconnaissable, déjà 'fait', pour ainsi dire, parvenu à ce stade où les transformations ultérieures ne seront plus que de simples surcharges (alors que rien dans la suave porcelaine de Saxe ou dans le filiforme professeur à barbiche et pince-nez ne permet, même à un regard attentif, de reconnaître l'homme-montagne et la femme aux robes, au maquillage multicolores que les quarante années suivantes vont façonner par de profonds changements de leur structure même)

(74)

These photographs have a dual function in the novel. Not only do they offer damning evidence of time, further contrasts between Marie and her contemporaries, more acquaintanceship with the past, but also they serve as a means of leading in to the tableaux vivants of which L'Herbe, like Le Vent, is largely composed.

For this is the principal means that Simon has, in 1958, of achieving illumination: through the creation of a number of word-pictures which, in their own suspended animation, frame and objectify the experience of one of the central characters. Simon still has need of a representative in the novel, even though that representative displays attitudes and a sensibility which are closely identifiable with those of the artist. It is Louise who expresses the groping movement toward illumination which is later adopted by the artist himself, after the quasi-total effacement of an intermediary persona:

Si l'on veut, ce 'elle' est fréquemment un 'je' déguisé; il représente le personnage tel qu'il existe non pas vu du dehors, mais à l'intérieur de sa propre conscience ou mémoire. Malgré les

apparences, nous sommes donc aux antipodes du roman traditionnel. A quoi il faut ajouter l'ambiguïté voulue du point de vue, puisqu'on peut relever nombre de passages où ce 'elle' est (ou semble être) une troisième personne vue du dehors, où l'on est véritablement dans l'ordre du récit. Le roman oscille donc entre le style narratif traditionnel et la transcription d'un contenu de conscience.¹¹

The contents of that consciousness are, as already suggested, made up in large part of a series of tableaux representing the high points of remembered, or sometimes imagined, experience. No clearer proof of this could be found than the fact that Simon used one such 'scene' from L'Herbe — the moment at which Louise and Sabine are, as it were, face to face although separated by a communicating wall — as the basis for a play, La Séparation, performed at the Théâtre de Lutèce in 1963.¹²

Although she admits the frailty of language, Louise shares with the novelist the need to expend words in the search to encapsulate that experience, even if it is only in this unstable form. Language is to serve as the support of her memory of certain scenes:

l'autre scène que Louise pourra aussi revoir par la suite, appartenant peut-être aussi à ce domaine du latent, de l'inexprimé, ou — la limite, la ligne de démarcation entre le formulé et l'informulé consistant seulement en cette poreuse, grossière et fragile barrière des mots — peut-être pas.

(151)

L'Herbe is, to a lesser extent than the later novels, a book about language. The story-telling element of Le Vent has been excised, to leave only the barest of pretexts for an examination of the life-giving potential of words. The tableau vivant is an example of their preservative power:

¹¹ Jean-Luc Seylaz, 'Du Vent à La Route des Flandres: la conquête d'une forme romanesque', p.231.

¹² The play was given an unfavourable review by Jacques Lemarchand in the Figaro Littéraire, 23 mars 1963, p.20.

Et elle pourra se voir pénétrant dans la salle à manger, la scène, le tableau: Sabine et le gros-homme déjà assis . . .

(128; my underlining)

(la scène — on l'avait plus tard décrite à Louise — s'étant déroulée ainsi: des personnages, un groupe de personnages paisiblement assis sous le grand marronnier, comme dans un de ces tableaux impressionnistes . . .)
(29-30; my underlinings)

This is the reason for the numerous 'Donc' and 'Et ceci:' in the novel; it is not so much a continuous narrative as a series of word-pictures designed to transcribe faithfully those seminal images which remain within the remembering and highly imaginative, interrogative consciousness. In this context, it is interesting to note that, in the special number of the periodical Entretiens (No.31, 1972) devoted to him, Simon presented a photographic reproduction of just such a scene (between p.119 and p.121). As Louise pieces together the life story of Marie, vivid pictures come to her mind, of points in time which, as in Le Vent, do not conform to the rigours of chronology. What is so interesting about Simon is this ceaseless struggle to circumvent the obstacle that narrative prose represents for a writer trying to capture the feel of memory, and its constant interrelationship with perception and imagination.

Once again this is a factor appreciated by Louise on overhearing one of the crucial episodes in her narrative:

Elle se tint immobile, retenant sa respiration, écoutant alterner, se répondre les deux voix invisibles, étouffées mais distinctes — comme si elles lui parvenaient non pas simplement assourdies par l'interposition d'une mince épaisseur de briques mais de très loin dans l'espace ou le temps, ce recul leur conférant une sorte d'existence propre, les décantant, les dépouillant de tout ce qui dans la réalité (le contact direct avec la réalité) vient gêner notre perception, celle-ci, sollicitée alors de tous côtés, s'éparpillant, se dispersant alors de tous côtés, s'éparpillant, se dispersant.

(168-9)

The terms used here are a direct antecedent to the manner of Simon's expression in the preface to Orion Aveugle,

vaunting the power of language against the forces of dispersal, to which, in this earlier novel, he makes frequent references. This, it may be said, is one of the major changes in Simon's development: he eventually refines out of his novels all explicit allusions to the difficulty of the task facing language, and unburdens his text of the enormous number of analogies and paradigms included in the earlier works. For the time being, in L'Herbe, it is the duty of language to fix on paper a record, however incomplete, of one woman's experience, and of her growing awareness of the implications of a very personal form of history. Perhaps the suggestion is that language, rather than being an instrument of discovery, is an instrument of survival pure and simple, 'slithering about in a frantic attempt to keep its footing in a mental reality; its justification is as an incantation'.¹³

But the contradictory materiality of language shares the focus of attention in L'Herbe, so continuing Simon's principle of equilibrium between opposing forces. The novel is to be seen in its own right as a barrier, however porous, of words against decomposition, as symbolized in the form of Marie's notebooks. In very revealing terms, these books — the accumulated transcript of history — occupy Louise's mind as if they were an edifice constructed to represent time itself. Their dates are like so many pieces of arithmetical masonry:

comme une sorte de mur aux éléments maçonnés ou plutôt assemblés, ajustés sans la moindre fissure, le moindre interstice, quelque chose qui faisait penser à ces vestiges d'antiques constructions pélasgiques ou romaines, et qui semblent non pas avoir résisté au temps mais être en quelque sorte le temps lui-même, les encres avec lesquelles avaient été tracés les chiffres présentant d'une année à l'autre d'imperceptibles différences, comme une patine progressive, la base du mur étant paradoxalement constituée par les millésimes les plus récents . . . les derniers chiffres tracés

¹³ John Sturrock, The French New Novel, p.88.

d'une écriture tremblée, difficile, comme écrasée, fléchissant sous le poids formidable du tout.

(119-20)

Despite the apparent insignificance of their contents, the notebooks acquire meaning through the manner of their presentation as the materialization, in language, of history, offering the presence of the past just as surely as do the ruins with which history is so readily associated. This paradox of the perdurability of language is completed, not where Marie is concerned, but in relation to Sabine, by Simon's incorporation of a description of language which again remains prominent in the later novels. This is of relevance to the theme of history, in that it demonstrates the enduring traits of humanity which transcend and outlast the individual, and are most easily accessible in the form of words. Sabine's preoccupation with sex is seen as one manifestation of a general tic of humanity throughout time:

quelque chose pour être écrit — ou décrit — en latin, à l'aide de ces mots latins, non pas crus, impudiques, mais, semble-t-il, spécialement conçus et forgés pour le bronze, les pierres maçonnées des arcs de triomphe, des aqueducs, des monuments, les rangées de mots elles-mêmes comme maçonnées, elles-mêmes semblables à d'indestructibles murailles destinées à durer plus longtemps que le temps même, avec la compacte succession de leurs lettres taillées en forme de coins, de cubes, de poutres, serrées, ajustées sans ponctuation, majuscule, ni le moindre interstice, à la façon de ces murs construits sans mortier.

(129-30)

Surely it is not stretching a point to discern in these words an almost exact description of a Simon novel? Less overtly but no less significantly than in La Bataille de Pharsale, the author is pointing in a thinly-disguised way to his own method of composition, his own art poétique. Simon deliberately tries to align serried ranks of words against time; this passage restates almost word for word the passage already quoted in respect of the notebooks. It may be claimed that the absence of mortar is a parallel for the lack of punctuation and logical articulation in Simon's writing, thus creating an assemblage of language

which is a striking anticipation of his subsequent development, as described in Orion Aveugle and in Simon's essay, 'La fiction mot à mot'.¹⁴

In other words, L'Herbe marks the beginnings of that creative submission to language which is the hallmark of the artist as Orion. After the break with tradition in Le Vent, this novel too brings about a change of direction for Simon:

La description naît au sein de la description, le mouvement, d'un autre mouvement. Mille éclosions sourdes de mots font la phrase. Pourtant, à mesure que la lecture se prolonge, le lecteur a le sentiment d'une métamorphose. C'est vrai que le livre bascule. Le langage de l'histoire devient l'histoire d'un langage.¹⁵

Not the arid history of philologists, as practised by Pierre, but a vital account of language at grips with the fluidity of time, is what is presented in Louise's narrative. There is a marvellous tension in L'Herbe, between language as a series of derisory symbols, and language as monument — as the mark of a partial triumph of mind over matter. Strangely enough, it is the unacademic Marie who assures the presence of the past by leaving just such a monument behind her:

cette formidable et écrasante pyramide que l'orgueil du plus orgueilleux des pharaons lui-même eût été impuissant à concevoir et qu'elle — la vieille femme maintenant en train de mourir, sinon déjà morte — s'était élevée à elle-même et, en quelque sorte, à son insu . . . : cette pyramide, ce monument — c'est-à-dire le contenu de la boîte.

(213)

Foremost amongst the contents of the box are the notebooks, a stimulus to the mind and language of Louise herself, as

¹⁴ In Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui (Publications du Centre Culturel de Cerisy-la-Salle, 50: Paris, 1972), t.II, pp.73-97.

¹⁵ This statement appears in a general review article by André Dalmas, 'L'Enfer de Melville', Tribune des Nations, 7 novembre 1958, which is included without page reference in the dossiers de presse at Editions de Minuit.

well as being material evidence of the durability of language itself. Just as the writing of Marie helps to provide a memory of her life, so too Louise is trying, through words, to elaborate a record of this crucial period in her life:

non comme une tranche de temps précise, mesurable et limitée, mais sous l'aspect d'une durée vague, hachurée, faite d'une succession, d'une alternance de trous, de sombre et de clairs: la chambre close, l'éclatante lumière du dehors, l'exubérante et folle végétation de septembre, la pénombre, le visage momifié, la gloire, la paix des jours déclinants — se voyant, pouvant voir la robe claire courant sur l'écran de la mémoire, la tache lumineuse suivie par le pinceau du projecteur dévalant la verte colline ou peut-être pas courant.

(125)

As this passage shows, Simon is well aware that language cannot exactly emulate an historical monument, precisely because language for him is intended to represent the shortcomings of memory and perception, and so to be susceptible to imprecision and approximation. Hence the plethora of adjectives and alternative similes in his writing. As a kind of collage of different forms of language, it is a model of fragmentation rather than a fixed mass such as a building.

This is made clear in an important passage late in the novel, when one of the notebooks is described:

imprimé en bleu sur fond vert, représentant un faisceau de lecteur romain au centre de deux drapeaux entrecroisés dont les plis retombaient sur un cartouche encadrant le mot Gloria en caractères eux aussi d'inscription romaine . . . le tout, les flasques étendards inclinés, la hache, les verges assemblées et la couronne césarienne, comme d'emphatiques et clinquants symboles.

(220)

All that remains of a lifetime is this derisory remnant, and the power of language is undermined by Simon's determination to balance the strength of words against the ironic debris that Louise finds in the carefully-preserved box given her by Marie.

On the other hand, it is precisely that debris which

occasions the interrogatory monologue through which the novel itself comes into being, and the powerful impact of L'Herbe bears eloquent testimony to what language can do. The word cartouche deserves closer attention in that last passage, for it takes up an echo from much nearer the opening of the novel; this concerns the description of a cat — 'the cruel, blank, objectifying face of matter', as one critic has called it¹⁶ — and its hesitation between movement and motionlessness, which is a curious source of torment for Louise:

se tenant dans cette posture semblable à une foudroyante condensation de la vitesse (exaectement comme une cartouche de dynamite renferme un million de fois son volume de bruit et de destruction)

(18)

At this point one comes across the importance of the act of reading, which is so fundamental to the nouveau roman in its attempt to abolish the distance between the writer and his reader. As an object in its own right, L'Herbe may be taken as an artefact such as a pyramid: the material representation of accumulated time and obsession, like the book which Léon Delmont, in Butor's La Modification, offers to the reader at the end of his journey between Paris and Rome. But, just like the cartridge to which Simon refers, the book will also release a dynamic sense of movement and life once it is read; obvious as this may appear, it is a basic tenet of the nouveau roman that each reading of the text is a minor act of creation which will bring a new and possibly unforeseen kind of illumination to the assemblage of words which the writer has offered; these terms of 'explosion' and 'expansion' are much favoured by Simon.

A recent article alluded, in passing, to this aspect of L'Herbe:

16 John K. Simon, 'Perception and metaphor in the "New Novel": Notes on Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon and Butor', Tri-Quarterly, 4 (1965), pp.153-82, (p.166).

La phrase fait, comme la cartouche de dynamite, exploser simultanément la syntaxe et la chronologie. Elle mime, en la syntaxe, la fluidité de la mort imperceptiblement affirmée, refusée, ralentie et le dynamisme gestuel, sensoriel et centralisateur de l'instant.¹⁷

Like Le Palace or La Route des Flandres, L'Herbe uses a baroque technique of establishing a basic chronology — the ten days it takes Marie to die — but blurring the linear development of this foundation by creating a fluidity in the text, which is like a living organism in itself, becoming fuller and richer as it develops. The ultimate truth is that this plenitude is as gratuitous as the parallel sumptuousness of the natural landscape so often described in the novel; the self-procreating character of language is, for the novelist, as cyclical as the movement of the seasons, and the text of the book has perhaps no more 'meaning' than the wild grass outside the house.

Yet there, in the last analysis, lies the basic significance of L'Herbe, which its epigraph indicated. No-one sees the grass grow, but it does; no-one sees people change, but they do; no-one sees time pass, but it does. All that language can achieve is an approximation to the imprisonment of time within the printed page. Surely this is the point of Simon's striking phrase, 'Louise tournant des épaisseurs de temps' (p.123), where a book is explicitly stated to be the materialization of time. This is also the triumph of L'Herbe, then: to represent in its pages, its composition, its style, the presence of the past: ruins and fragments, but an artistic monument nonetheless. To make of the figment of the mind an artefact whose materiality will outlast that mind: this is the implied aim of the artist, which is exposed, demonstrated, and achieved in L'Herbe, the first of Simon's novels dedicated to the examination of

¹⁷ Pierre Caminade, 'Déjeuner avec l'herbe', Entretiens, No.31 (1972), pp.117-19.

language from within. It is a novel about and despite its own limitations.

Perhaps it is useful to conclude with a remark on the element of tentativeness in this novel. Unlike Le Vent, it does not piece together the bric-a-brac of a whole town-ship's impressions of a bewildering sequence of events. It prefers to look closely at one simple human incident as it is experienced in the mind and sensibility of an intelligent woman. But at the same time it introduces the externalized viewpoint of a third-person narrative, and this is proof of Simon's determined experimentation with technique in the re-presentation of a peculiar vision of reality. Central to that vision is a distinctive conception of time as dissolution, and so Simon is much concerned with tempo and time-scheme in his novel. What the artist as Orion eventually does is to abolish all differentiation in time by reassembling the data of perception, imagination, and memory, within a constant present tense; meanwhile, what Simon does in L'Herbe, as in Le Vent and other novels, is to exploit the present participle in the creation of his tableaux, and as a bulwark against time.

Another important element in the technical conspiracy against time is punctuation, as has been suggested with regard to a passage already quoted. Simon relies, in this novel, not on that artificial and supposedly logical order which punctuation traditionally creates, but on the infinitely more strained half-logic deriving from the contiguity of images and scenes within the mind. The abandonment of punctuation is the removal of those artificial barriers between disparate areas of time finding their own relationship within the sensorial and affective perspective of memory. This is to say that, although the actual appearance of a Simon text seems to change drastically with the austere sentence structure of Orion Aveugle, this is simply a different method of presenting a vision which remains basically unaltered and which is apparent, at least intermittently, in L'Herbe.

To take one example, it is a similarity of gesture that occasionally effects a transition in the text of the novel. At one point, Louise is involved in a slight physical struggle with her lover:

essayant de se dégager, de s'échapper, et lui rattrapant, réunissant de nouveau les poignets qu'il aurait pu tenir dans une seule de ses mains, disant: 'Allons', et elle: 'Tu me fais mal, je t'en prie, tu...', tous les deux luttant maintenant: Louise pouvant, lui semblait-il, les voir . . .
(239)

Almost imperceptibly a movement takes place whereby, from being a participant in an action, Louise becomes the observer of a similar action in which she is not involved, and it is this abolition of temporal distance or logic which characterizes Simon's developing approach to the limitations of novelistic form. In fact the struggle which Louise seems to recall is first described thirty-three pages earlier in the novel:

Et le vieil homme: Allons, donne-moi
Et elle: Je te défends.
Et lui: Allons
Et elle: Tu me fais mal, Pierre, je t'en supplie . . .
(206)

But such clear-cut moments of transition are rare in L'Herbe, and the change in time is usually explicitly signalled by the intervention of third-person narrative to indicate the progression, or return, from one day to another in the ten of Marie's dying, and in the greater period of time covered by Louise's imaginative use of memory. This will be less obvious in Simon's next novel, where the sensorial world comes into its own and so permits the abolition of a traditional time-scheme.

With L'Herbe the most memorable passages are still the expressive descriptions of fluidity which will recur in La Route des Flandres, though more closely reflected in the sinuosities of the text of that novel. Simon is content to demonstrate the arbitrary character of his text in L'Herbe by concluding with a description of the ineluctable dissolution of consciousness:

laissant de nouveau place au silence, à la paix nocturne où claquaient encore, de plus en plus espacées, les dernières gouttes, puis, quoiqu'il n'y eût pas un souffle, tout un arbre sans doute comme s'ébrouant, frissonnant, toutes ses feuilles déversant une brusque et ultime pluie, puis quelques gouttes encore, groupées, puis, un long moment après, une autre — puis plus rien.

(262)

Like its predecessor, Le Vent, this novel is remarkable most of all for the quality of its word-pictures, not only as pure description, but also as the expressive vehicles of a number of traditional themes: death, time, and the anguish of impermanence. But L'Herbe is a transitional stage between Le Vent and Simon's novels of the 1960s in its tentative efforts to do away with temporal perspective, and it is a compelling book in its own right, an interesting stage on Simon's progress toward becoming the artist as Orion, so powerfully assured in the later novels, where it is not so much the presence of the past that concerns him, as the timeless present of a self-sufficient work of art.

Chapter IV: The Assassination of Time:
La Route des Flandres 1960

L'échec du Savoir est la lacune
par où surgit entière la Litté-
rature.

Serge Doubrovsky

Although there is a gap of only two years between L'Herbe and the publication of Simon's sixth novel, he has admitted that La Route des Flandres is in fact the fruit of twenty years' reflection:

J'ai médité ce roman pendant vingt ans, mais je craignais de verser dans l'héroïque ou dans le pitoyable. Et puis, je ne trouvais pas le moyen de le composer comme je le souhaitais. Enfin, je m'y suis mis et j'ai d'abord travaillé huit mois dans le noir. Ce livre, je ne le voyais pas. Je ne voyais apparaître que des émotions simultanées¹ dans mon esprit; tout se présentait en même temps.

It is immediately clear that the major problem faced by the novelist was that of transposing the simultaneity of memory into the linear medium of prose composition. In his solution of this formidable problem Simon provides conclusive evidence of his growing stature as an artist, which is perhaps corroborated by the international acclaim given to this novel. Just as Le Vent had seemed to oscillate between the extremes of chaos and order, so in La Route des Flandres there is a discernible pattern whereby, at every level of the book's meaning, apparent failure is superseded by triumph, or by consolation of some kind.

The essentially tragic tenor of the novel is in part redeemed by the majesty of the artistic process through which Simon sustains the tragic vision, within the intensely poetic structure of a ceaselessly inventive prose. This is to say that the novelist is moving closer to that exploratory position represented by the Orion figure, even

¹ André Bourin, 'Techniciens du roman: Claude Simon'.

though his point of departure was a preconceived vision of the novel which had to be followed by the mise en mots itself. Here for the first time Simon begins to realize the synthetic potential of language as a poetic medium, capable of shaping recalled and imagined moments of time into the timeless pattern of a work of art. 'Poetic', in this sense, is taken as an indication of the novelist's desire to remove the linear time-element from his novel, in the manner of the modern poets, as described by Joseph Frank:

Aesthetic form in modern poetry . . . is based on a space-logic that demands a complete reorientation in the reader's attitude toward language. Since the primary reference of any word-group is to something inside the poem itself, language in modern poetry is really reflexive. The meaning-relationship is completed only by the simultaneous perception in space of word-groups that have no comprehensible relation to each other when read consecutively in time. Instead of the instinctive and immediate reference of words and word-groups to the objects or events they symbolize and the construction of meaning from the sequence of these references, modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity.²

The assassination of time is not achieved by the central character of Simon's novel, in the real sphere of human relationships, but in terms of the novel itself, in the transcending of that reality by artistic reconstruction: La Route des Flandres embodies, twenty years on, what had seemed an unutterable experience.

The tension between failure and triumph is suggested first of all in relation to the theme of time, which dominates the novel from beginning to end. More strongly than in any of his previous novels, Simon evokes the overwhelmingly destructive force of time in human affairs. This

² The Widening Gyre, p.13.

he achieves by making explicit reference to the state of war and the intense sensation of time's rapidity which war produces. At one point an anguished question is formulated:

(as-tu remarqué comme tout cela va vite, cette espèce d'accélération du temps, d'extraordinaire rapidité avec laquelle la guerre produit des phénomènes — rouille, souillure, ruines, corrosion des corps — qui demandent en temps ordinaire des mois ou des années pour s'accomplir?)

(205)

As Jean Ricardou has demonstrated, in an essay of characteristic density,³ this destructiveness operates on a number of levels, from the personal to the universal, and effectively abolishes communication of any kind, so that the novel is to be seen as a complex representation of ruin. The soldiers wandering along the Flanders road lose all sense of time and direction, but the strength of the human dependence on a knowledge of time is shown when, after the central incident of the novel, relating the massacre of the cavalry squadron to which the central character, Georges, had belonged, he begins quite absurdly (p.161) to wonder what time it can be.

At other intense moments the same preoccupation is in evidence, whether in relation to the battle or to subsequent sexual experience:

cherchant à me rappeler depuis combien de temps nous étions dans ce train un jour et une nuit ou une nuit un jour et une nuit mais cela n'avait aucun sens le temps n'existe pas Quelle heure est-il dis-je . . .

(20)

Tu crois qu'il est quatre heures du matin

(278)

je dis Quelle heure peut-il être?

(293)

quelle heure pouvait-il être?

(296)

One paradoxical aspect of La Route des Flandres is that the language of the novel is closely concerned with time, while

³ 'Un ordre dans la débâcle', Critique, No.163 (décembre 1960), pp.1011-24; reprinted in his Problèmes du nouveau roman (Paris, 1967), pp.44-55.

the relativity of time is so forcefully proclaimed: it is important to appreciate the change, in that first quotation, from Imperfect to Present tense, implying that time is not done away with in time of war alone. For the soldiers in the Flanders campaign there was no sense in asking the time, because they had no possibility of changing their situation; for the central character, looking at his postwar sexual affair with Corinne, widow of his former commanding officer, time is equally 'irremediable'; for the novelist writing in the reconstructive mode, there is no such sense of time, since it is 'assassinated' by the power of instinctive or sensorial recall, which will be seen as one of the triumphs of the book.

The initial impact, however, is one of chaos, the total absence of order and meaning, which is reinforced significantly by the closing lines, in which the parallel between warfare and time is made explicit:

la guerre pour ainsi dire étale pour ainsi dire
 paisible autour de nous, le canon sporadique frappant
 dans les vergers déserts avec un bruit sourd monumen-
 tal et creux comme une porte en train de battre agitée
 par le vent dans une maison vide, le paysage tout en-
 tier inhabité vide sous le ciel immobile, le monde
 arrêté figé s'effritant se dépiautant s'écroulant peu
 à peu par morceaux comme une bâtisse abandonnée, inuti-
 lisable, livrée à l'incohérent, nonchalant, imperson-
 nel et destructeur travail du temps.

(314)

Warfare, then, is to be understood as an exaggeration of the basic instability and impermanence of human artefacts; it merely precipitates their disappearance, and it serves as an apt metaphor of Simon's conception of time. The play on words whereby war is called paisible is his way of underlining the continuity of disorder, as in the final lines of both Le Vent and L'Herbe.

What of humanity itself? If there is an obvious failure to create objects which will last, or stand the test of time, there is a certain kind of triumph in the fact that, although individuals merely come and go, there are nevertheless some fundamental traits of human nature

which remain constant. These are not destroyed but reinforced by the passage of time. This triumph is diminished, however, by the realization that the enduring preoccupations of humanity are primarily negative, and that foremost amongst these is warfare itself, as Simon has already suggested in La Corde Raide, where a very pertinent comparison is made:

Sous un certain angle, la guerre c'est un peu comme les courses de chevaux: cinq minutes de tension violente pour beaucoup d'emmerdement et de fatigues (si vous n'êtes pas professionnel et que les rites — élégances, parades, saluts — ne vous passionnent pas). La guerre m'intéressait, parce que c'est le seul endroit où l'on puisse bien voir certaines choses, et aussi parce que je voulais essayer de comprendre cette occupation si importante et pour ainsi dire essentielle en ce sens qu'elle rentre dans les trois ou quatre besoins fondamentaux, comme coucher avec des femmes, manger, parler, procréer, pour lesquels les hommes sont faits et dont ils ne peuvent se passer.

(54)

While there are numerous references to horses in La Route des Flandres, whether in Flanders itself or at French race-courses which Georges calls to mind, the novel is also a convincing demonstration of the central character's incomprehension of his experience.

Where the notion of the éternel retour is concerned, the figure of de Reixach, captain of Georges's cavalry squadron and a distant relative of his family, plays an important part in the novel; he contributes to the assassination of time by seeming to incarnate history. The mere sight or thought of him, especially as spoken of by his mother — the Sabine who was such a grotesque figure in L'Herbe — is enough to summon up in Georges's mind a picture of the whole de Reixach lineage:

Se dessinant donc ainsi, à travers l'exaspérant bavardage d'une femme, et sans même que Georges ait eu besoin de les rencontrer, les de Reixach, la famille de Reixach, puis de Reixach lui-même, tout seul, avec, se pressant derrière lui, cette cohorte d'ancêtres, de fantômes entourés de légendes, de racontars d'alcôves, de coups de pistolets, d'actes notariés et de cliquetis d'épées.

(58)

A considerable achievement in La Route des Flandres is the

abolition, by the controlled use of language to evoke resemblances and to blur distinctions, of the gulf in time which separates the de Reixach in Flanders from his eighteenth-century ancestor. Both are military commanders; both are eventually suggested to have committed suicide because of disasters which occurred simultaneously in public and in private life; both seem to have been unable to reconcile their ordered view of life, learnt from books or military academy, with a brusque and uncontrolled experience of chaos. The complexity of the novel arises in part from the skill with which Simon interweaves the 'legends' of these two men, thereby underlining the things which are unchanging in the human condition.

The principal resemblance between the two, as Georges remembers the one and imagines the other, is in their attitude to death, enigmatic and incredible as that attitude may seem. Taking their military training or their 'philosophy' to extremes, they face death as the only possible response to their experiences in the field. A passage near the end of the novel shows the ease with which the narrator's attention (be it that of Georges, or of the third-person narrator who also contributes to the novel) can move from one level of time to the other in thinking of these de Reixachs:

voilà pourquoi nous avançons aristocratiquement cavalièrement à une majestueuse allure de tortue lui continuant comme si de rien n'était à parler avec ce petit lieutenant . . . magnifique cible pour ces Espagnols impénétrables absolument rebelles allergiques il faut croire aux larmoyantes homélies sur la fraternité universelle la déesse Raison la Vertu et qui l'attendaient embusqués derrière les chênes-lièges ou les oliviers je me demande quelle odeur quelle haleine avait alors la mort.

(312)

The two de Reixachs come together in maintaining the semblance of dignity and propriety in the face of crumbling values. This is true not only of their military experiences, but also where their private lives are concerned: the 'suicide' is in each case the culmination of knowledge of marital infidelity,

and in both cases the third party concerned is an inferior: the ancestor's groom, or the twentieth-century commander's ex-jockey Iglésia. On the more intimate level of Georges's own family background, then, there is the element of éternel retour at work, which has the effect of compressing history and bringing one time-level on to the same plane as another.

In a more general sense, though, it is the cyclical return of warfare, the experience of Everyman, which does much to abolish the perspective in time, and to make something universally relevant out of Georges's own feelings about the war. The notion of warfare as fatality is frequently suggested:

la voix de la vieille femme qui continuait à faire entendre ses lamentations rythmées, monotones, comme une déclamation emphatique, sans fin, comme ces pleureuses de l'antiquité, comme si tout cela (ces cris, cette violence, cette incompréhensible et incontrôlable explosion de fureur, de passion) ne se passait pas à l'époque des fusils, des bottes de caoutchouc, des rustines et des costumes de confection mais très loin dans le temps, ou de tous les temps, ou en dehors du temps, la pluie tombant toujours et peut-être depuis toujours, les noyers les arbres du verger s'égouttant sans fin . . .

(63-4; my underlining)

In passages such as this Simon achieves that telescoping of temporal perspective which characterizes novels like Histoire and La Bataille de Pharsale in particular, and this he does by focussing the attention on the essential gesture, the essential sound, the essential passion in any given situation.

These situations are not necessarily wide apart in linear time, although this is the case with the evocation of warfare; there are also many occasions on which a transition in time is accomplished mainly through the linking image of the horse.

One critic has in fact described La Route des Flandres as:

une sorte de labyrinthe de situations, où certaines données de l'univers 'civil' — celui du turf — se trouvent transposées sans être fondamentalement altérées dans l'univers militaire, comme si, alors que changent dramatiquement les conditions de la vie des hommes dans le passage de la vie à la guerre, le flux intime

de leur conscience était le gage de la permanence de leur immersion dans le temps.⁴

The astonishing fluidity of this novel owes much to the similarity of settings, attitudes, and people between the Flanders road and the pre-war scenes, imagined or remembered by Georges, where de Reixach and his entourage enjoy watching and participating in race-meetings. Georges describes de Reixach, riding in front of him just before the fatal ambush:

cessant alors pour de bon de regarder cet endroit où il n'y avait rien, redressant la tête et reprenant avec ce petit sous-lieutenant sa paisible conversation du genre de celles que peuvent tenir deux cavaliers chevauchant de compagnie (au manège ou dans la carrière) et où il devait sans doute être question de chevaux, de camarades de promotion, de chasse ou de courses. Et il me semblait y être, voir cela . . .
(19; my underlining)

At such moments the description switches from one geographical location and from one point in time to another, in a manner which is sign-posted by the novelist, which will not always be the case in later novels. Again the impression is that these transitional phrases lead into a passage which describes a scene witnessed and held in the mind's eye.

Often the point of transition is the inflexible attitude of de Reixach himself, always and everywhere the same:

il saisissait son porte-monnaie, l'extirpait et comptait les pièces dans la main de la femme aussi paisiblement que s'il avait réglé une orangeade ou une de ces boissons chic au bar d'un quelconque pesage à Deauville ou Vichy... Et de nouveau il me semblait voir cela . . .
(22; my underlining)

Even within the context of a description of a racecourse, however, the principle of the éternel retour is introduced again in order to effect the telescoping of time, as an evocation of changelessness. Georges describes, for example, the group of horses seen in the distance in the early stages of a race:

⁴ Raymond Jean, 'Des romanciers et des pur-sang', Cahiers du Sud, 48^e année, No.359 (février-mars 1961), pp.137-9.

apparition, groupe médiéval, chatoyant au loin (et non pas seulement là-bas, au bout du tournant, mais comme s'avancant pour ainsi dire du fond des âges, sur les prairies des batailles éclatantes où, dans l'espace d'un étincelant après-midi, d'une charge, d'une galopade, se perdaient ou se gagnaient des royaumes et la main des princesses)

(153-4)

It is obvious that, despite the destructive force of time in relation to material objects — either buildings or human bodies — there is an undercurrent of continuity in the intangible realm of the human character. The ultimate proof of this is that Georges can make an implicit comparison between his experience on the Flanders road and a moment from the very distant past; at several points he uses the epithet apocalyptique and so brings his own time into close contact with the biblical evocation of the world's end. He and the other survivors of the murderous attack on the squadron become, in a sense, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, lost in the midst of the Flanders disaster and waiting passively for the finish. The pessimism of the novel seems in part to lie in this atmosphere of doom, and in the fact that the affirmation of constancy in human nature throughout the historical process is tempered by the violence which remains fundamental in mankind. The failure of men to construct anything to outlast time is matched only by the triumph of their own inherent savagery.

So much, then, for time as synonymous with the accumulation of history. There is a second, more personal area of triumph and failure where the theme of time is concerned. The assassination of time is attempted by Georges on an individual and basically physical level; La Route des Flandres is an intensely erotic novel in which the sexual act plays a paradoxical role.⁵ This, of course, is explicitly stated

⁵ Hence Jean Ricardou's reference to 'l'étrange équivoque du titre, ce filigrane: la Route des Flancs', Problèmes du nouveau roman, p.53.

in Simon's choice of epigraph for the third and final section of his book:

La volupté, c'est l'étreinte d'un corps de mort par deux êtres vivants. Le 'cadavre' dans ce cas, c'est le temps assassiné pour un temps et rendu consubstantiel au toucher.

(Malcolm de Chazal; 253)

As can be said of so many characters in Simon, Georges involves himself, with Corinne, the widow of de Reixach, in an attempt to deny reality through the sexual act. The principal features of that reality are the awareness of solitude, and the feeling of imprisonment within time and within the materiality of the body. It then becomes the unavowed aim of the sexual act to defeat this condition, by arriving at a shared suspension of time.

The final section of La Route des Flandres relates the failure of this subterfuge. Georges achieves only the illusion of success, even at the moment of most intense sensual abandon:

comme si notre vie tout entière s'était précipitée avec un bruit de cataracte vers et hors de nos ventres s'arrachant s'extirpant de nous de moi de ma solitude se libérant s'élançant au dehors se répandant jaillissant sans fin nous inondant l'un l'autre sans fin comme s'il n'y avait pas de fin comme s'il ne devait plus jamais y avoir de fin (mais ce n'était pas vrai: un instant seulement, ivres croyant que c'était toujours, mais un instant seulement en réalité comme quand on rêve que l'on croit qu'il se passe des tas de choses et quand on rouvre les yeux l'aiguille a à peine changé de place)

(265)

As a recent essay by Serge Doubrovsky has indicated,⁶ Georges experiences disappointment in his relationship with Corinne because he is a victim of the human illusion that the shared ecstasy of the sex act can bring release from the temporal continuum which is his prison; he has

⁶ 'Notes sur la genèse d'une écriture', Entretiens, No.31 (1972), pp.51-64. M. Doubrovsky poses the telling question, 'Un désastre? Mais lequel? C'est qu'il y en a tellement!' (p.60).

failed to understand his principal reason for seeking out the woman herself. That reason is found in his search to elucidate an enigma which has haunted him for six years, since the apparent suicide of de Reixach on the Flanders road. He hopes to gain from contact with Corinne in the flesh some real knowledge or insight into his past, but he eventually achieves an understanding of the impossible nature of his undertaking. Not only does sexual union fail to give lasting relief from what Simon sees as the human condition of solitary confinement, it also fails in its more narrowly pragmatic function as the key to the mysteries obsessing Georges's memory.⁷

This failure is confirmed in the intermittent passages describing Georges and Corinne together during the night which they spend in a hotel room, when it is clear that Georges periodically 'abandons' the woman in order to re-appraise the contents of his memory:

gouttes se poursuivant le long des branches luisantes
 se rattrapant se rejoignant se détachant tombant avec
 les dernières feuilles les derniers vestiges de l'été
 des jours à jamais abolis qu'on ne retrouve ne retrouve
 jamais qu'avais-je cherché en elle espéré poursuivi jusque
 sur son corps dans son corps des mots des sons . . .
 elle dit A quoi penses-tu? je dis A toi, elle dit de
 nouveau Non Dis-moi à quoi tu penses, je dis A toi tu
 le sais bien, je posai la main sur elle juste au milieu
 c'était comme du duvet de légères plumes d'oiseau un
 oiseau dans la main mais aussi un buisson proverbe
 anglais elle dit Pourquoi fermes-tu les yeux.

(274-5)

Ironically, in the moment of intimate physical contact with the woman, Georges is unable to focus his attention upon her; she is a presence more evanescent than those scenes from the realm of memory and imagination which he is constantly reliving. The material presence of the woman

⁷ See also Stephen Heath, The Nouveau Roman (London, 1972), pp.164-5, for an intense discussion, based on linguistic theory, of the Georges-Corinne relationship.

provokes the mental absence of the man, and on the level of personal relationships the sexual act culminates in defeat for the central character of the novel. An American commentator has emphasized this central notion of defeat:

Georges cannot know; therefore, he questions. In this he is unlike the heroes of Robbe-Grillet — who cannot know but who believe that they do — or those of Butor — who likewise seek answers but who are destroyed by their search. He is unlike them also in the complexity of his search, reflected in the many layers and prisms of his narrative. The Flanders Road is the most challenging of Simon's works, the most demanding of contemporary novels and one of the most moving. It offers in Georges a metaphor for modern man, a searcher after meaning in a world without meaning, an idealist made tragic and ennobled by his very failure. His search elevates Georges above the commonplace, imbues him with a sense of tragedy: he seeks but cannot find, recognizes that his search must fail, but continues to live, rejecting all that he has found hateful and inhuman.⁸

While this comment may overstate the case for Georges as an idealist, the stress on defeat is relevant enough. Yet while it is justifiable to evoke the disillusionment of the central character, it is also essential not to miss the positive aspect of this sexual contact. If his knowledge of Corinne does not bring ultimate insight into the meaning of the past for Georges, she does at least inspire and direct, albeit unwittingly, the work of his memory and his imagination, and calls up scenes from that past which can then be subjected to the anxious reinvestigation implicit in virtually every one of Simon's descriptions.

This is to say that Georges's failure on the physical level is counteracted in some measure by his triumph in the realm of the imagined, which has important repercussions for the further triumph of the novel itself as a finished work of art. For it is precisely this intense physical experience with Corinne that illuminates memory in Georges.

8 Morton P. Levitt, 'Disillusionment and Epiphany: the Novels of Claude Simon', p.59.

From the erotic centre of the novel there opens up a whole web of cross-references in space and in time, based on what the novelist himself has called 'une architecture purement sensorielle'.⁹ At various points throughout La Route des Flandres it is the senses of the central character, stimulated by the gestures, words, and simple presence of the woman, which establish an almost electrical contact with the accumulated sense-data of his past. Here, then, is a more significant aspect of the assassination of time: events widely scattered in linear time are brought into close proximity thanks to the images recreated in the mind of Georges during his erotic confrontation with Corinne.

The distance in time may be abolished by the simple physical sensation of coldness:

ils ne nous permettaient de nous lever que lorsque le jour était franchement là et en attendant nous restions à grelotter tremblant de tous nos membres étroitement encastrés enlacés je roulai sur elle l'écrasant de mon poids.

(262)

or by the resonance of a particular sound:

sa tête roulant furieusement à droite et à gauche sur l'oreiller parmi la tache sombre de ses cheveux faisant Non Non Non Non, ils avaient enfermé un fou dans la porcherie de la ferme en haut du pré qui leur servait de corps de garde, devenu fou dans un bombardement parfois il se mettait à crier sans fin sans but.

(264)

and in sounds other than the human voice:

au bout d'un moment elle alluma, je fermai vivement les yeux tout était marron puis marron rouge je les gardai fermés j'entendis l'eau couler argentine emportant dissolvant . . . (je pouvais l'entendre argentine glacée et noire dans la nuit sur le toit de la grange dégorgeant des chêneaux . . .)

(265)

so that there is a ceaseless movement to and fro in time and place; from the present of Georges's night with Corinne

⁹ Quoted in Claude Sarraute, 'Avec La Route des Flandres Claude Simon affirme sa manière', Le Monde, 8 octobre 1960, p.9.

to moments of his experience either as soldier or as prisoner during the war, and to prewar scenes such as the racecourses frequented by the de Reixach family. The narrative is controlled by the receptivity of the remembering consciousness to a variety of sensory stimuli.

In the pages dealing with the couple, Georges and Corinne, Simon again achieves the most striking effect of transition in time and place, sometimes within the space of a few words of the text, and this especially in relation to the twin themes of sex and violence. This conjunction in aggression is arrived at by way of the notions of dissolution and apocalypse. Georges's feeling of liberation from the constraints of normal experience, in the climax of the sexual act, is most strikingly expressed in terms of fluidity:

morts elle et moi assourdis par le vacarme de notre sang se ruant refluant en grondant dans nos membres se précipitant à travers les ramifications compliquées de nos artères comme comment appelle-t-on cela mascaret je crois toutes les rivières se mettant à couler en sens inverse remontant vers leurs sources, comme si nous avions un instant été vidés.

(264-5)

Emptied on the physical level, Georges is then prepared for the flood of memories and images which fill his mental being; foremost amongst these is the obsessive reliving of the liquid nightmare of Flanders:

on aurait dit que dans l'obscurité la nature les arbres la terre entière était en train de se dissoudre noyée diluée liquéfiée grignotée par ce lent déluge.

(265-6)

More significant than this, however, is the manner in which Simon describes the central incident of the novel, the ambush in which de Reixach's squadron is almost annihilated.

For it is surely no coincidence that the scene is evoked through the vocabulary of fluidity, flux and reflux, as Georges remembers seeing the cavalymen in front of him:

des sortes d'animaux aquatiques flottant sur le ventre propulsés par d'invisibles pieds palmés glissant lentement l'un après l'autre . . . la moitié à peu près de

l'escadron se trouvant engagée lorsqu'ils refluent vers le carrefour c'est-à-dire comme un accordéon comme sous la pression d'un invisible piston les repoussant, les derniers continuant toujours à avancer alors que la tête de la colonne semblait pour ainsi dire se rétracter le bruit ne parvenant qu'ensuite de sorte qu'il se passa un moment (peut-être une fraction de seconde mais apparemment plus) pendant lequel dans le silence total il y eut seulement ceci . . .

(155-6)

The image of the flood tide turning back upon itself is common to the two experiences, martial and erotic; in the term mascaret there is an anagram of the similar-sounding massacré, so that the two are brought close together across the gap in time and despite the pages which separate them in the novel itself. In the paroxysm of chaotic action there is also that illusory suspension of time which was evident in the description of the sexual paroxysm as well. La Route des Flandres is indebted, for much of its structural plasticity, to the heightened awareness achieved by its central character when, paradoxically, he seems to be at the very threshold of oblivion.

It is interesting, therefore, to note the underlining of this resemblance between the two experiences, through the use of a particular term at two different and important moments in the time-scheme of memory. The first relates to the miserable conditions encountered in Flanders:

toute la connaissance du monde que nous pouvions avoir c'était ce froid cette eau qui maintenant nous pénétraient de toutes parts, ce même ruissellement obstiné multiple omniprésent qui se mélangeait semblait ne faire qu'un avec l'apocalyptique le multiple piétinement des sabots sur la route . . .

(277)

The second returns to the couple in the aftermath of intercourse in a French hotel room:

tandis que respirant péniblement j'essayais de dégager une de mes jambes prises sous le poids de nos membres emmêlés nous étions comme une seule bête apocalyptique à plusieurs têtes plusieurs membres gisant dans le noir . . .

(293)

In the second passage, a further transition is effected, taking Georges back to the suffocating conditions in a railway wagon full of prisoners of war; there too he had felt as if on the point of expiring. Whether in the restricted feeling of one couple, or of a group of men, or in the picture of a tragic landscape, the desperate sensation of the world's imminent end permits the assassination of time as the text of the novel moves constantly from one scene to another. Thus La Route des Flandres is first and foremost a superb illustration of the vital force of the erotic as a stimulus to memory, to imaginative recall, a force fundamental to Simon's major works.

Beyond the common imagery of dissolution, the most remarkable area of contact between the erotic and the warlike is the display of aggression, again a familiar element in Simon's fictional world. Once more, this omnipresent theme provides a link between levels of time and destroys the temporal perspective of the novel. Allusion is made to the bizarre hostility of the sexual act, as Georges attempts to imagine the furtive coupling of Corinne and the jockey Iglésia:

cette simple suite de gestes, de paroles, de scènes insignifiantes, et, au centre, sans préambule, eet assaut, ce corps à corps urgent, rapide, sauvage.

(51)

In this way the sexual encounter is established on the same vicious footing as the 'normal' physical confrontation of enemies on the field of battle, a theme which Simon will exploit more systematically in La Bataille de Pharsale.

On another occasion it is Georges himself who is involved in the encounter:

Je la heurtai le cri heurtant sa gorge étranglé elle parvint pourtant à dire:

Non

Je dis de nouveau Tu ne crois pas que je t'aime, la heurtant de nouveau mes reins mon ventre la heurtant la frappant de nouveau tout au fond d'elle sa gorge s'étranglant un moment elle fut incapable de parler mais à la fin elle réussit à dire une seconde fois:

Non

et moi: Tu ne crois pas que je t'aime Vraiment

Tu ne crois pas que je t'aime Alors est-ce que je t'aime maintenant Est-ce que je t'aime dis? la heurtant chaque fois plus fort.

(263-4)

An essential factor here is the notion of language as coercion: in a curious way the failure of Georges to persuade Corinne parallels the failure of language to force the past to reveal itself to him in a more comprehensible light. The woman is easy to penetrate in a strictly physical sense; but the de Reixach enigma, like the man himself, remains quite impénétrable (p.58).

There is also the paradox that Georges suffers, in this moment of sexual combat, a paroxystic sensation such as he never undergoes on the field of battle as an actively aggressive soldier. This notion of paroxysm, whether in its military or sexual context, produces startling examples of the assassination of time within the novel, the memory of the central character projecting one area of sensory experience on to the same plane as another. Professor Fletcher has summarized the importance of the erotic in much of Simon's writing:

L'univers viscéral, foisonnant, organique de Claude Simon est hanté, en définitive, par cette constatation tragique, que l'homme, emprisonné dans la durée, sujet aux incohérents délabrements du temps, à cet illusoire et apaisant afflux' dont parle Le Tricheur, tente désespérément, mais finalement en vain, de s'en délivrer par le truchement du dépassement érotique. Mais il lui reste une lueur d'espoir, la création artistique: peinture et priapisme, érotisme et écriture . . . ne font qu'un dans cette oeuvre baroque et splendide. A l'instar de Samuel Beckett, peut-être Claude Simon a-t-il réussi à arracher du néant où est voué tout élan humain, l'unique consolation qui nous demeure possible: la contemplation de l'oeuvre d'art qui consacre notre irréremédiable et inéluctable faillite.¹⁰

If the sexual act, for Georges, fails as the conjuration of solitude and as the means to further knowledge or understanding,

10

'Erotisme et création, ou la mort en sursis', Entretiens, No.31 (1972), pp.131-40 (p.140).

it is nevertheless constructive in stimulating the work of memory and imagination through which the text itself will ultimately be produced.

Memory and imagination are the twin sources of all Simon's major novels, and here again there is evidence of the process by which apparent failure is countered by ultimate triumph, albeit limited. The failure stems from the knowledge that the memory is inadequate, and that there is a preponderance of the imaginative, or fictive, in any reconstruction of the past. This is the main reason why La Route des Flandres is so strongly reminiscent of Absalom, Absalom!. The 'contamination progressive du réel par l'imaginaire'¹¹ is the root of 'fiction' in one sense of the word; 'fiction' may be synonymous with 'untruth' because there is no hope of a total recall of the past, except in those privileged moments retrieved by sensorial memory. Fiction is necessarily created by the fragmentation of perception and memory, which is why Simon's provisional title for this novel was in fact 'Description fragmentaire d'un désastre'. The fiction within the novel is of course represented by the de Reixach enigma, this being the term which Georges himself uses.

He makes ceaseless efforts to piece together the fragments of knowledge at his disposal, from the whispered secrets propagated by his own mother ('à travers l'exaspérant bavardage d'une femme' (p.58)) to the few hesitant facts supplied by Iglésia, to his own first-hand experience. But it is inevitable that his picture will remain incomplete, because Georges is, in symbolic terms, 'derrière sa haie, derrière le temps' (p.49). He faces a double obstacle because in 1940 he was already looking back, and in 1946 he is, as it were, looking back upon that memory; he is twice removed from the truth:

¹¹ Jean-Luc Seylaz, 'Du Vent à La Route des Flandres', p.237.

(il ne dormait pas, se tenait parfaitement immobile, et non pas une grange à présent, non pas la lourde et poussiéreuse senteur du foin desséché, de l'été aboli, mais cette impalpable, nostalgique et tenace exhalaison du temps lui-même, des années mortes . . . et lui se rappelant)

(42-3)

So far distanced in time from the events which continue to fascinate him, he cannot hope to elucidate the enigma of de Reixach's apparent suicide. All he achieves is the formulation of an anguished and familiarly Simonian question:

pensant qu'après tout elle avait peut-être raison et que ce ne serait pas de cette façon c'est-à-dire avec elle ou plutôt à travers elle que j'y arriverai (mais comment savoir?) peut-être était-ce aussi vain, aussi dépourvu de sens de réalité que d'aligner des pattes de mouche sur des feuilles de papier et de le chercher dans des mots, peut-être avaient-ils raison tous deux, lui qui disait que j'inventais brodais sur rien et pourtant on en voyait aussi dans les journaux.

(295)

Georges admits his own twofold failure, on the verbal and physical levels, to resolve, not only one mystery, but two: the apparent suicide of de Reixach, and the incidental but problematical network of sexual and aggressive relationships amongst the group of peasants encountered in Flanders. He and his fellow-soldier Blum spend most of their time in captivity going over and over these two enigmas, Georges concentrating on the figure of Corinne as a possible solution to the question of de Reixach's death. The tragic paradox is that when he is actually with her, she appears almost more diaphanous than the image which he had created; she is incapable of giving body to his obsessions. It is also essential to recognize the nature of the imaginative reconstruction undertaken by Georges and Blum, since this in turn will be of importance in relation to the value of Simon's own conscious intentions as an artist.

If Georges cannot arrive at the truth, why then does he continue to sift through the debris of his experience? One reason is that his mental activity is strictly obsessive, which is why one critic has called La Route des Flandres:

un essai de reconstitution d'une fresque fantastique, atrocement réelle et incroyablement rêvée, oeuvre étrange et magnifique d'un artiste en proie aux multiples obsessions de son imagination et de sa mémoire.¹²

If, at the time of his imprisonment, Georges had actively tried to conjure up a picture of Corinne, tried to find answers to his questions, he is more passive, and more resigned in outlook, when he turns his mind back upon his war-time experiences. He is less an agent of research than a medium, a receptive consciousness in which the images of the past can live again, however briefly and incompletely. This notion of receptivity is the second reason for his search: it is an instinctive activity born out of those sudden moments when, as has been suggested in talking of the themes of sex and warfare, time is abolished by the coinciding of two sensorial experiences from different points on the linear time-scale.

Georges does not necessarily try to bring these moments — a Simonian kind of epiphany, or, in Proustian terms, his equivalent of 'un peu de temps à l'état pur' — into being, but seizes on them as and when they present themselves. The past rushes in upon the present so that the man is taken out of his immediate experience and transposed to a remembered and re-imagined moment of his own personal history; this is the counterpart, in his consciousness, of that 'phénomène d'osmose' (p.26) mentioned in another descriptive passage of the novel, and it serves to emphasize the underlying fluidity which is the guiding principle of La Route des Flandres, both on the thematic and the technical levels.

At one point, for example, Corinne is remonstrating with Georges for having tried to make use of her:

¹² This remark comes from a review by Georges Anex, 'La Route des Flandres', in the Gazette de Lausanne, 14 janvier 1961, included without page reference in the dossiers de presse at Editions de Minuit.

elle essaya de se dégager je dis Qu'est-ce que tu as Qu'est-ce qui te prend? elle essayait toujours de se dégager et de se lever, elle pleurait, elle dit encore une fois Des dessins comme en font les soldats, des propos de soldats, je les écoutais continuer à se disputer dans le soir.

(276)

So easy is this movement in time that the transition is made almost imperceptibly; scarcely has Corinne mentioned soldiers' talk than Georges is listening to soldiers talking again, as though there were no interval whatsoever. Thus the sensual focus of the book is also the productive centre of an intricate sensorial complex, and gives the novel an intensely oneiric quality, not unlike that suspension in time suggested by Lawrence Durrell when he speaks of a novel 'set free to dream'.¹³ In the darkened room shared with Corinne, Georges finds himself at the centre of an obsessive reverie upon his past and the sum of unanswered questions still facing him, a reverie in which he enjoys only the elusive and illusive triumph of imagination and its displacement in time, always coming back to the immediate context of the room itself, his symbolic point of departure: 'the whole of La Route des Flandres is brought to mind by the act of love'.¹⁴

In order to appreciate fully the complexities of this novel, it is impossible to delay any longer an examination of Simon's technical achievements in writing it. Once again the tension between failure and triumph is the key to a proper understanding of those achievements, both in the composition of the novel and in the language through which it comes into being. Simon experiments with form in an attempt to defeat the limitations of the novel as a linear prose medium, and at the same time he exploits the inventive nature of language itself as a further element in the creative act of writing. This is to say that in La Route des Flandres Simon is working

¹³ The Alexandria Quartet (London, Faber and Faber, 1968), p.67.

¹⁴ John Sturrock, The French New Novel, p.76.

more consciously than ever before toward an appraisal of prose fiction's potential as the artistic structure within which to describe experience: already the analogy with Orion is firmly established.

As far as the thematic framework of the novel is concerned, Simon has again used the principle of the éternel retour, this time as it figures in artistic representations, to underline his intentions and to stress the relevance of the human situations described in his novel; this is part and parcel of his technique for eliminating the traditional time-scheme from the book. Mention has already been made of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse as a point of comparison for the Flanders experience, but there are a number of mythological and literary allusions in La Route des Flandres whose purpose is to demonstrate the unchanging in humanity. It should not come as a surprise to find that one of the most effective mythological allusions is of direct relevance to the novel's sexual theme:

quittant mon cou son autre bras semblait ramper le long d'elle-même comme un animal comme un col de cygne invertébré se faufilant le long de la hanche de Leda (ou quel autre oiseau symbolique de l'impudique de l'orgueilleuse oui le paon sur le rideau de filet retombe sa queue chamarrée d'yeux se balançant oscillant mystérieux)

(262-3)

This image, bringing together the hotel encounter and the enigmatic memory of sexual intrigue from a Flanders village, involves an awareness of metamorphosis which is further related to another borrowing from antiquity and which will reappear frequently in Simon's subsequent novels:

j'étais un chien . . . j'étais cet âne de la légende grecque raidi comme un âne idole d'or enfoncée dans sa délicate et tendre chair un membre d'âne je pouvais le voir allant et venant.

(292)

Time is once more abolished through these literally 'classic' situations which highlight the essential postures and movements of human bodies, especially in the animalistic frenzy of the sexual act. It can be said that what was relevant many centuries ago, when Apuleius wrote his Metamorphoses, is no less relevant in the moment of Georges's own twentieth-

century experience.

As Joseph Frank says, in speaking of Ulysses, any mythological allusion is, almost by definition, a statement of changelessness:

The chief source of meaning is the sense of ironic dissimilarity and yet of profound human continuity between the modern protagonists and their long-dead (or only imaginary) exemplars.¹⁵

This is why further references are made, for example, to the mythological figure of the Centaur, who epitomizes the novel's hovering between the human and the animal domains, and is also of relevance where the theme of language is concerned. The name of Vulcan also appears (p.129) in ironic reference to the sexual scandals of the Flanders village through which the cavalrymen pass; and the mythic proportions of the violence of Flanders are captured by another allusion:

nous n'étions pas dans la boue de l'automne nous
n'étions nulle part mille ans ou deux mille ans
plus tôt ou plus tard en plein dans la folie le
meurtre les Atrides, chevauchant à travers le temps . . .
(122; my underlining)

Here is an explicit statement of the annihilation of time due to the basic changelessness of humanity. Certain seminal scenes of La Route des Flandres are again quite deliberate tableaux vivants whose static sharpness brings out this strain of continuity; they immobilize the essential moments at which humanity is revealed for what it is.

Not only mythology, but also the literary heritage is adduced to reinforce this conviction that, although individuals change, the body of human beings remains the same; by referring to literary archetypes, the characters in the novel point up the general applicability of the situations encountered. Because of the apparent foolhardiness of de Reixach, with his rigid application of preconceived and often irrelevant principles, the blind devotion to duty on the part of his

¹⁵ The Widening Gyre, p.58.

lieutenant, what better point of comparison than Cervantes?

Mais il n'y avait pas de tribunes, pas de public élégant pour nous regarder: je pouvais toujours les voir devant nous se silhouettant en sombre (formes donquichottesques décharnées . . .)

(25)

je pouvais maintenant le voir de dos avec ce petit sous-lieutenant à côté de lui marchant tranquillement . . .

(166)

And in a novel where the theme of jealousy is strong, it is not surprising to find an allusion to the play which seems to crystallize the nature and force of jealous emotions:

Après tout tu ne l'as jamais vu qu'en peinture et en buste, avec son fusil de chasse à deux coups sur l'épaule, comme l'autre Othello baneal de village.

(282)

Some of the brief flashes of comedy in La Route des Flandres stem from ironic contrasts such as these between the jealous Moor and the outraged peasant met in a Flanders village, but as well as providing light relief they have the important function of refocussing the attention on characteristic and basic human experience.

A comic twist is given to the theme of conflict between the sexes through the use of a literary allusion. In describing the eighteenth-century de Reixach and his sexual disasters, Blum uses a seventeenth-century reference:

le corps tiède et palpable de cette Agnès . . . cet Arnolphe philanthrope, jacobin et guerroyeur renonçant définitivement à perfectionner l'espèce humaine.

(195-6)

If there is a hint of farce in his situation, allowing the analogy with Molière's L'Ecole des Femmes, there is nevertheless an overriding tone of pathos: the man's breakdown is caused by the gulf which he experiences between his Rousseauesque theories, and the events which overwhelm him in the real world. In fact the comic and heroic aspects of warfare are brought very close together with a reference to legendary or literary horses, proving again how fundamental is equine imagery in the fluidity of the narrative transitions and in the evocation of continuity. When Georges sees again the dead horse lying beside the road he muses on

the fate that has befallen it and all its equine ancestors:

non plus viande boucanée et puante mais transmuée,
 assimilé par la terre profonde qui cache en elle
 sous sa chevelure d'herbe et de feuilles les osse-
 ments des défuntes Rossinantes et des défunts Bucé-
 phales.

(242)

The steeds of the great warrior Alexander, of the ludicrous adventurer Don Quixote, and of some nameless French soldier are all brought together by this common experience of death and the reversion to the original state of matter, so that literary and mythological allusions can be seen to function with reference to the theme of the éternel retour: death remains a constant, both on the individual and the universal planes. By strewing such allusions throughout his text, Simon is lifting the events and scenes described out of a restricted temporal framework and wilfully destroying the illusion of linear progression.

Such allusions also help to provide landmarks within so fragmented and fluid a text, as well as pointing up its thematic impact. Simon has also used another artistic representation, the de Reixach family portrait, as an element of similarity between the two leading military men of that name, and particularly as a link between two time-schemes, through the common denominator of suicide:

ce portrait où le temps — la dégradation — avait remédié par la suite (comme un correcteur facétieux, ou plutôt scrupuleux) à l'oubli — ou plutôt l'imprévision — du peintre, posant (et de la manière même dont s'y était prise la balle, c'est-à-dire en faisant sauter un morceau du front, de sorte que ce n'était pas une rectification par addition, comme eût procédé un second peintre chargé plus tard de la correction, mais en ouvrant aussi un trou dans le visage — ou la couche de couleur qui imitait ce visage — de façon à ce qu'apparût ce qu'il y avait au-dessous), posant là cette tache rouge et sanglante comme une salissure qui semblait un démenti tragique à tout le reste.

(80-1)

The portrait is one of the few concrete objects that Georges has seen which are pertinent to the de Reixach legend, and even then it is enigmatic in the extreme; it serves only to spur the effort of imagination, precisely because it does not

tell the whole truth about the eighteenth-century personage, any more than the snatches of gossip and the sight of Corinne or de Reixach give Georges a full understanding of their background. The portrait acts as a leitmotiv in the movement of Georges's remembering imagination, inspiring him to envisage other eighteenth-century scenes so graphically that they stand out with the sharpness of detail that one might expect from a painted representation:

comme s'ils avaient revêtu, chaussé, coiffé quelque imaginaire et inexistant personnage, les regardant de ce même oeil sec, glacé, effrayant, tandis qu'il continuait toujours à grelotter, impassible, et se reculant pour juger de l'effet, et à la fin renversant sans doute la chaise d'un revers de main, puisque sur la gravure elle gisait par terre et les vêtements...'

Et Blum: 'La gravure? Alors il y en a bien une! Tu m'avais dit que...'

Et Georges: 'Mais non. Il n'y en a pas. Où as-tu pris ça?'

(214)

If memory is able to pick out similarities between an immediate experience and a situation immobilized in a work of art, the imagination is no less capable of projecting a vivid picture of events that may well never have taken place, and of giving them the authenticity that such a work of art seems to enjoy. In La Route des Flandres, 'un tableau à la Dufy d'abord et un Dürer ensuite',¹⁶ Simon has made full and astonishing use of this two-way process. His novel abounds in graphic delineations of 'frozen moments' which either imagination or memory creates.

This may still be seen as a triumph on the thematic level, since time is assassinated only through the constant nature of man, and in any case that nature is cause only for pessimism. Reverting to the thornier technical problems of La Route des Flandres, it is important to evaluate Simon's

16 Gennie Luccioni, 'La Route des Flandres', Esprit, 29 (1961), pp.187-90.

success in circumventing the obstacle of linear form in order to transcribe a vision which is essentially spatial, like that of a painter. Here again it is the question of time which is capital to the artist's undertaking, as Simon himself has freely admitted:

Ces bribes de souvenir, pourquoi chercher à les classer en un ordre chronologique? Je ne me soucie pas de ce que l'on pourrait appeler la perspective du temps . . . Dans la mémoire tout se situe sur le même plan: le dialogue, l'émotion, la vision coexistent. Ce que j'ai voulu c'est forger une structure qui convienne à cette vision des choses, qui me permette de présenter les uns après les autres des éléments qui dans la réalité se superposent, de retrouver une architecture purement sensorielle. C'est cela qui me semble le plus naturel, le plus difficile aussi. Les peintres ont bien de la chance. Il suffit au passant d'un instant pour prendre conscience des différents éléments d'une toile. Je voudrais amener le lecteur à confondre son temps avec le mien.¹⁷

Simon's task is to distribute within the linear framework of a novel, components which are really those of a canvas:

Le livre est fait dans une vue qui le donne, non pas perspectivement, et dans l'avènement du concept, mais comme un paysage.¹⁸

He tries to deploy in time the spatial elements of a painting in order to form a harmonious whole, conforming to a pictorial logic rather than to the demands of traditional chronology. This Simon has done, to a certain extent, in abolishing the distance in time which separates any given event in the text from the ones coming immediately before or after, effecting startling transitions in time by using the 'harmonics' which are provided by similarities of gesture, sound, colour — as in the liberal use of the term fauve more as a colour than as a quality of character, especially in the evocation of those

17 Claude Sarraute, 'Avec La Route des Flandres Claude Simon affirme sa manière'.

18 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cinq notes sur Claude Simon', Médiations 4 (hiver 1961), pp.5-9; reprinted in Entretiens, No.31 (1972), pp.41-6 (p.44).

racecourse scenes, 'des scènes, de fugitifs tableaux printaniers ou estivaux' (p.48), which really do give the impression of being descriptions of painted scenes by a Dufy — and it is worth recalling that Dufy is best known as a fauviste, one of a school of painters dedicated to an 'exaltation de la couleur pure'.¹⁹ In La Route des Flandres the simple coincidence in coloration of a spring day may well cause the text to switch from Flanders to France and back again.

But it is perhaps the suggestion of superimposition which points to Simon's main stratagem, one which he has borrowed from music. In this novel Simon has conducted an experiment which he will repeat in La Bataille de Pharsale, by incorporating in the first part of the text a statement of the themes which will be developed in the rest of the book. After the manner of a musical composition, the main body of La Route des Flandres is an approfondissement of the preoccupations introduced in the first fifteen pages of the novel: the suicide, the relationship with Corinne, the Flanders debacle, the quest undertaken by Georges, all are announced in the opening sequence. Furthermore, although music is a time-art, it is fortunate in being able to use the technique of counterpoint to show a number of themes evolving simultaneously:

Sensory impression is the writer's nearest attempt at recording pure sensations and images. It marks the transposition of musical and poetical effects into fiction. Although the writer of internal analysis may employ metaphor, . . . he usually stops there. The user of sensory impression, on the other hand, will generally go so far as to rebuild the entire texture of his work on an analogy with either music or poetry.²⁰

19 Jean Leymarie, Le Fauvisme (Geneva, 1959), p.13.

20 Melvin Friedman, Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method (New Haven, 1955), p.6.

This, then, is what Simon has done in La Route des Flandres: he has adopted for narrative prose a principle of music, so that his novel becomes, in a way, a rhythmic exercise related to the polyphonic art of the fugue. In order to realize this, it is necessary only to pick out the three strands of 'narrative' in La Route des Flandres, each of which is broadly similar to the others, and offers a point of comparison and interrelationship with them.

The twentieth-century de Reixach's difficulties with his wife and others, is paralleled not only by the affairs of his predecessor in the eighteenth century, but also by the strange goings-on in the Flanders village where Georges and his companions make a stop. This offers a minor version of the three-sided figure representing human jealousy, serving as a reflection of the two other affairs involving the de Reixach family. It also has the virtue of being a part of the first-hand experience of Georges and his companions; their efforts and failures to piece together the fragments of this other puzzle are an echo of their attempts to work out the intricacies of their captain's background. This parallel line of development is firmly introduced near the beginning of the novel, to recur throughout:

il lui semblait toujours la voir, là où elle s'était tenue l'instant d'avant, ou plutôt la sentir, la percevoir comme une sorte d'empreinte persistante, irréelle, laissée moins sur sa rétine (il l'avait si peu, si mal vue) que, pour ainsi dire, en lui-même: une chose tiède, blanche comme le lait qu'elle venait de tirer au moment où ils étaient arrivés, une sorte d'apparition non pas éclairée par cette lampe mais luminescente, comme si sa peau était elle-même la source de la lumière, comme si toute cette interminable chevauchée nocturne n'avait eu d'autre raison, d'autre but que la découverte à la fin de cette chair diaphane modelée dans l'épaisseur de la nuit: non pas une femme mais l'idée même, le symbole de toute femme . . .
(41)

Like the eighteenth-century woman, this peasant-girl is a figure who seems to surge out of the darkness of the past as the focal point of one of the tableaux created in the mind of Georges, in the same kind of dramatic lighting:

cette femme à moitié nue entrevue dans l'entrebâillement de la porte, le sein et le visage éclairés d'en dessous par une bougie, si bien qu'elle ressemble à une de ces Marianne de plâtre des salles d'école ou de mairie où la poussière . . . s'accumule en couches grises sur toutes les saillies, inversant ainsi le relief ou plutôt la lumière . . .

(189)

Both of these are parallels for Georges's own encounter with Corinne, a captivating physical presence in a darkened hotel room, intermittently lit by one lamp, and where she too offers Georges, in a metaphorical sense, 'le lait de l'oubli' (p.261). Each of them is a representative of womanhood whose primary function is to tantalize and ultimately to evade Georges.

The peasant girl's background is remarkably similar to the network of circumstances woven around the de Reixach family, especially in that this woman seems first of all a provocation to the instinctive sexual reaction of the male:

Georges disant: 'Mais je l'ai assez vue pour savoir qu'elle est comme du lait. Cette lampe suffisait. Bon sang, c'était exactement comme du lait . . .'

(61)

Secondly, she has the capacity to provoke violence:

'Si j'ai bien compris ce boiteux champion de tir au fusil a des peines de coeur?' . . . Il (je veux dire l'adjoint ce type qui ce matin armé d'un parapluie de sa seule frousse et du rempart d'un officier est allé narguer défier l'autre armé lui d'un fusil) couchait avec sa propre soeur qui était la femme de ce boiteux c'est bien ça?

(127)

Since Georges is also a distant relative of de Reixach, there is also the further parallel of implied incest to bring the strands of this counterpoint together. All through the novel the three time-levels interlock and merge, but there is no more obvious instance than when Corinne talks of herself as a symbol of womanhood in the same way as Georges has spoken of the village girl:

tu ferais mieux de dire quoi, il me semble que ce n'est pas difficile à deviner il me semble qu'il n'est pas très difficile de se figurer à quoi peuvent penser pendant cinq ans un tas d'hommes privés de femmes, à peu près quelque chose dans le genre de ce qu'on voit dessiné sur les murs des cabines téléphoniques ou des toilettes des cafés je pense que c'est normal je pense que c'est la

chose la plus naturelle mais dans ces sortes de dessins on ne représente jamais les figures, ça s'arrête en général au cou quand ça arrive jusque là quand celui qui s'est servi du crayon ou du clou pour gratter le plâtre s'est donné la peine de dessiner autre chose.

(96)

Corinne too is a symbol, a sketchy figure whose essence is not in her own identity but in the sexual role, as the focal point of male attention. It is only because Georges is a typically intelligent Simonian narrator that she is able to function also as the stimulus for many of his searching looks at the past. The strain of sexual attraction is the main melodic line of the novel, on which there are three variations relating to three widely-distanced levels of time: the point of La Route des Flandres is to compose a timeless scheme out of these three narrative threads.

Indeed the figure three is very important to the novel as a whole. There are three illustrations of the eternal triangle, the novel is divided into three sections, and the problem of linearity was solved when Simon hit upon the idea of a triple movement as the basic principle of composition:

Ce n'est que plus tard que sa composition m'est apparue en songeant à la forme de l'as de trèfle qu'on ne peut dessiner d'un seul trait qu'en passant trois fois par le même point. Ce point, dans La Route des Flandres, c'est le cheval mort vers lequel, dans leur²¹ errance, les cavaliers reviennent trois fois de suite.

The dead horse appears in each of the novel's three sections and is used to emphasize the acceleration of time in warfare, as Georges is astonished at the rapidity with which the animal reverts to the state of inanimate matter:

déjà à moitié absorbé semblait-il par la terre, comme si celle-ci avait déjà sournoisement commencé à reprendre possession de ce qui était issu d'elle. . . .

(27)

un cheval, ou plutôt ce qui avait été un cheval. . . et retournait maintenant, ou était déjà retourné à la terre originelle sans apparemment avoir eu besoin de passer par le stade intermédiaire de la putréfaction, c'est-à-dire par une sorte de transmutation ou de transsubstanciation accélérée. . . .

(105)

²¹ André Bourin, 'Techniciens du roman: Claude Simon'.

mais plus de mouches maintenant, comme si elles-mêmes l'avaient abandonné, comme s'il n'y avait plus rien à en tirer, comme s'il était déjà — mais ce n'était pas possible, pensa Georges, pas en un jour — . . . (242)

The central actions narrated take place in the one day of aimless wandering in the Flanders countryside, and the recurrent description of the dead horse situates the surface time-scheme of the book; but the intervening pages are the product of memory and imagination repeatedly rediscovering this focal image as the mind of the protagonist comes back ineluctably to the extant and obsessive moments of his experience.

It is a curious accident that the most dramatic of all these moments should occur at the exact centre of the text: the narrative seems to work slowly inwards toward the description of the ambush which wiped out the cavalry squadron (pp.155ff.), and then outwards again to embrace the whole spectrum of Georges's experience. This is a feature on which the novelist himself has recently provided another interesting comment:

Ainsi dans La Route des Flandres, redoublant la composition en forme de trèfle . . . s'organise un jeu des éléments autour d'un point central: le roman s'ouvre et se ferme sur la chevauchée mortelle de Reixach sur la route, le centre exact du livre étant occupé par l'épisode de l'anéantissement de l'escadron surpris par une embuscade, épisode lui-même 'cadre' par le début et la fin de la course d'obstacles que dispute et perd Reixach (s'anéantissant ainsi, ou se perdant, aux yeux de Corinne). Divers épisodes, différents thèmes (comme celui des paysans du cantonnement) apparaissent et réapparaissent de part et d'autre de l'élément central, l'ensemble se présentant en somme un peu comme ces coupes de terrains au centre desquels se trouve un puits artésien et dont les différentes couches superposées (sableuses, argileuses, etc.) décrivant une courbe sous-jacente, toujours présentes, donc, en profondeur, affleurent à la surface de part et d'autre du puits.²²

The core of the novel is supplied by the account of the one

22 'La fiction mot à mot', pp.92-3.

first-hand experience which has most marked Georges's consciousness, and the narrative gains in intensity for Simon's abandoning of linear prose in favour of an exploratory structure designed to mirror as faithfully as possible the fluid movement of memory, the appearance and reappearance of seminal images within the non-linear memory. Simon has also referred to the structure of the book as being based on the figure eight;²³ not only does this convey the convergence of the narrative threads at a central point, but it may also be said to mirror the movement of Georges's thoughts from the present through the central point of Corinne to the past, from Flanders through the central image of the horse to the prewar or even more distant past, and so on. But in order to examine Simon's triumph in creating what is essentially a timeless work of art, it is now vital to study aspects of the poetic language through which that triumph is achieved — but once again, only after the threat of failure even on this most important level.

La Route des Flandres, like most of Simon's best work, is in large part a novel about language. Where language fails is, first of all, in its role as an instrument of communication between individuals. On the Flanders road the feeling of dissolution is carried even into the realm of language, which breaks down on occasion and merely reinforces chaos:

aux prises avec un groupe d'hommes gesticulant, s'échauffant, s'affrontant, les voix se mêlant en une sorte de chœur incohérent, désordonné, de babelesque criaille-rie, comme sous le poids d'une malédiction, une parodie de ce langage qui, avec l'inflexible perfidie des choses créées ou asservies par l'homme, se retournent contre lui et se vengent avec d'autant plus de trahison et d'efficacité qu'elles semblent apparemment remplir docilement leur fonction: obstacle majeur,

²³ See for example Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Claude Simon', p.187.

donc, à toute communication, toute compréhension, les voix montant alors, comme si la simple modulation des sons se révélant impuissante elles n'avaient plus d'espoir que dans leur force, s'élevant jusqu'au cri, s'efforçant l'une l'autre de dominer, de se surpasser.

(59-60)

Considered in these terms, language is not so much a valuable link between men as one more instrument of aggression, where volume replaces meaning and nothing is achieved. Although La Route des Flandres is diametrically opposed, in intention and conception, to such a play as La Cantatrice Chauve, Simon does at least share with Ionesco this tendency to reveal the savagely uncommunicative force of language, and to remove from language its thin veneer of order and of 'meaning': both men are working, paradoxically, with the medium which they undermine. The soldiers themselves find it impossible to make sense of their conversation, to the point where this absence of communication becomes a fatality in itself and an atmosphere of resignation is created:

Ils continuèrent à se disputer, leurs voix même pas hargneuses, avec quelque chose de dolent plutôt, empreintes de cette sorte d'apatmie propre aux paysans et aux soldats.

(68-9)

It is not only the uneducated who experience this failure; Blum and Georges, intelligent men both, become exasperated at their inability to arrive, through discussion, at an elucidation of the de Reixach enigma. This frustration is evident when they appear to be talking at cross-purposes:

et Georges: 'Mais non!' . . .
 et Georges: 'Mais non. Tu mélanges tout . . .'
 et Blum: 'Bon sang! Mais qu'est-ce qu'il y a alors?' . . .'
 et Georges: 'Oh bon Dieu! . . .'

(194-7)

They are intelligent enough to be sceptical of the possibilities of the word, whether spoken or captured on the printed page. This is where Georges's own background is relevant, because of his fraught relationship with his father, the gross professorial figure familiar from L'Herbe:

Aiming for himself as subject, Georges undertakes a pursuit of identity; pursuit against language . . .

which is grasped as a pursuit against his father — normalien, agrégé, teacher, writer, in short, representative and guardian of the word.²⁴

The main point of contention between father and son is their attitude to language as an intellectual, expressive system. Georges would much rather be a farmer, actively participating in the process of natural creativity, than a purveyor of words like his father; this was shown quite clearly in L'Herbe, based on a period of time after Georges's return from active service. His revolt is made clear at certain moments in La Route des Flandres, and almost from the beginning:

rien n'est pire que le silence quand, et Georges alors en colère disant: 'Mais bien sûr!', et son père regardant toujours sans le voir le boqueteau de trembles . . . et disant: 'Qu'est-ce que tu as?' et lui: 'Rien je n'ai rien Je n'ai surtout pas envie d'aligner encore des mots et des mots et encore des mots Est-ce qu'à la fin tu n'en as pas assez toi aussi?' et son père: 'De quoi?' et lui: 'Des discours D'enfiler des . . .'
puis se taisant.

(35-6)

What begins to emerge from the novel is a change of attitude in Georges as his own circumstances are altered. At one stage, remembering the period of captivity in Germany, he recalls mentioning to Blum a note he has had from his father:

cinq lignes sur les insipides lamentations qu'elle répand tout au long de ces lettres aux lignes heureusement limitées que nous sommes autorisés à recevoir, pour ajouter au concert ses propres lamentations en me faisant part de son désespoir à la nouvelle du bombardement de Leipzig et de sa paraît-il irremplaçable bibliothèque . . .'

(223)

In the misery of prisoner-of-war camp Georges has little patience with these bleatings over the loss of some books. What, after all, is the use of a library? What good are books, when food and clothes and other essentials are missing?

²⁴ Stephen Heath, The Nouveau Roman, p.163.

Georges still seems scornful of his father's attitude to words, just as he had been before leaving home:

Parce que tout ce qu'il a à sa disposition c'est seulement cela cette pesante obstinée et superstitieuse crédulité — ou plutôt croyance — en l'absolue prééminence du savoir appris par procuration, de ce qui est écrit, de ces mots que son père à lui qui n'était qu'un paysan n'a jamais pu réussir à déchiffrer, leur prêtant, les chargeant donc d'une sorte de pouvoir mystérieux, magique . . .'

(36)

But almost without realizing it he himself has come round to a position of dependence on language.

Even though words are the most evanescent of human products ('chaque fois qu'ils ouvraient la bouche il s'en échappait un petit jet de buée grise qui s'effaçait presque aussitôt' (pp.65-6)), and despite his sarcasms about Blum's theories regarding de Reixach, Georges, in the camp, begins to rely on language in the same way that his less inquisitive compatriots turn to songs, cards, and trading, in the attempt to gloss over the wretched reality of their surroundings. There is a very revealing passage in which, from the point of view of a man looking back on his experience, Georges can appreciate the significance of those conversations with the little Jew:

ils essayaient de se transporter par procuration (c'est-à-dire au moyen de leur imagination, c'est-à-dire en rassemblant et combinant tout ce qu'ils pouvaient trouver dans leur mémoire en fait de connaissances vues, entendues ou lues, de façon — là, au milieu des rails mouillés et luisants, des wagons noirs, des pins détremés et noirs, dans la froide et blafarde journée d'un hiver saxon — à faire surgir les images chatoyantes et lumineuses au moyen de l'éphémère, l'incantatoire magie du langage, des mots inventés dans l'espoir de rendre comestible — comme ces pâtes vaguement sucrées sous lesquelles on dissimule aux enfants les médicaments amers — l'innommable réalité) dans cet univers futile, mystérieux et violent dans lequel, à défaut de leur corps, se mouvaient leur esprit: quelque chose peut-être sans plus de réalité qu'un songe . . .

(184)

This is one of the most important passages in Simon, which prefigures, through the use of the terms rassemblant and combinant, his later and frequent references to the technique

of literary collage which is so important in his later work. It is also a pointer to the image of the cave, which will appear in Le Palace as an evocation of the dreamlike quality of experience and of the accounts we try to give of that experience. Language is a means of escape, a mental refuge from bleak physical reality. Procuration and magie are the terms Georges used in ironizing his father's submission to language, but the son too falls victim to this attitude.

Exactly the same truth applies when he is side by side with Corinne; although he is not speaking directly to the woman, his monologue is an attempt nevertheless to resuscitate the past through the use of language, which is no doubt why his evocation of that past is endowed with such oneiric quality. Is it not supremely ironic that, remembering Georges's refutation of language, Blum should be able to stop him in full flight with the amused exclamation: 'Mais tu parles comme un livre! Et Georges relevant la tête, le regardant un moment, perplexe, interdit' (p.222)? Such is the force of his curiosity that he cannot prevent himself from trying to arrive at a more profound understanding of his experience, and the one recourse he has is language, the attempt to explain his dilemma to those around him. It is a short step to the level of the novelist himself, and his attitudes to the artistic medium in which he works.

For this is the difference between Georges, the central character, the focal point of the novel's human themes, and Claude Simon the novelist: where the one tries and fails to use language as a moyen, a system of expression in a world of chaos, the novelist triumphs by giving language its head, by tapping the resources of language as a matériau in which to give plastic shape to his own apprehension of chaos.²⁵ There is no satisfying plot, no linear development toward

²⁵ See Jean Ricardou, Problèmes du nouveau roman, p.18, for his succinct distinction between 'informateurs' and 'écrivains'.

a conclusion in La Route des Flandres, no answers to any of the questions raised. Instead, and magnificently, there is a harmonious and pictorial representation of one man's consciousness transcribed into the structure of a poetic language evolving in time and eventually falling prey to time in the sense that the novel has to end, and does so on an affirmation of the power of time. It is the paradoxical productivity of the novel's language which must finally be investigated.

Even at this level Simon is realistic enough to admit the shortcomings of language; he is, after all, giving only a fragmentary description, and to underline this fact he refers to some papers found by Georges in the loft of his old house. In terms which are deliberately echoing the field of battle, the littered countryside through which Georges rides in Flanders, these old documents are described in this way:

sillage de débris surnageants, morceaux, parchemins semblables à des fragments d'épiderme tels qu'en les touchant il lui semblait toucher au même moment — un peu raccornis, un peu desséchés comme ces mains tavelées des vieillards, légères, fragiles et immatérielles, prêtes, semble-t-il, à se briser et tomber en cendres lorsqu'on les saisit, mais néanmoins vivantes — par delà les années, le temps supprimé, comme l'épiderme même des ambitions, des rêves, des vanités, des futiles et impérissables passions)

(54-5; my underlining)

This is a succinct, evocative statement of the success and failure of the book itself, which may be incomplete but still achieves an almost plastic, living representation of a period in time, and of the impressions left upon a particularly receptive and retentive consciousness, so that reality is not subjugated but re-presented as an inchoate mass.

One of the documents helps also to bridge the gap in time by reflecting the human/equine ambiguity of certain situations in the novel. This is to say that the page transcribed from Italian is a kind of mise en abyme for the novel itself:

tout dans la femme Centaure est gratieux, e délicat, et tout mérite D'être regardé avec une attention particulière le noeud et la jointure ou la partie umaine

finit avec la partie cheval est certainement admirable l'oeil distingue la délicatesse de la blanche carnation dans la femme de la netteté du pelage éclatant dans la bête d'un bay clair mais on confond ensuite en voulant déterminer les Confins.

(55-6)

Apart from the obvious comparison with the terms in which Corinne herself is described, this passage reflects several aspects of the language of the novel, not least of which is the capacity of words to be distorted, whether in print or in the way they are mishandled in the human mouth:

'Reichac vingt dieux t'as pas encore compris: chac l'ixe comme ch-che et le ch à la fin comme k Mince alors jte jure çuilà qu'est-ee qu'il peut être cloche ça fait au moins dix fois que je le lui explique . . .'

(46)

The non-academic parlance of Iglésia is followed by the disjointed lyrics of the prisoners' songs:

Granpèr! Granpèr!
Vouzou blié vo! tre! che! val!
Granpèr! Granpèr!

(121)

and by the idiosyncrasies of local dialect:

elle me remplit encore une fois à ras bord ce petit cône qui tenait lieu de verre de comment appellent-ils ça du genièvre je crois là-bas ils disent g'nièvr.

(125)

and finally by many instances of military slang, especially as used by Iglésia:

'Si ces corniauds arrêtaient seulement un peu leur bastringue on pourrait peut-être arriver à roupiller!'

(136)

Not only does language have to try to evoke fragmentation, it is also itself susceptible to deformation, and has apparently no stability.

But language is superbly resourceful, and one of Simon's main allies in 'La Route des Flandres' is the use of metaphor, the figure of speech which by definition allows a transfer to take place not only from one area of meaning to another, by the movement from the literal to the figurative, but also from one level of time to another. This is what Ricardou calls, in 'Problèmes du nouveau roman', by the apt name of 'métaphore structurelle' (p.48). By the liberal use of this technique Simon frees the text from the constraints of

time and makes possible a fluid transfer from one area to another within the remembering consciousness. As the Italian passage suggested, the main metaphorical system in La Route des Flandres is that which blurs the frontiers between the human and the equine. The abolition of distance between one event and another is accomplished in part by the contiguity of images, most succinctly expressed in the concision of metaphor.²⁶ Georges and Blum exchange comic propositions in which men and horses are brought together around the theme of sex:

c'était son travail et il s'en acquittait avec cette scrupuleuse application dont il avait fait preuve depuis cinq ans qu'il montait pour lui, et pas seulement ses chevaux racontait-on, grim pant sautant aussi sa, mais que ne racontait-on pas sur lui sur eux.
(47-8)

At some moments there is deliberate playing with language around the central theme of sexual metamorphosis:

'Ou plutôt d'étalons, dit Blum, parce que dans une famille pareille je suppose que c'est comme ça qu'il faut les appeler, non? Est-ce que l'armée n'a pas par là-bas un centre d'élevage réputé, un haras? Est-ce que ce n'est pas ce qu'on appelle les Tarbais, avec les diverses variétés . . . — Bon, bon, dit Georges, va pour étalons, il . . . — . . . pur-sangs, demi-sangs, entiers, hongres . . . — Bon, dit Georges, mais lui c'est pur-sang . . .
(54)

As is the case when the villagers are talked of as goats (pp.127-8), this use of metaphor serves not only as a comic device but also as a means to eliminate temporal distance from situation to situation. It is scarcely necessary to say how close is the metaphorical relationship between the erotic positions taken up by Georges and Corinne, and the postures of the herdsmen on the Flanders road; it has already been said, in referring to the Apuleius legend, that Georges makes clear the association between himself and the animal kingdom.

26

See also Raymond Jean, 'Les signes de l'éros', Entretiens, No.31 (1972), pp.121-9 (pp.121-6 in particular); and Jean Ricardou, Problemes du nouveau roman, pp.51-2.

The other metaphoric strain in La Route des Flandres is the familiar rapprochement of the earth with the principle of womanhood, which produces some of the most astonishing pages of the novel, in the facility of transfer from one situation — Georges hiding in a ditch in Flanders — to another: Georges pursuing the sexual experience with Corinne. This is anticipated early in the novel with the phrase 'cette bouche herbue' (p.41), in the close interplay of fossé and sillon (pp.256-7), and in the fact that Corinne is said to become the 'dure et pourpre chair de cette terre' (p.247); Georges is the ass, the dog, and so forth; the woman is a bird, a ditch, a mould, constantly open to the man. Although she remains distant from Georges, even when he is beside her, the paradox brought out by the use of metaphor is this almost tangible reality of the woman as he thinks about her:

c'est-à-dire la couleur, ce rouge acide, peut-être simplement parce qu'elle était quelque chose à quoi pensait non son esprit, mais ses lèvres, sa bouche, peut-être à cause de son nom, parce que 'Corinne' faisait penser à 'corail'?

(235)

et sirop, et orgeat, des mots aussi pour elle, pour cela . . .

(49)

Clearly it is essential to narrow the focus still further in order to concentrate, on the power of individual words to contain different meanings and to allow a transfer in time: this is the fundamentally poetic character of language in La Route des Flandres.

Simon has exploited the multiple semantic content of single words on several occasions in his novel:

j'éloignai le miroir, mon ou plutôt ce visage de méduse basculant s'envolant comme aspiré par le fond ombreux . . .

(43)

When, a few lines later, the dishevelled appearance of his hair is described, this brings together the image of the monster Medusa and the aquatic creature, which must also be taken along with the previously implied sexual overtone:

faisant penser à ces organismes marins et carnivores aveugles mais pourvus de lèvres, de cils: l'orifice de cette matrice le creuset originel . . .

(42)

This points the way to a whole series in which Simon exploits the polysemantic words such as raide; de Reixach is 'stiff' in refusing to relax his military bearing (p.60), a dead body is stiff in the posture of death, and of course there is the sexual connotation whereby Georges is 'raidi comme un âne' (p.292); even the neck of a horse is 'raide comme un mât' (p.157), so that an immense variety of situations can be seen to come together within the reductive structure of words. This is possibly most evident where the term gland is concerned:

je m'écartai le retirai complètement pouvant le voir au-dessous de moi sorti d'elle luisant mince à la base puis renflé comme un fuseau un poisson . . . avec au bout cette espèce de tête, d'ogive ou plutôt comme une sorte de bonnet avec sa fente en haut à la fois bouche muette et oeil furieux et mort aux bords rosés comme ceux de ces animaux poissons . . . on dit gland à cause de la peau qui le recouvre à moitié, c'était alors de nouveau l'automne mais en un an nous avons appris à nous dépouiller.

(290-1)

After an explicit series of similes, it is the word gland which again acts as a point of transition taking the mind of the central character away from this immediate sexual experience and back to the time when acorns were on the ground in an autumn spent in captivity. This is underlined by Georges's likening himself to a tree in the excitement of sexual passion: 'l'arbre sortant de moi était enfoncé' (p.292), and in the play on the word pissenlit:

je boufferais les pissenlits par la racine bouffant là où elle pisse suant nos corps emperlés exhalant cette âcre et forte odeur de racine, de mandragore, j'avais lu que les naufragés les ermites se nourrissaient de racines de glands et à un moment elle le prit d'abord entre ses lèvres puis tout entier dans sa bouche comme un enfant goulé c'était comme si nous nous buvions l'un l'autre.

(259)

So aware is Simon of the suggestive power of language that he uses similar terms in yet another circumstance, quite

different from these, and seemingly unrelated, where words found at other points in the novel all come together in one concentrated passage:

quatre demi-sang tarbais produits de croisement connu sous l'appellation d'anglo-arabe deux d'entre eux entiers celui du capitaine hongre le quatrième (monté par le simple cavalier) étant en fait une jument . . . celui du capitaine bai-brun . . . celui du sous-lieutenant alezan doré la jument montée par le simple cavalier baie . . . celui de l'ordonnance bai-clair . . . et le cheval de main . . . alezan ou plutôt rouquin ou plutôt rose lie-de-vin, moucheté de gris la queue d'un gris jaunâtre légèrement ondulée, liste en tête, descendant jusqu'aux naseaux et la lèvre supérieure d'un blanc rose, le cheval étant alors dit 'buvant dans son blanc' . . .

(301)

Here is a dense network of echoes: the human-animal metamorphosis, the passage from the Italian text, the colours, and finally the sexual connotations of 'drinking' — for Georges too talks of 'le lait de l'oubli' (p.261) and of the 'bouts rose-thé' (p.261) of Corinne's breasts. The effect of these echoes is to help destroy temporal perspective through the elaboration of a vast system of cross-references. If the novelist has only a limited stock of words to choose from, nevertheless he can capitalize on their polyvalency in order to release the text which he is creating.

Another 'poetic' aspect of language is the simple value of harmonious sounds, which can be onomatopoeic:

le bruit, le martellement monotone et multiple des sabots . . .

(30)

leurs noms gutturaux et râpeux Arhmed ben Abdahalla ou Bouhabda ou Abderhamane . . .

(260)

or suggestive of movement:

les chevaux aux noms dansants — Carpasta, Milady, Zeida, Naharo, Romance, Primarosa, Riskoli, Carpaccio, WildRisk, Samarkand, Chichibu . . .

(23)

or purely alliterative:

la même houri la même haletante hoquetante haquenée

(296)

while at other times there is a more conscious illustration of

the power of words to create mental images. This is often introduced or emphasized by phrases such as 'comme on dit', or 'pour ainsi dire', when the novelist is deliberately pointing to the suggestive richness of language:

Les chiens ont mangé la boue, je n'avais jamais entendu l'expression, il me semblait voir les chiens . . .
(9)

il n'aurait pas donné un coup d'éperon pas donné sa place pour un boulet de canon c'est le cas de le dire il y a comme ça des expressions qui tombent à pic . . .
(15)

les haies ici étaient faites d'aubépine ou de charme je crois petites feuilles gaufrées ou plutôt tuyautées comme on dit . . .
(90)

le fidèle jockey ou plutôt étalon dont l'infidèle Agnès avait fourbi, ou plutôt qui avait, comme on dit, fait reluire la jeune . . .
(197)

As with metaphor, the point of all these examples is to suggest the paradoxical adaptability of language. If it is not a valid system of communication, it is nonetheless a creative and in that sense a poetic structure within which to explore experience, to describe and attempt to evaluate the fluidity of the space-time continuum where the complex web of obsession, memory, and imagination evolves. In this novel Simon has included an actual demonstration of the theory of artistic language which he will expound more precisely in the preface to Orion Aveugle: words are semantic storehouses within which the multiple paths of one man's experience of the world coincide and cross-fertilize one another. If language is reductive in the sense of failing to cope adequately with reality, it is productive in its composition of an artistic and thus timelessly relevant representation of that reality.

This, then, is Simon's triumph in La Route des Flandres, and it emerges even when Georges questions himself so anxiously as the narrative approaches its conclusion. Language is powerless to name:

mais comment appeler cela: non pas la guerre non pas la classique destruction ou extermination d'une des deux armées mais plutôt la disparition l'absorption par le néant ou le tout originel de ce qui une semaine auparavant était encore des régiments des batteries des escadrons des escouades des hommes, ou plus encore: la disparition de l'idée de la notion même de régiment de batterie d'escadron d'escouade d'homme, ou plus encore: la disparition de toute idée de tout concept.

(299)

This is paralleled by the image of the map from which all the placenames slowly disappear in the total dissolution of order. Bearing ever inwards upon the elusive centre of his experience, an experience which defies expression, Georges fails to satisfy his desire to fix his past in words; but Simon the novelist takes that past and fashions, through ceaseless invention and repetition, a work of art in the true tradition of the twentieth century. If the central character enjoys only the temporary escape offered by sleep, the novelist whose persona Georges is achieves the triumph of art: his sense of déjà vu becomes that of the reader. La Route des Flandres takes the debris of an intensely human disaster and gives them the dynamic shape of an acutely satisfying work of artistic merit; the assassination of time is accomplished by implanting that shape as a memorable element within the consciousness of the reader. Above all, this is a novel about the failure and the paradoxical triumph, where the artist as Orion begins to emerge as the redeemer of human experience from the destructive grip of time, through the durable potential of language: this is to say that it is an exemplary novel of the human condition.

Chapter V: A Dream of Revolution:
Le Palace 1962

Le dire fait notre connaissance du monde. Nous voyons le monde tel qu'il a été dit par les peintres, par les écrivains.

Claude Simon

If the central character of La Route des Flandres experiences a state of consciousness close to that of a dream, the same can be said with even more conviction of the ex-student from whose point of view the actions and the characters of Le Palace are presented. The principal merit of this novel is to suggest forcefully that oneiric quality of experience, as deformed in memory and imagination, which is basic to Simon's work; but where the artist takes a further step in the direction of Orion is in the developing cooperation with language as an exploratory medium, in which the disparate strands of memory and of obsession can be brought together in a memorable synthesis. Referring to his supposed aim in writing the novel, Simon had this to say:

On se met à écrire et puis le langage, de lui-même, engendre quelque chose dont on ne savait pas qu'on était porteur . . . Faulkner est tout imprégné de Proust, il le connaît par coeur. 'La mémoire n'existe pas, dit-il, le cerveau ne reproduit que ce que les muscles cherchent en tâtonnant, ni plus ni moins. Et le total qui en résulte est, d'ordinaire, incorrect et faux, et ne mérite que le nom de rêve.' Voilà, Le Palace ne mérite que le nom de rêve sur la révolution espagnole.¹

Just as there is a constant tension, in La Route des Flandres, between triumph and failure, so too in this novel Simon makes a compromise between the various forces which falsify experience, and the basic inadequacies of the language with which the novelist attempts to re-present that experience. The pages of Le Palace, 'un opéra tragique et dérisoire',² are full of

¹ Madeleine Chapsal, 'Entretien: Claude Simon parle', L'Express, 5 avril 1962, pp.32-3.

² Edith Fournier, 'Le Palace de Claude Simon', Médiations, 6 (été 1963), pp.158-60.

references to art forms of one kind or another, while the structure and style of the novel are, in their own right, an example of compromise between order and disorder, and between dream and reality. This novel, too, works toward the goal of a timeless suspension of experience within the dynamic framework of language.

The concepts of 'dream' and 'revolution' function both on the thematic and on the technical levels. Despite the novelist's disclaimers, there is a definite thematic substratum in Le Palace which might be taken — like much of his work — as a comment on the vanity of human enterprise, and on the injustices of social history. Returning to the city of revolution he had known fifteen years previously, the ex-student quickly realizes that all trace of the uprising has vanished, and that the old hierarchy of wealth is firmly reinstated. This is made clear to him as he tries to talk to a waiter and a prostitute in a bar in the city centre, recalling the revolutionary period which these people must look back on with nostalgia. But the waiter seems to have erased all memory of those days, and exchanges remarks with the prostitute:

sans aucun doute quelque chose de méprisant (pas à cause de ce qu'il avait rappelé — ce dont ni elle, ni le serveur ne se souciaient plus à présent, avaient appris en quinze ans à ne pas plus se soucier qu'on ne se soucie d'un rêve, trop violent, trop lointain, trop éclatant pour qu'il soit possible de croire à sa réalité, de s'en souvenir autrement que comme d'une aventure absolument incroyable qui vous est arrivée pendant qu'on dormait)

(26)

The theme of disillusionment is strong in Le Palace, and it is related to the idea that humanity itself is a mobile, to use the term from Simon's epigraph, which passes repeatedly through the same points without any real progress ever being achieved. On this thematic level the novel is dominated by the dictum, 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose', and the pages of Le Palace may be read as a confirmation of defeat.

One means of underlining the cyclical movement of humanity is to make reference to repeated events in history, and this Simon does quite frequently. On occasion he alludes directly to the theme of history, albeit in abstract terms:

Toutefois il supposa que devait jouer simultanément une autre loi (une sorte de corollaire) un peu semblable à celle des vases communicants et selon laquelle le niveau du contenu dans les divers contenants doit être partout égal, en vertu de quoi l'Histoire se constituait au moyen non de simples migrations mais d'une série de mutations internes, de déplacements moléculaires.

(12)

As Dr Sturrock has said, in talking of Simon's 'mercantilist view of matter',³ this suggests a basically unchanging world where men and their artefacts change places, but the basic scheme of things is unaltered. Obviously the notion is borne out by the eponymous 'palace' itself, formerly a luxury hotel, then the headquarters of the 'revolution', and finally converted again to financial ends in the shape of the bank which the returning student contemplates, fifteen years later.

As in La Route des Flandres, Simon also uses allusions to legend, to classical antiquity, as a device to point up the changelessness of human nature. The third section of the novel, headed 'Les Funérailles de Patrocle', is a deliberate juxtaposition of the event remembered by the student with its historical or legendary counterpart. Although there is perhaps a hint of irony in this — confronting the undignified death of General Santiago with the heroic demise of the Greek warrior — the principal aim of the episode is to show how the same basic situation repeats itself time and again in the course of history, and to bring the theme of death firmly into the foreground of the novel. What is also important is the theme of treachery, the fifth column blamed for the clandestine assassination; this gives rise to some of the most strikingly atmospheric of Simon's prose, when he

³ The French New Novel, p.44.

evokes the feeling of collective guilt which tends to destroy the illusion of togetherness in the revolution:

quelque chose qu'elle (la foule) aurait elle-même secrété: une épidémie, une de ces terrifiantes, meurtrières et répugnantes maladies qui sont héréditairement l'apanage des pauvres, comme la teigne, la pelade ou les latrines bouchées, et qui tuait maintenant, imbécile, furieuse et aveugle, ici et là dans la ville étouffée sous son pesant couvercle de puanteur, dans les fétides émanations d'égout, de melon pourri et d'huile rance.

(114)

Where the element of collective striving is concerned, Le Palace recalls superbly the rapid disintegration of what unity there was at the beginning of the revolutionary action. This is done largely through the snippets of conversation which the student remembers. The individuals seemed to be fighting verbally, rather than discussing on common ground. More particularly, the process of disuniting is depicted through Simon's use of the American, whom John Sturrock calls 'the true hero of Le Palace',⁴ as an ironic commentator on those around him and their failure to act.

Like the student, the American is an outsider by nationality, but the older man has none of the brash idealism of his junior, and disdains the ideological commitment which would integrate him into the central group. He baits the indigenous revolutionaries with his sarcastic references to arms and to the government's intentions, but more specifically, it is the American who verbalizes ironically on the hopelessness of their undertaking. On four occasions in the novel the American intervenes to comment on the 'abortive' nature of their task. The first is when he describes the town after a street map:

('... comme une grille d'égout, disait l'Américain, et si on la soulevait on trouverait par dessous le cadavre d'un enfant mort-né enveloppé dans de vieux

⁴ Le Palace, edited by John Sturrock. (London, 1972: Methuen's Twentieth Century Texts), Introduction, p.xi.

journaux — vieux, c'est-à-dire vieux d'un mois — pleins de titres aguichants. C'est ça qui pue tellement: pas les choux-fleurs ou les poireaux dans les escaliers des taudis, ni les chiottes bouchées: rien qu'une charogne, un foetus à trop grosse tête langé dans du papier imprimé, rien qu'un petit macrocéphale décédé avant terme parce que les docteurs n'étaient pas du même avis et jeté aux égouts dans un linceul de mots...'

(16)

This announces several major aspects of the novel: the theme of sickness and putrefaction, the leitmotiv of newspapers, the theme of disunity, and the presence of death above all, which will culminate in the enigmatic and powerful closing image of the book.

In the second section of Le Palace the student, although he has not yet met the American, finds the same image to describe the embattled city, and the first impressions it makes upon him. As with the allusion to Patroclus, there is also an attempt to contrast what he sees around him with the glorified or idealized pictures and conceptions gleaned from history or legend:

non pas une bataille (puisque à l'inverse d'une cité investie, conquise dans une action guerrière où ce sont alors les faubourgs, les quartiers périphériques qui sont les plus atteints, les dégâts — façades criblées d'éclats, églises incendiées, magasins pillés, glaces étoilées par les balles — se trouvaient au contraire en plus grand nombre en son coeur même), non pas donc une conquête, un viol (puisque elle n'avait pas été victime d'une intrusion, assaillie de l'extérieur), mais comme déchirée par quelque chose qui était sorti ou qu'elle avait arraché, expulsé d'elle-même, plutôt (sang et ordure) comme une sorte d'accouchement, ou peut-être d'avortement . . . 'Si bien, pensa-t-il, qu'on ne peut pas exactement dire qu'ils l'aient prise, mais plutôt qu'elle s'est elle-même ensanglantée, barbouillée de rouge, avec quelque chose secrété par ses entrailles . . .'

(92)

The American and the student have a certain affinity in the attitudes reflected in their lengthy conversations, and in the fact that they each react in the same way to the city. There can be little future for the dream of revolution if such language can be used as soon as the student arrives.

This notion is reiterated in the section 'Dans la Nuit'. The student, perspiring uncomfortably in the unremitting heat, uses this feeling to elaborate his suspicions about the city in general:

même la nuit la ville continuait à suer, suinter, avec cette différence qu'alors on pouvait presque l'entendre à travers le (ou au-dessous du) silence nocturne (un ruissellement ténu, imperceptible, incessant, quelque chose qui s'écoulait d'elle goutte à goutte dans le noir, sournoisement, la vidant, impossible à arrêter, continuant à sourdre par tous ses pores), silence qui n'était pas simplement vide, absence, cessation de bruits, mais pour ainsi dire actif, épais: comme si pendant le jour toute cette agitation (le bruit, les cliquetis d'armes, les palabres, les pétarades des moteurs) n'avait d'autre raison que de s'étourdir, se donner le change, couvrir par le tapage et le mouvement le mince et sournois chuintement de fuite, cette espèce d'invisible et permanente hémorragie.

(150-1)

Despite the vagueness in the terms of the description, which in itself is a part of Simon's positive purpose, it is clear that this is intended as a warning of the imminent cessation of the revolution, and the disappearance of the dream. All the hectic activity in the city is tantamount to an empty if defiant gesture, since the wheel is sure to turn full circle again. The image of abortion, the draining of life, comes back at the end of the novel to be associated with the evocation, as a figment or projection of the imagination or as fact, of a desperate suicide:

et à la fin tout s'immobilise, retombe, et elle reste là, gisant épuisée, expirante, sans espoir que cela finisse jamais, se vidant dans une infime, incessante et vaine hémorragie: même pas éventrée, poignardée, rien qu'un peu de sang suintant, s'écoulant sans trêve par une mince, une invisible fissure au centre même de son corps, une flaque, une petite mare bientôt, s'étendant, s'élargissant lentement sur le carrelage de l'uri-noir souterrain dans le couloir duquel se tient toujours, au sein de l'odeur suffoquante, le dos contre le mur de briques vernissées, la cérémonieuse rangée de cirleurs à la chevelure aile de corbeau, tout entiers vêtus (chemise et pantalon) de noir, alignés, patients, disponibles, terribles et faméliques derrière leurs petites boîtes cloutées semblables à d'antiques et mystérieux petits coffres, de minuscules et dérisoires cercueils d'enfants.

(230)

Thus the dream of revolution ends in the sadly derisory atmosphere of a public convenience. The wheel of history takes another turn, characterized again by a senseless explosion of violence:

parce qu'apparemment pour que cette vieille motte de terre et d'eau ne s'arrête pas de tourner lui faut-il sa périodique ration d'enfants écrasés sous des poutres, de femmes échevelées griffant leurs seins et de mains crispées sortant des gravats, moyennant quoi les saisons reviennent à peu près régulièrement et soleil, pluie, vent et gel se partagent le temps d'une façon supportable.
(127)

The revolutionary situation is only one of the points through which humanity passes in the cyclical course of history, and it is only self-delusion — or dream — to think otherwise. It is a mere fifteen years later, however, that the student really comes to understand how brief the illusion of triumph had been, and how quickly in fact the old order was re-established.

There is one vital passage which can help summarize the use of dream on this thematic level. Again it concerns the laconic figure of the American, who is the student's teacher in the matter of certain basic truths. In some respects he is a very philosophical character, and at the centre of the novel there takes place an important conversation whose theme is precisely this dreamlike feeling created by the revolution and its participants:

disant qu'ils n'étaient tous eux-mêmes que des fantômes, comme ces hommes de la caverne qui avaient fini par prendre pour la réalité leurs ombres projetées par le soleil bas, démesurées, distendues, gigantesques et titubantes, et qu'ils regardaient avec une sorte d'étonnement un peu effrayé, un peu ébloui, leurs gestes pas très assurés, maladroits, démesurément amplifiés par la déformation de la lumière, comme des gestes d'ataxiques, mais que tout cela n'avait pas plus de réalité, de sérieux, de crédibilité que des ombres.
(119)

Of course it is impossible not to draw the parallel with the Platonic simile of the Cave in The Republic; without venturing too far into philosophical territory, what Simon is doing is to demonstrate as clearly as possible that the revolution-

aries, attempting to shake off the burden of social injustice symbolized by the hierarchy of wealth and rank, and by the predominant position of the Church, merely take the shadow for the substance and place their faith in a revolution which is chimerical, a dream which they are eventually impotent to convert into a lasting reality. In discussing a baroque novel like Le Palace, it is appropriate to remark that the American is putting into his own words something that has been called 'one of the key ideas of the baroque: the stage-like vanity of this world'.⁵ The fact that the Italian gunman, one of the microcosmic revolutionary group, sets up in the student's mind a picture of a Roman arms-bearer ('est-ce que ce n'était pas porte-glaive?' (p.155)), or that the soldiers in Spain are like medieval men-at-arms ('On aurait dit un lansquenet' (p.131)), is a reminder not only of recurrent aggressiveness but also of the self-repeating movement of history, which will provide one of the major themes of Histoire and La Bataille de Pharsale.

Despite this thematic base in Le Palace, Claude Simon, who always stresses the claims of art to the exclusion of social, psychological, or political considerations, would probably reject the description offered by one reviewer of his novel:

En définitive, je crois que Le Palace est, un quart de siècle après l'événement qui lui sert de prétexte, le roman intellectuel de cette génération pour qui l'échec de la Guerre d'Espagne fut, comme pour d'autres, l'échec de 1848: la mort des rêves.⁶

Le Palace is not, in the manner of Malraux's L'Espoir, a novel about the Spanish Civil War as such, but as its author said, a form of subjective reverie which is one man's memory

⁵ Carl J. Friedrich, The Age of the Baroque (New York, 1952), p.57.

⁶ Anne Villelaur, 'La mort en puissance', Lettres Françaises, 26 avril 1962, p.2.

of his brief participation in a confused sequence of events to which history has given that collective title. It is important to go on from the notion of dream as illusion, to the more fundamental concept which sees memory itself as a kind of dreamlike state, where the term 'dream' becomes almost a synonym for 'imagination'. This is the notion expressed in Simon's choice of the heading 'Inventaire' for the first section of the novel, because the twin strands of memory and imagination come close together in the idea of an inventory drawn up by the student in describing the bric-a-brac of remembered objects, people, and impressions, and in the suggestion of the verb inventer in the rubric itself. The list is not simply recalled but possibly fabricated, because time deforms and punctures memory, and imagination comes in to plug the gaps. To understand the effort made by the student, and to refute the intellectual pretensions suggested in that last quotation, it is necessary only to recall another remark made by Simon himself:

J'ai voulu décrire des odeurs, des images, des sensations tactiles, des émotions . . . J'ai voulu décrire ce qu'a été pour moi la révolution espagnole. D'abord par honnêteté: tout ce que je peux savoir sur la guerre d'Espagne, c'est ce que j'ai ressenti par mes sens. Et aussi par goût, c'est ce que j'aime faire, traduire en mots, en langage, ce que Samuel Beckett appelle le 'comment c'est'. Ou plutôt le 'comment c'est maintenant', comment c'est désormais dans ma mémoire. 'Comment c'était', je n'ai pas pu le savoir.

J'y étais, mais je suis profondément d'accord avec la phrase de Proust qui dit que la réalité ne se forme que dans le souvenir. Dans le moment présent, moi je ne vois rien. Le Palace ne peut pas être un témoignage parce qu'en aucun cas l'art ne peut être un témoignage.⁷

In a sense, then, Le Palace is an immense collage made up of the kaleidoscopic debris of memory, the critical moments imprinted upon a consciousness which is less intellectual than sensorial,

⁷ Madeleine Chapsal, 'Entretien: Claude Simon parle'.

'l'étudiant pouvant reconstituer le tout par assemblage' (p.53), which is significant for Simon's own attitude to language as the structure in which to formalize experience: the term assemblage becomes increasingly important in his attempts to deploy words as if prose fiction were a space-form and not a time-form.⁸ These moments of experience take their place as so many brief scenes in a narrative which reflects the dreamlike inconsistency of fragments. The sudden and unexpected recall of certain scenes is a common phenomenon in the life even of the ordinary person, and an artistic heightening of just such moments is sought in Le Palace:

et eux (les quatre hommes — ce qui, avec lui, faisait cinq) se tenant là, surgis de ce néant où ils devaient retourner presque aussitôt après une brève, violente et météorique existence pendant laquelle il les aurait vu agir et se comporter comme des êtres de chair et d'os . . . : se tenant donc là, insolites, et même légèrement incroyables, légèrement irréels, légèrement désuets.

(32-3)

Such is the nature of obsessive memory that these 'unreal' figures demand the student's attention more than does the reality of the city around him fifteen years on: this group of men is one of the points through which the circular movement of memory also takes his thoughts.

It is this sensation of unreality which leads the remembering narrator to question even his own identity. There are several passages in Le Palace which describe a phenomenon such as a fracturing of the self, when the individual appears as actor and spectator at one and the same time, and most frequently this occurs when an act of memory is being accomplished.⁹ In such cases the tone of bemused surprise —

⁸ See also A.A. Mendilow, Time and the Novel, Part I, 'The General Problem', pp.3-52, for a discussion of fiction in relation to other art forms.

⁹ See A.C. Pugh, 'Claude Simon: the narrator and his double', p.35; also J.A.E. Loubère, 'Claude Simon's Le Palace: A Paradigm of Otherness', Symposium, 27 (1973), pp.46-63.

'Ça: moi? Ça?... ' (p.21) — is exactly that of a man who seems to have lived through a dreamlike experience, and can recall only parts which no longer bear any relation to the whole truth; hindsight is consistently damaging.

The incapacity of memory to retain an integral image of accumulating experience is an aspect of Simon's obsessions which is familiar from the early stages of his career. In La Corde Raide he admitted:

Autant chercher à retenir l'eau dans ses doigts.
 Essayez. Essayez de vous chercher. 'Je est un
 autre.' Pas vrai: 'Je est d'autres.' D'autres
 choses, d'autres odeurs, d'autres sons, d'autres
 personnes, d'autres lieux, d'autres temps.

(174)

There is a direct echo of this at one point in Le Palace when the narrator, the ex-student, looks back with his inner eye and sees himself, not as an individual but as an amalgam of fragments (pp.156-7)¹⁰ and later in the novel as he tries to dominate 'ce vaste et confus mélange de formes, d'odeurs et de bruits' (p.216). Where the dream of revolution could be called illusive, the dreamlike quality of memory is elusive, and leads to more anxious interrogation:

Mais comment était-ce, comment était-ce? Sans
 doute y avait-il quelque chose qu'il n'avait pas su
 voir, qui lui avait échappé . . .

(134)

mais comment était-ce donc, comment était-ce?

(135)

Mais comment était-ce, comment était-ce?

(212)

In two ways the notion of dream is related to the student's feeling of being an outsider. Firstly, as a man of contemplation by definition, he had no real sense of community with the true, active revolutionaries, and, like the stepfather in Le Sacre du Printemps, was always on the fringes of the group. Secondly, the passage of time, the flawed nature of perception allied to the inadequacy of memory, and

¹⁰

J.A.E. Loubère calls this the 'homogenization of others in the student' ('Claude Simon's Le Palace . . .', p.57).

this dispersal of the self, combine and cause him to feel like a man looking in upon his own experience and finding nothing at the centre. In more ways than one Le Palace can be described as the remnants of a broken dream.

As a means of accentuating this fragmentation of memory, Simon uses two analogies, one of which refers to the building itself, the luxury hotel converted into revolutionary headquarters, the other to the central character. Each of them conjures up a similar image, that of the storehouse or mausoleum. First of all the student imagines himself as the curator of a museum:

Pensant: 'Et moi assis là comme un gardien de musée, mais même pas invalide, ce qui, à la rigueur, serait une façon comme une autre de justifier le port d'une invisible casquette et d'un invisible uniforme, et pas encore comme un vieillard, mais sois tranquille, ça aussi ça vient...'. Pouvant se voir, au milieu de cette ville qui avait l'air de décombres.

(126)

This is important for three reasons: the student again has the feeling of being an outsider; he restates the notion that he is recalling and re-experiencing chaos, making renewed reference to the debris of war which then becomes the debris of memory; and thirdly, the simile will reveal its full implications when the importance of art, and of the novel as a reconstructive art form, is being considered.

The 'palace' itself is one of the static points through which the tide of humanity moves, and again through which the spiralling movement of memory leads the student's mind at a number of points throughout the novel. In the final section appears another striking image bringing out the atmosphere of the building as the recipient of human lives which it persistently outlasts:

hautain, vertical, roccoco [sic], secret, exotique, peuplé de ses mystérieux fantômes de milliardaires négriers, de vieilles ladies voyageuses, de riches Brésilienues, de divas en tournées et des évanescences, suaves, perverses et roses apparitions de bergères surprises, semblable à quelque monumental mausolée, le monstrueux vestige de quelque civilisation exquise, barbare et corrompue disparue depuis long-

temps, absurde, démesuré, inutilisable, gardien (comme ces tombeaux sacrés de rois de l'antiquité fatals aux explorateurs qui en profanent le secret) d'une sorte de malédiction.

(187-8)

The building itself is a real storehouse of the past, in which several layers of time come together, and it offers a point of recurrent fascination for the student obsessed with the omnipresent menace of death and dissolution. In its own way, too, it has proved fatal to the revolutionary aspirations of the men who invaded it, and has gained its revenge by reverting to its original function as a monument to the rich. Its principal importance to the student is as a stable element in the movement of time, a landmark to which the inquisitive memory returns, as to some picture-gallery whose canvases can be inspected time and again in the search for illumination.

Clearly there are two major parallels for Simon's conception of memory; this can be reinforced by the reading of an earlier passage in the novel, referring directly to memory as a preserving agent against the erosions of time. The student is musing on the dreamlike appearance of the group who flit in and out of his consciousness:

cette espèce d'inépuisable et vague réserve où se tiennent ceux que nous n'avons rencontrés que quelques heures ou que quelques jours, sans passé, sans avenir, échappant à ces fatidiques servitudes auxquelles sont habituellement soumis les humains . . . — et plus tard il lui semblera les voir, immobilisés ou conservés comme sur une photographie, dans cette sorte de matière figée et grisâtre qu'est le temps passé, cette espèce de gélatine qui garde indéfiniment choses et gens comme dans de l'alcool, légèrement déformés sans doute, mais intacts.

(33-4)

Thus one of the dominant metaphoric strands of the novel collects the forces of preservation — museum, mausoleum, reserve — against those of dissolution, and the novel itself records the brief moments of illumination which survive from the student's partial involvement in the Spanish cause.

This being the case, it is essential to examine the appearance in Le Palace of numerous artistic representations

of various kinds, and to consider Simon's treatment of the inevitable dichotomy between representation and reality, before assessing the merits of the novel as an art form in its own right. In a manner which is becoming familiar in Simon, and which will reach its climactic expression in La Bataille de Pharsale and Orion Aveugle, the potential of art is viewed in two ways, negative and positive. The work of art may be considered in a negative sense as deformation or as exaggeration, as a sterile, deadening artefact, or simply as an inadequate response to the multifarious experience of the world. In a more positive though still tentative way, art and especially literary art — the use of language — is presented as a means to overcome the forces of dissolution, and as the medium in which the human experience can survive the flux of time. Writing thus conceived is to be understood as an enormous rearguard action or rather, as was the case in L'Herbe, as a form of salvage operation.

Several of the allusions to works of art, or even to examples of illustration which do not merit that name, in Le Palace, are made in what can only be called a spirit of derision, in order to stress the chasm separating truth from illusion, fact from fiction, or reality from its glorified representation. This was the point in deciding to call the description of Santiago's burial 'Les Funérailles de Patrocle', using the grim picture of the twentieth-century soldier's death in order to expose the Greek story as a glorious deformation of truth. The first of the other references occurs very early in the novel, as the student recalls with no little irony the luxurious trappings of the 'palace', which were replaced by the revolutionaries' equipment:

au centre de chaque panneau, un rectangle légèrement plus clair indiquait la place qu'avait occupée une de ces gravures elles aussi style Trianon et dont le titre traditionnellement en français (l'Escarpolette ou la Chemise Enlevée) figure au bas dans un cartouche entouré de guirlandes de roses (les mêmes — les mêmes fleurs, la même couleur — qui s'enroulent autour des cordons de la balançoire ou teinte le bouton d'un sein) . . . des tonnes de guirlandes sculptées et peintes à

la machine, de bureaux ministre, de nudités surprises et de mélancoliques mandolinistes à tricorne vêtus de soie brillante)

(10-11)

Such stereotyped images are the meaningless, superfluous trappings of luxurious living which are rejected by the incomers. Watteauesque and insipid, they seem to bear no relation to the real issues of life. The ultimate extreme of derision is reached much later in the novel, when the student realizes that the engravings have in fact been put to some positive use as notice-boards. They have in fact been symbolically 'turned round'; that is to say that they have undergone a revolution of their own, destined to make practical objects of them. Perhaps it is indicative of Simon's attitude, that even in this new role they appear of little value, at least to the ironic mind of the student:

contemplant les fragments de chairs roses, si près qu'il lui semblait pouvoir sentir, respirer le funèbre et mélancolique parfum de musc s'exhalant des chevelures et des poitrines poudrerizées, comme le lointain, subtil et prémonitoire parfum d'un siècle désenchanté et agonisant, un putride et subtil message de scepticisme et d'élégante incrédulité, l'aimable testament d'une aimable et philosophique immolation aux philosophiques et barbares nécessités de la raison.

(197-8)

It is the theme of ephemerality which dominates this passage; it sounds a warning note, confirmed of course by subsequent events, about the already moribund aspirations of the hopeful insurgents. There is therefore a two-way process of derision, from spectator to spectacle and vice versa, each providing an appropriate commentary upon the other.

Artistic representations can also be used as illustrations of that 'History' which is by now a major Simonian theme. Not only do they stand as monuments to the few triumphant moments in humanity's progress, they also offer ironic comment on the underlying forces in human nature, and reaffirm the gulf between the glorified illusion and sordid reality. Such thoughts pass through the student's mind, as from a speeding car, he catches glimpses of the city's statuary:

tel qu'on pouvait le voir (avec sa barbe d'airain, son court manteau, sa toque, son regard d'airain) sur les couvercles coloriés des boîtes de gants fruits confits et les timbres dentelés au format allongé où en camaïeux de différentes couleurs . . . est représentée la scène, le débarquement, la plage bordée d'une végétation touffue de palmiers et de bananiers aux troncs inclinés et où un groupe de sauvages aux corps nus et admirables (les femmes aux cheveux liés en touffes, aux seins jumeaux, aux visages virginaux et grecs, aux pubis glabres et bombés de statues) met genou à terre à la vue de la petite croix . . .

(84-5)

This fascination with representations of all kinds will culminate in the illustrated text of Orion Aveugle. Furthermore, there is an effect of derision achieved when he includes the detail that each of the statues the student passes is crowned by a layer of pigeon droppings. The theme of disillusionment and of revolution, in the sense of a return to the established order, is concentrated around the poster displaying a symbolic revolutionary figure with the optimistic device 'VENCEREMOS'; in addition to the irony directed against such representations as statuary and engravings, there is a progressive and relentless undermining of the veracity of this glorious motto.

This is done by the technique of collage, and in particular by the incorporation into the text of Le Palace of snippets of newspaper headlines, posters and placards. From the perspective of fifteen years the student can taste the bitterness of defeat in the knowledge that the poster proclaiming certain victory is gone, as are the men who created it, but this does not prevent him from remembering it in great detail:

le buste décharné et musculeux se détachant en bistre sur un fond jaune, le dessinateur ayant exagéré par des effets d'ombres appuyés et brutales la maigreur et la musculature du corps, l'affiche ne portant d'autre légende, sur une bande blanche en bas du rectangle, au-dessous du ventre creux, que le mot

VENCEREMOS

en lettres capitales et noires, et lui, l'étudiant — ou celui qui avait été l'étudiant —, croyait toujours le voir, pathétique, hurlant, frustré

(121-2)

Here is a prime example of 'art' put to the use of propaganda and so becoming sheer exaggeration; as a deformation of reality it is exposed by the other fragments which appear significantly alongside:

deux affiches identiques posées côte à côte, portant sous une image représentant des maisons en ruine la légende suivante:

EL DOLOR
DEL PUEBLO

. . . d'autres affiches semblables collées à la suite et sur la droite, mais en partie masquées par celles qu'on leur avait superposées, de sorte que seule la partie supérieure était visible, c'est-à-dire, se répétant plusieurs fois, la même image de ruines et le mot:
DOLOR DOLOR DOLOR DOLOR

se suivant comme une lamentation au-dessus du même buste d'homme maigre et nu brandissant un fusil qu'il avait vu placardé dans la chambre du palace remplaçant les nymphes roses et les folâtres bergères.

(178-9)

Pessimistic as it may be, this is an apt comment on the brevity of the revolution, and a reaffirmation of the basic injustices which it is powerless to destroy. The poster is a static reminder of a people's frustration and a memorable image of violent futility. The cry of victory is silenced first of all by the relentlessness of the other posters, but there are other illustrative fragments which deflate the illusion of triumph.

These are the questions posed in all the newspapers on the day of Santiago's funeral:

EL GIGANTE DE LA LUCHA! . . . QUIEN ASESINO A SANTIAGO?
. . . EL CRIMEN HA SIDO FIRMADO! . . . QUIEN A MUERTO
EL COMMANDANTE? . . . QUIEN ES EL ASESINO DE SANTIAGO?
(39)

Repeated literally ad nauseam, these questions become almost a leitmotiv of despair for the revolutionaries, who realize that the seed of destruction already exists within the movement itself. 'VENCEREMOS' is an empty slogan when the threat of defeat is internal, and the student makes this clear in remembering those tense moments of dissension within his own small group which must be taken as a microcosm of the revolution as a whole. During the funeral procession itself, the banners carried by the marchers bear the anguishing reprise of the same

questions; they are the external signs of the feeling of guilt, suspicion, and fear, which is beginning to petrify the revolution. Again, during the interminable night which the student recalls, the same newspapers conspire to keep him awake, sick at the thought of what has happened, precisely because the supplying of an answer to the questions is tantamount to an admission of defeat.

Simon continues the process of comparison with artistic representations while bringing out the unreal, insignificant appearance of some of the characters involved. The student remembers a revealing thought which came to him as he argued with an unhelpful hotel-keeper:

traversé tout à coup par l'idée comique qu'il s'était trompé, que ce n'était sans doute pas comme il l'avait cru le patron de l'hôtel qui était assis là, mais quelque personnage factice, comme ce mannequin du musée Grévin ou ces singes automates qui jouent de la grosse caisse à l'entrée des baraques foraines, probablement, pensa-t-il, une figure de cire du musée Grévin.

(216)

So unsuccessful are the student's attempts to communicate with those around him that he is left only with ironic laughter as a means of disguising his inward feeling of despair. This is the case also when he recounts the burial of Santiago, making a comparison between the soldiers whom he has encountered and the uniformed puppets who escort the catafalque, the 'official' body of men appearing like music-hall players (p.118). As Michel Deguy has so pointedly demonstrated, what Simon is saying here is that life is experienced, as it were, at one remove, filtered through intermediary stages like an Offenbach opera, a museum, or an art gallery.¹¹ Only for the briefest of moments does undiluted reality hold the stage, the few days when the city is in the hands of the revolutionaries being only a temporary suspension of the conventions.

¹¹ Michel Deguy, 'Claude Simon et la Représentation', Critique, No.187 (décembre 1962), pp.1009-32.

Soon enough, this paradoxically illusory state of affairs is reversed, and the normal games of life can be resumed. The revolution then exists only as so many pictures within the remembering imagination of the student, and the short-lived reality of the past becomes the durable if dreamlike obsession of his memory. Hence the incomplete but striking quality of the images which memory resuscitates in the eye of the student, in an essentially Proustian way:

Mais justement la façon fortuite, inévitable, dont la sensation avait été rencontrée, contrôlait la vérité du passé qu'elle ressuscitait, des images qu'elle déclenchait, puisque nous sentons son effort pour remonter vers la lumière, que nous sentons la joie du réel retrouvé. Elle est le contrôle aussi de la vérité de tout le tableau, fait d'impressions contemporaines qu'elle ramène à sa suite avec cette infaillible proportion de lumière et d'ombre, de relief et d'omission, de souvenir et d'oubli que la mémoire ou l'observation conscientes ignoreront toujours.¹²

The negative aspect of the representation of reality is also mitigated at certain moments by a less derisive attitude on the student's part. Some critical fragments of experience can best be rendered by an allusion to their appearance as archetypes in the form of certain art works. This is once more related to the theme of revolution in so far as the principle of the éternel retour, already important in La Route des Flandres, is operative in art no less frequently than in history, and art is there to mirror history. In this context, 'artistic representations' can be expanded to incorporate such wide-ranging references as the plays of Shakespeare, the paintings of Poussin, and the visual stimulus gained from the gaudy covers of a cheap magazine.

The latter comes in during the 'Récit de l'Homme-Fusil' when the student is trying to picture in his mind's eye the assassination scene related by the Italian. Throughout this narrative, it is the student who provides details of description

¹² Marcel Proust, A la recherche du temps perdu (Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, 1954), t.III, p.954.

to round out the denuded account given by the gunman. It finally comes to him that this murder and the subsequent escape are two of those seminal moments of violent experience best seen in the static, exaggerated form of a comic-book illustration:

et alors cela fut là, se matérialisa violemment sous forme d'une de ces images grossièrement dessinées et coloriées qui illustrent les couvertures à sensation des magazines bon marché (l'explosion dans la mine, la chute du couvreur, le scaphandrier aux prises avec la pieuvre géante), la scène campée par un de ces dessinateurs spécialisés dans les faits divers, l'immobilisation, la perpétuation du tumulte, les faciès tordus d'effroi, de stupeur ou de colère, et qui l'avait représenté, au centre, s'enfuyant.

(93)

This in itself is a trouvaille both for the student and for the writer, since the device illustrates the characteristic violence and confusion of experience, it sums up the impressions of the scene around which the student has been groping while trying to follow the Italian's story, and it demonstrates the paradoxical unreality of this aggressive act of murder by reducing it to this quasi-static form. In this respect, as a simple representation, it is perhaps well suited to the unintellectual nature of the gunman, but at the same time it is the student's imaginative and effective response to the problem faced by the Italian, namely that of exteriorizing an unbearable experience:

de sorte donc qu'il lui semblait voir, se reconstituer l'action (la brève, foudroyante et chaotique succession ou plutôt concentration, superposition de mouvements, de tapage, de cris, de détonations et de galopades) sous forme d'une série d'images fixes, figées, immobiles, . . . chacune trop différente de la précédente, pour qu'il fût possible d'établir entre elles un élément de continuité.

(66)

Illustrations such as these impose immobility upon the incoherence of experience. This will again be of relevance in the discussion of Simon's own artistic aims in writing the novel. Here the work of art is neither derisive nor derisory, but a concentrate of experience. An extension of the use of tableaux vivants, this state of suspended animation — 'la perpétuation du tumulte' — is the only

way to apprehend experience in retrospect, to make possible an act of contemplation.

The conviction that nature imitates art, that experience merely repeats and corroborates the situations found in art, finds expression on two other noteworthy occasions in Le Palace, one of which reintroduces the ironic voice of the American:

disant que ça faisait encore trop de drapeaux, trop de couleurs différentes, qu'il n'aimait pas ça: trop de pleureuses derrière le cercueil: comme dans Shakespeare quand le jeune héritier du trône, l'enfant-roi aux cheveux coupés en frange, a été égorgé . . . et que les sept oncles qui avaient juré devant Dieu, les Saintes Huiles et tout le saint frusquin de le protéger et veiller sur lui font de nouveau serment.

(109)

The American is lucid enough to know that appearances are too good to be true, that there are traitors in their midst, and that their experience is simply conforming to the 'classic' situation delineated once and for all in the Shakespearean version of 'history'. There is nothing new under the sun, there is nothing revolutionary in the events taking place around them; the mobile of humanity is simply passing through the point represented by aggression and treachery on the perimeter — or closed circuit — of human preoccupations.

This notion is underlined by the student himself as he remembers thinking of the town as it looked in the light of autumn:

la ville prenant peu à peu cette consistance de bronze (l'étudiant pensant à certains tableaux de Poussin, certains lavis où des statues renversées gisent mutilées sous des ciels de métal en fusion, suffocants, et des personnages courant, se voilant la face, s'enfuyant dans toutes les directions, parmi les palais solennels, les solennels alignements de frontons et de colonnades, les solennelles perspectives dallées, vides, où filent sans bruit à ras du sol, rapides, voraces et innombrables, les rats)

(151-2)

The fictional Barcelona which he remembers is almost exactly the same as the fictional city depicted in this painting. Once again life imitates art in that the student is a witness to scenes of archetypal and cyclically recurrent importance to the human condition. Simon in fact gives a direct if

subtle echo of just such a scene in his description of the square in front of the 'palace' ('palais') when the rain surprises the populace:

la place où les gens couraient déjà, vestes en capuchons sur la tête, semblables à une débandade de décapités galopant sur leurs reflets . . .

(193-4)

Since the square has already been described as 'entièrement dallée' (p.88), and since the soaked populace is said to give off an 'odeur de chien mouillé' (p.197), it is clear that Simon is reworking the Poussin picture into his own description of the Barcelona scene: he is giving new movement to a representative moment from the world of art which is repeated at regular intervals in the 'real' world of his experience, and works of art viewed in this light are so many points of reference by which human experience can be measured and contemplated despite the ceaseless revolutions of time and history.

Once again, however, it is important to see that for each allusion to an art work or representation of reality, there seems to be an accompanying reminder of the inadequacy of all such refractions. No sooner has the student come up with the cartoon image of the Italian gunman's flight than he undermines the validity of the picture through a reference to the ineffable violence of the experience:

l'étudiant pensant: 'Mais ce n'était pas cela. C'est-à-dire pas visible. C'est-à-dire que ce qui se passait réellement n'était pas visible, impossible à représenter par un dessin ou même une photographie en admettant qu'un photographe de presse ait eu la chance de se trouver là...'

(94)

No account, however objective or faithful to the appearance, can hope to present a true picture of experience because the reality of things is always hidden beneath the surface — which is precisely why Simon's writing abounds in phrases such as 'sans doute y avait-il quelque chose qu'il n'avait pas su voir', and in moments of anguished yet apparently fruitless scrutinization of pictures and photographs, not least of all those graphic images held within the remembering imagination.

The inadequacy of representations, particularly with

regard to language as a recording medium, is expressed in the metaphors of sterility and comestibility which punctuate the text at regular intervals, and most of all with reference to the unpalatable nature of the ubiquitous newspapers. Not surprisingly, it is the American who formulates this metaphor of the deadening power of words, when he speaks of the still-born child that the 'revolution' has come to be:

'une puante momie envelopée et étranglée par le cordon ombilical de kilomètres de phrases enthousiastes tapées sur ruban à machine par l'enthousiaste armée des correspondants étrangers de la presse libérale. Victime de la maladie pré-infantile de la révolution: le parrainage et l'estime de l'honorable Manchester Guar...', et le maître d'école: 'Oh, ferme ça'.

(17)

His words — a true reflection of the actual state of affairs — are themselves unpalatable to the 'schoolmaster' and his compatriots. This idea, expressed at the very beginning of the novel, is reiterated conclusively almost at the end when the student too is submitting to disillusionment about the chances for survival of the revolution. Looking at the 'notice-boards' used by the revolutionaries, he comes to appreciate the depressing truth of the American's remark, since even these works of artistic representation have now been submerged:

comme si quelque pudibonde fureur les avait condamnées ; . . à être peu à peu recouvertes de colle en pot et étouffées sous les bureaucratiques entassements de papier en quoi se résorbent toute violence et toute révolte.

(197)

This is one of the most depressed moments experienced by the student, and it is directly linked with the deadening nature of language, which attempts to systematize but succeeds only in suppressing the vital spark of energy essential to the revolutionary cause.

This moment is skilfully prepared for by the recurrent metaphor of digestion used in describing the newspapers. At first it appears in a fairly positive way, since the papers can be rapidly dealt with:

parcourus à toute vitesse par cet oeil sélectif que possèdent les professionnels, capable de détecter en quelques secondes dans le fatras des comptes rendus

de meetings, de discours, de résolutions et de quotidiens bulletins de victoire, les deux ou trois phrases comestibles.

(28)

But as the novel progresses the sensation of nausea becomes the inescapable reaction to the very sight of the papers asking the same question about the murder of Santiago. This must go along with the notion expressed by the American in response to the student's musing about his 'greyness', which is called a moisissure (p.138). The American then renews the metaphor of digestion and links it to the feeling of doubt about the cause:

('Le fait de n'être plus absolument sûr, dit-il une fois, mais de continuer quand même. Comme le pot à confiture sur lequel commence à s'en tisser une petite couche, comme un brouillard. Et si on râcle le dessus, par-dessous elle est encore bonne. Je veux dire comestible. Seulement il y a cette sacrée putain de couche du dessus. Et bientôt c'est le pot tout entier qui pue...')

(139-40)

With this deliberate emphasis, it becomes clear that one of the purposes of language is to make experience palatable to men, but that it fails, managing only to heighten the nausea already felt at the dispersal of their ideals. This sensation grips the student when, alone at night, he thinks of reading a newspaper to distract him:

celui de sortir le journal de la poche de sa veste et d'essayer de le lire, et alors (comme ces malades auxquels l'idée seule non pas même d'un plat, mais de manger, mâcher, déglutir est insupportable) son coeur se soulevant, s'insurgeant, envahi par une espèce de nausée tandis qu'il lui semblait voir se mélanger les titres aux grosses lettres:

QUIEN HA MUERTO QUIEN HA ASESINADO QUIEN

HA FIRMADO EL CRIMEN

ravalant précipitamment une furieuse nausée.

(162)

He then turns for relief to the bright colours and meaningless ornamentation of an empty cigar-box. The failings of language could scarcely be more forcibly expressed than in this visceral reaction to the newsprint, a remorseless reminder of defeat.

More than this, the student himself finds language quite incapable of representing the feelings which he experienced during the revolution. This is why, not only is there the

familiar Simonian technique of recurrent expressions like 'ou plutôt', but also the student is often left groping for words and has to resort to a vague 'quelque chose' and a series of approximative adjectives, or the use of adjectival paradox. Trying to evoke the sinister atmosphere at the funeral of Santiago:

comme si des milliers de spectateurs pressés aux fenêtres, entassés sur les trottoirs, les toits des tramways ou grimpés sur les réverbères, se dégageait quelque chose d'épais, d'irrespirable, plus perceptible, plus effrayant que des cris.

(135)

In transmitting the general atmosphere of the city and the feeling of its life ebbing from it:

ce quelque chose qui suintait dans le noir, terrifiant, et le terrifiant, silencieux et menu trottement des rats . . .

(152)

puis de nouveau le silence et cette chose plate, innombrable, immobile . . .

(171)

Or again in admitting the incapacity of simple vocabulary to express the extremity of his condition:

rien d'autre que cette chose que l'étudiant connaissait bien maintenant et qui était à la fatigue, à la lassitude, et même à l'épuisement, ce qu'est le désespoir au doute.

(207)

But the sheer impotence of language as a means to get at experience in its essence, and to communicate thought or feeling of any kind, is nowhere better revealed than in the important scene where the student attempts to gain insight from the American. He fails, principally because language has broken down, to the point of alienating him from his own speech:

l'étudiant pouvant maintenant entendre sortir de lui sa propre voix (avec cette espèce de stupeur, d'effroi chaque fois renouvelé, comme si quelqu'un d'autre, une sorte d'idiot, de bègue, de perroquet imbécile nous avançait chaque fois que nous ouvrons la bouche, se servant de notre propre gorge, de nos propres lèvres pour faire entendre en place de langage une série de sons heurtés, rocailleux, de paroles heurtées, discordantes, approximatives.

(131)

If the student as participant in the action of the novel is unable to communicate, to use language as an instrument of expression, and if he is depressingly conscious of the imperfections of the verbal or written media as recorders of 'history', it is nonetheless the task of the artist working with the novel form to discover through his own inventiveness the true potential, as art, of that language. Once again it is the distinction between moyen and matériau which must be kept firmly in mind when the values of literary creation are being assessed.

Like all of Simon's major novels, Le Palace is essentially a compilation of fragments whose interrelationship is sensorial rather than intellectual, as his comment on Faulkner and Proust implied. Proust figures prominently in another remark made by Simon in a newspaper article:

Cependant il m'arrivait parfois, particulièrement lorsque je me trouvais dans le Midi, d'éprouver, de retrouver, à des années d'intervalle, et du fait d'excitations physiques (poussière, chaleur, odeurs, vue de certains types d'hommes), ces 'souvenirs involontaires' que Proust (toujours lui!), dans une lettre à Bibesco, définit ainsi: 'Attirés par la ressemblance d'une minute identique, ils sont seuls une griffe d'authenticité. Puis ils nous rapportent les choses dans un dosage exact de mémoire et d'oubli. Et enfin, comme ils nous font goûter la même sensation dans une circonstance tout autre, ils nous libèrent de toute contingence, ils nous en donnent l'essence extra-temporelle'.

C'est cela que j'ai essayé de fixer. Du moins au départ. Ajoutons ce mystérieux travail qui se fait presque à l'insu de l'écrivain, cette dynamique du langage, des mots qui en entraînent d'autres.¹³

There could be no clearer indication of Simon's preoccupations as an artist than this double reference to Proust and to the sensorial architecture which guides his writing; and it is the role of sensorial memory, and of sight and odour in particular, which is of greatest importance.

¹³ Claude Simon, 'Je ne peux parler que de moi', Nouvelles Littéraires, 3 mai 1962, p.2.

Clearly the most effective visual stimulus to memory is the flight of pigeons which the student sees from time to time during the revolution, and again fifteen years later.¹⁴ The periodic 'Et à un moment . . .' which introduces the image can thus be taken as referring to two separate time-schemes, and as being triggered off not only by visual but also by auditive stimulus ('froissement d'ailes'). These are sensory leit-motive which recur constantly, dictating transitions from one time-level to another within the consciousness and imagination of the student, moving as it does from memory to present perception. For example, at one point in the present the pigeons are disturbed, and the bridge across time is formed by their rapid movement, behind which he seems to see again the 'palace', before the 'curtain' of birds is drawn aside to reveal things as they are:

le frémissant voile de pigeons ondulant, fléchissant, retombant, s'affaissant enfin, la muraille froide et nue de la banque réapparaissant de nouveau, géométrique, carrée.

(24)

The pigeons too, or at least the recurrent image of their flight, may be taken as another still point through which the student's thoughts pass, so that frequently when they are mentioned two widely separated time-levels are brought directly together:

pouvant entendre à côté de lui le rire de l'Américain: le même banc, les mêmes buissons de lauriers, le même tapis ocellé de pigeons — par contre le ciel gris de septembre.

(128)

The narrative, if such it may be called, recedes into the events of fifteen years ago, until, four pages later, the same visual stimulus brings the student's mind forward to the present again:

Seulement il n'est pas Italien. Il ne le racontera pas.'), les minuscules têtes des pigeons semblables à des becs d'ombrelle se levant et s'abaissant vivement.

(132)

14

See also John Sturrock, The French New Novel, p.50.

Then again, two pages further on, the flight of pigeons seen against a September sky leads into another transition (p.134). At moments very far apart from each other in the text, the same group of pigeons irrupts into the student's consciousness and reawakens him to the present after a long digression into memory:

puisqu'apparemment c'était toujours pareil: les mêmes pigeons, les mêmes palmiers, les mêmes tramways (sauf que maintenant on avait peint dessus des réclames), le vieillard ayant sans doute fini de distribuer le contenu du sac car il le tenait à présent renversé.

(214-5)

It is the flight of pigeons which, in the very last pages of the novel, brings the two time-levels together again and merges them in the oneiric, almost nightmarish quality of the climactic scene of suicide:

s'envolant tous ensemble dans un multiple bruissement d'air froissé et de claquements d'ailes comme d'ironiques et imbéciles applaudissements, se groupant, formant comme une nappe, un plan, impondérable, frénetique et pointillé . . .

(228)

puis le vol de pigeons surgit dans le soleil . . .

(229)

They are the sensorial symbol of the incessant abolition of time within the remembering imagination, and they are a superb device for the novelist seeking to bring together in his text the contiguous if disparate fragments of time which the memory preserves.

Another pertinent linking image between the two broad areas of time concerned in the novel is that of the tramway, as, like the curtain or veil of pigeons, the trams can act as a screen opening or closing upon the past; and at the end it is the appearance of a tram which brings back the present after another flight into memory:

tous vautés sur les marches du perron ou accotés aux guéridons de la chicane, fumant et crachant paresseusement, puis un tramway passa, les cachant, les escamotant derrière le bariolage violent de ses réclames.

(223)

The recurrent exploitation of unchanging images, sounds, and movements creates the extra-temporal dimension of the text.

The imagery of the pigeons and the tramway circuit is further dispersed throughout the text. The pigeons have wings, and the student recalls where the revolutionary office is situated:

se rendant compte alors que le bureau . . . se trouvait dans l'aile gauche . . .

(30; my underlining throughout)

A piece of paper blowing in the wind takes on the look of a battered bird:

comme un sillage d'oiseaux affolés et infirmes, et à un moment l'un d'eux (proclamation? affiche?) jaillit, s'éleva de sous les roues arrières, traversa presque à la verticale la glace, battant des ailes . . .

(80)

The driver of a Barcelona taxi has a distinctive hair style:

(l'étudiant se rappelant seulement alors le chauffeur dingue, sa chevelure aile de corbeau . . .)

(112)

as do the young men walking in the square fifteen years later:

des garçons noirs, efflanqués, aux cheveux en aile de corbeau . . .

(122)

and the sinister attendants in the public convenience:

la cérémonieuse rangée de cireurs à la chevelure aile de corbeau . . .

(230)

Finally, the dress of young women in the square is linked to the same image:

avec leurs tabliers empesés dont les bretelles leur font comme des ailes . . .

(214)

The flight of pigeons is clearly only the central point of a whole series of visual cross-references which pulls the various moments of time together within the text in a ceaseless and fascinating process.

The tramways too find similar images or 'harmonics' as Simon calls them at all points throughout the novel. At one stage they are described as follows:

s'engageant sur la courbe dans un interminable grincement, se présentant peu à peu (non par un mouvement continu mais par une série de légers, cahotants et brusques changements de plans) de flanc.

(123)

This recalls the first pages of the novel, describing the motion of a pigeon's head:

tournant la tête sans raison à droite et à gauche,
passant d'une position à l'autre par une série de
minuscules et brefs mouvements . . .

(10)

It also coincides with the stubbornly animated behaviour of a folded newspaper:

le folio supérieur commença à baïller et se soulever,
se rouvrant lentement par un mouvement imperceptible
mais continu de volet autour de sa charnière . . .

(147)

In such a network of cross-references, it is impossible to omit the revolving door in which the Italian gunman was momentarily trapped:

dans le bruit des pales tournantes et de l'air froissé,
avec cette sorte de vertige, cette angoisse de la claus-
tration, du tourbillon)

(68)

This in turn must lead to the central baroque leitmotiv of the novel. Le Palace is full of evocations of the baroque, reflecting the form of the novel itself, a colonne torse in which the central axis (the student in the revolution; the student revisiting the city) is offset and surrounded by a spiral of detail and ornamentation, exactly like the style of the baroque: once again, 'la perpétuation du tumulte'.

The 'palace' itself, 'la fastueuse débauche de corniches, de volutes et de vagues pétrifiées' (p.14), is a baroque monument. The city is full of baroque statuary; one column in particular is described, along with the ubiquitous pigeons, to bring out the full dynamic tension of the baroque style, and its peculiar relevance to the novel whose shape it is dictating:

(la colonne elle-même constituant pour ainsi dire l'axe
de l'infatigable et frémissante ronde, du permanent
tourbillon d'ailes suspendu dans l'air moite, dessinant
comme un invisible cône renversé, la pointe en bas)

(86)

The image is then repeated in the description of revolutionaries clearing out an occupied house:

ce fut comme si on avait crevé un oreiller de plumes:
une brève explosion de papiers déchirés jetés à pleines
mains et que le vent, l'air, maintinrent un instant,
tourbillonnant . . .

(130)

It appears again, with clear inferences for the novel itself
seen as a monumental whole, in the renewed description of the
'palace':

comme la concrétisation furieuse de quelque délire,
quelque cataclysme mental, solidifié.

(190)

This last simile introduces the fundamental consideration
of the novel itself as a work of art, pointing to the baroque
as the key to a really meaningful interpretation of Simon's
text. Depicting stasis at the point of disintegration, the
baroque is ideally suited to Simon's purpose, as one critic
has hinted:

Ces segments, ces lambeaux, toujours incomplets, toujours
coupés ou troués, glissent les uns sur les autres, comme
un jeu de cartes déchirées qui tantôt se recouvrent,
tantôt se découvrent, jeu dispersé mais toujours tenu,
pour éviter l'éparpillement, par la force agissante de la
pensée actuelle périodiquement réintroduite.¹⁵

As already suggested, Le Palace is a baroque literary monument
which dramatizes, or perpetuates, instability in a language
which itself is a form of suspended animation. The seemingly
fixed surface of the text is in fact the scene of a constant
process of cross-reference. This is where the idea of the
novel as a gigantic form of sauvetage is important: the style
of Le Palace is Simon's attempt at the redemption of the dream.

That the baroque is obsessed with the imagery of water
and fluidity is made obvious in such a novel as Butor's
La Modification, another spiral of memory and imagination
built around a central narrative axis, as well as devoting a
great deal of attention to the actual baroque architecture of
Rome; in Le Palace Simon too refers frequently to the notion

¹⁵ Jean Rousset, 'Trois romans de la mémoire', Cahiers
Internationaux de Symbolisme, 9-10 (1965-66), pp.75-
84.

of fluid movement in order to convey the instability of the perceptions being described. This applies in general to the concept of history as a corollary to the 'vases communicants' (p.12), and to the ceaseless flow of time, an idea brought out most clearly in the striking imagery of shipwreck used to describe the 'palace' itself. There is a significant moment of near-submersion for the student, obsessed by the thought of dissolution and by the flood of memories:

semblable à la haute muraille d'un navire surgissant de la brume, nimbée (avec ses rangées de fenêtres superposées, ses superstructures compliquées, ses paratonnerres, ses antennes, ses mâts) de l'espèce d'aura qui émane de ces sortes de constructions, flottantes ou pas, traditionnellement baptisées de noms empruntés à une gigantomachie marine ou terrestre (Majestic, Titanic, Europa), comme pour ajouter encore à cet aspect d'épave à l'abandon.

(186-7)

As the novel approaches its conclusion, this image is revived as a means of stressing the underlying theme of wreckage:

l'énorme bâtisse toute entière semblable à présent, dans les furtives apparitions de soleil qui faisaient étinceler les toits mouillés, miroiter les vitres, à quelque épave monumentale, ruisselante, drossée et abandonnée par la tempête et aux saillies de laquelle les eaux, en se retirant, auraient laissé accrochés les habituels débris (chiffons, vieux journaux détremés, algues blanchis par le sel) charriés par le flot.

(212-3)

At this stage in the novel, this is a fine synthesis of the theme of wrecked human aspirations and the theme of memory, whose wave-like movement ebbs and flows through time, washing up the debris which compose the massive collage of the book itself. The image is rounded off soon after with a renewed reference to the predatory movements of the revolutionaries around the central square:

semblables à ces bancs d'oiseaux inquiets, plaintifs et sauvages qu'on voit voler interminablement en gémissant au-dessus de quelque chose d'invisible, quelque charogne, quelque bête agonisante, quelque monstre, quelque léviathan malade, commençant déjà, tout vivant, à se décomposer, incapable de se diriger, lentement ballotté au gré de la houle.

(224-5)

This aimlessness causes the torment of the student, caught

between two 'realities' which he cannot stomach: the glittering façade of the bank, and the tragic wreckage of the revolutionary headquarters. He is trapped in a closed circuit uniting these two images.

The imagery of fluidity is used also in describing the funeral procession in the third section of the novel. Symbolically stationed above the marchers, the student describes them in this way: 'la lente et irrésistible marée' (p.110), and goes on to evoke the rapid movement defying the eye:

la tête du cortège toute proche à présent, quoiqu'à aucun moment on n'ait pu le voir avancer à proprement parler: plutôt comme si s'étaient succédés une série de plans fixes, à différents étages pour ainsi dire, de la marée humaine qui emplissait l'avenue.

(114)

Since the student observes or remembers different 'levels' of humanity at fifteen years' distance the one from the other, this image applies to time in general, as well as to the particular phenomenon being described in detail. Once again the image is used, with regard to the noise of the march, in order to express the idea of wreckage and submersion:

(le) bruit silencieux et confus de piétinement qui semblait le recouvrir, le submerger, au fur et à mesure qu'avancait le cortège, comme une espèce de lugubre marée.

(138)

It reappears to describe the people themselves as so much flotsam:

(maintenant c'était comme un fleuve sombre, brassé par de lents remous, quelques-uns tournant parfois la tête quand ils passaient devant l'hôtel . . . (de sorte que la foule, l'espèce de magma, de lave grumeleuse grise et noire se piquait ça et là d'ovales couleur chair, comme des bulles, comme des masques posés à plat sur sa surface, dérivant lentement pendant quelques instants, emportés par l'imperceptible courant . . .)

(140)

The baroque instability of the novel, which is its major strength and Simon's aim, stems from this constant metaphorical language, which applies to humanity, to buildings, and to the whole of the city:

(comme si ce n'était pas simplement la nuit, l'obscurité, qui avaient remplacé le jour, mais une sorte de marée, de lave tiède et opaque qui se serait lentement répandue dans les rues, les avenues, s'élevant peu à peu à partir du sol comme l'eau dans un bief, escaladant les façades au fur et à mesure que la lumière se retirait, les submergeant à la fin . . .)

(159)

So systematic and insistent is this imagery that it becomes clear that the student, the writer, is a man working against the constant threat of darkness and immersion; what is the form of the novel to do but reflect this struggle? The 'architecture sensorielle' of Le Palace is an attempt to dominate the flux by picking out the recurrent similarities in different scenes. These similarities can then be rescued from dispersal, precisely because language offers only a certain number of words with which to describe them. Paradoxically, then, certain of the terms used to evoke fluidity are in themselves a barrier against submersion, in that they fix the image securely in the pages of the novel and create a system of pictorial cross-references.

A good example of this, and an anticipation of Orion Aveugle, is the use of the term serpentin and its variants. It appears in the 'Récit de l'Homme-Fusil' in referring to the neon lighting used in advertisements: '(le tube serpentin de néon . . .)' (p.53), and again eight pages further on: 'une courte ligne ondulée, comme un serpent, une sinusoïde' (p.61). It recurs at regular intervals thereafter:

celle d'un S couché et irrégulier . . .

(68)

le secouant de droite et de gauche comme un serpent, convulsé, sinueux . . .

(81)

comme ces paroles s'échappant en lignes serpentes, de la bouche des personnages des bandes dessinées . . .

(106)

les deux courts morceaux fouettant l'air comme des serpents . . .

(121)

Once more, within the one text, a whole series of fragments is brought into close contact. The novel is like a system of coils whose baroque movement lends a hesitant stability

to the movement of perception, memory, and imagination. This is why the words themselves are repeated from the end of one section to the beginning of the next, as Philip Stevick suggests:

Disregard for the conventions of seeming to end may be a calculated attempt to render fictionally some aspect of the way in which the novelist views the world at large, a view, perhaps, of the operation of the mind or of the metaphysical continuity of the world or of social disintegration, views which may make the tradition of cadence, with its tranquil enclosure and its suggestion of philosophical certainty, unusable.¹⁶

Within sections, the writing also follows a strict circular pattern: this is best seen in the fourth section, 'Dans la Nuit', where the final words (from 'les ombres chinoises' onwards (p.175)) are practically a literal repetition of the opening pages (from 'mais le rideau de la fenêtre' to 'puis tout s'était éteint' (pp.144-5)), and a first section headed 'Inventaire' finds a deliberate symmetrical echo in a closing section headed 'Le Bureau des Objets Perdus'. The writing itself spirals back and forth, projected by the recurrence of sensory stimuli.

If any further proof were needed, there is the regular repetition of the word rond, with the concomitant image of revolving:

- l'infatigable et frémissante ronde . . . (86)
- Quelques jardins et des avenues de palmiers, qui remplacent les anciens remparts (rondas) . . . (88)
- tout autour du périmètre de la place . . . (125)
- les voitures et les taxis jaunes, parcourant et reparcourant inlassablement le même itinéraire . . . (133)
- les automates condamnés à répéter sans fin les mêmes mouvements ou reparcourir le même itinéraire . . . (185)
- la ronde des petits tramways . . . (214)

Simon's main stratagem in Le Palace is to capture the cyclical progress of humanity through a variety of images of 'revolution' within a text whose own form is a fine example of just such a movement.

It remains to assess the final purpose and value of the novel as a finished work of art. Given again the many references, within Le Palace, to the inadequacy of language, why in the first place does Simon take the trouble to write? There appear to be three ways of answering that question, one of which brings Simon into line with theories expounded by the Russian Formalists:

Et voilà que pour rendre la sensation de la vie, pour sentir les objets, pour éprouver que la pierre est de pierre, il existe ce que l'on appelle l'art. Le but de l'art, c'est de donner une sensation de l'objet comme vision et non pas comme reconnaissance; le procédé de l'art est le procédé de singularisation des objets et le procédé qui consiste à obscurcir la forme, à augmenter la difficulté et la durée de la perception. L'acte de perception en art est une fin en soi et doit être prolongé; l'art est un moyen d'éprouver le devenir de l'objet, ce qui est déjà 'devenu' n'importe pas pour l'art.¹⁷

Here is a parallel for Simon's conception of the artist as Orion, the writer who sets out to explore the landscape of language and all its resources. This leads in Le Palace to a series of discoveries coming back round to the notion of baroque, because they are described as a sequence of materializations: the redemption of the dream is achieved largely through language itself, to give shape to the insubstantial stuff of experience or obsession.

This notion of materialization appears significantly at the very beginning of the book when the student remembers a pigeon's becoming suddenly visible, as if 'matérialisé par la baguette d'un prestidigitateur' (p.9); it recurs when he suddenly realizes that what the Italian gunman has been saying

¹⁷ V. Chklovski, 'L'art comme procédé', in Théorie de la Littérature: Textes des Formalistes russes, edited by Tzvetan Todorov (Paris, 1965), pp.76-97 (p.83); see also D.G.B. Piper, 'Russian Formalism and the "Nouveau Roman"', Forum for Modern Language Studies, 3, No.1 (January 1967), pp.36-48.

leads to the same impression: 'et alors cela fut là, se matérialisa violemment . . .' (p.93); the banners of the funeral marchers appear 'comme une écharpe de brume, une condensation, la matérialisation visible sous forme de nuage planant au-dessus des têtes d'un fantasma obsessionnel, tenace, inapaisable' (p.111). In each case the primary feature is the allusion to fragility and ephemerality, which is illustrated most memorably in the final appearance of this word:

et cette fois il parut se matérialiser à partir de l'air lui-même, violemment, bruyamment froissé ou plutôt fouetté, brassé, agité, comme par quelque opération magique . . . c'est-à-dire les deux ailes déployées comme celles d'un oiseau héraldique battant l'air qu'elles semblaient accumuler, condenser au milieu d'elles et qui, pressé, finissait, au moment où ils regardaient, de se solidifier . . . puis, de nouveau, de cette même façon imprévisible, tout d'un coup, il s'envola — c'est-à-dire qu'il fut brusquement de dos, s'éloignant à tire-d'aile, à peu près horizontalement et en ligne droite, au-dessus de la place, décroissant très vite, et disparaissant.

(203-5)

There is a case for treating this as the single most important passage in the novel, because it synthesizes so many of Simon's preoccupations as an artist. It evokes the startling rapidity of movement which is a constant and insuperable obstacle to the registering of perceptions; the bird in its sudden appearance and equally rapid disappearance is clearly a symbol of memory and its resuscitation of brief moments of time. But also the bird is exactly like something on an escutcheon, that is to say like an artistic representation; and furthermore, it becomes solidified or concrete — and this is the task which language as used by Simon attempts to fulfil, to materialize these evanescent apparitions within the flux of mental life. This is the 'magic' potential of language as artistic medium, not as instrument of historical recording or of pseudo-philosophical communication.

The other two elements in answer to the question, 'Why write?', go very much together. One is seen in the mise en abyme represented by the 'Récit de l'Homme-Fusil', an illustration of the function of language as extirpation and as

materialization:

comme s'il ne pouvait pas admettre que ce qu'il a fait ou vu n'ait pas laissé plus de traces qu'un rêve . . . comme s'il essayait d'arracher, de rejeter de lui cette violence, cette chose qui a élu domicile en lui, se sert de lui.

(77)

Thus the act of reconstitution can be interpreted either as a remedial procedure — as if to combat that 'indigestion' so strongly suggested in Le Palace — through which certain unbearable obsessions are excised (though this is never quite possible, and Simon always has another book to write), or as a way of giving form, no matter how tentative, to a dreamlike experience.

If the fragments of that dream can be solidified into an artistic whole, then art will be in some measure justified, and Simon has symbolized that compromise by adopting the parallel with the baroque. If the gunman's narrative and his febrile attempts to draw a schematic illustration of his act are not actually a conscious effort at redemption, the student's interrogation of memory is an articulation by a man of anxious intelligence, who can only use language as the instrument of his search:

There is an opaque medium interposed between reality and our awareness of it, and between our awareness and our expression. Language does not reflect reality but transmutes it into something vastly different . . . But we cannot live except by naming. We are caught in the inextricable dilemma that the letter killeth but the life-giving spirit can find expression only by the letter.¹⁸

Often dismissed as one of the least interesting of its author's novels, Le Palace is in fact one of the most significant, precisely because it shows the writer moving still further from the conception of art as the expression of humanistic themes, toward a more purely artistic idea of language, not only as a meaningful distortion of experience, but as a valid

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A.A. Mendilow, Time and the Novel, p.148.

undertaking in its own right. Simon's answer to the dilemma is to eschew deliberate thematic intentions in favour of 'art for art's sake', whereby as an artisan of language he can reach for a suspension of disorder within the synthetic framework of the novel.

If Le Palace does not contain all the emotive resonance of La Route des Flandres, and if it seems to display less fine writing than Simon's previous novels, it is because he is purifying his conception of language in evolving that poetic, creative medium which will reemerge five years later with Histoire. The novel of the Spanish Civil War still hovers between the intellectual and the sensorial, even if heavily reliant on the latter, so that the twin notions of dream and revolution operate both as a comment on human life and as an approach to the artistic re-presentation of that life: Le Palace is both a 'philosophical' and a 'pictorial' work of art.

Chapter VI: 'A pattern of timeless moments':
Histoire 1967

A people without history
 Is not redeemed from time,
 for history is a pattern
 Of timeless moments.

T.S. Eliot

The novel which earned for Simon the Prix Médicis in 1967 is possibly the most dauntingly complex piece of work that he has written. Unlike La Route des Flandres or Le Palace, it is not governed by any specific narrative intention conceived before undertaking the actual task of writing; it does not offer the convenient headings included in La Bataille de Pharsale, but contains only by implication that novel's more overt suggestions of its author's creative technique; and its style and syntax offer, on the surface at least, a chaotic contrast to the severely controlled sentence structure of Orion Aveugle and subsequent texts. In terms of length alone, to say nothing of its intrinsic verbal and structural intricacies, Histoire is the most substantial work in the total output of the nouveau roman. An essential feature of this novel is that it represents the culmination of a particular phase in Simon's writing, while at the same time indicating a change of direction confirmed in the novels published since 1969.

In a sense, Histoire is the final book in a trilogy begun in 1960. In these three novels Simon turns away from the almost purely fictive nature of the writing that had gone into Le Vent and L'Herbe, in order to exploit, in an imaginative and therefore distorting manner, the definite autobiographical elements of the past. The result is that this trilogy depends to a considerable extent upon the description, constantly modified and deepened, of certain major events in the life of the writer, and of the narrator who is his persona in each of these three novels. The tragedy of 1940, and the brief adventure of the Spanish Civil War, form the historical backbone of this phase. Many of the pages of Histoire present a reprise of situations from the two preceding novels; the names

of Flanders and de Reixach reappear at regular intervals, while a large section of the novel reappraises the atmosphere of the Spanish city which supplied the basic material for the revolutionary backcloth of Le Palace.

Histoire, however, reveals a somewhat different construction, and the basic situation in the novel shows the change in Simon's approach. The 'action' is concentrated upon a single day in the life of its narrator, a day spent in the town and in the old family home which were the focal points of his childhood. Unlike L'Herbe, this novel evokes a distinctly personal past. The history suggested by the novel is no longer that of two precise episodes of global importance, but a history of much more personal intensity, which comes into being through the evocative force of the familiar surroundings in which the narrator again finds himself. Thus one significant reason for the novel's density is the combination of an apparently trivial surface action with the far more profound meaning of the memories and reveries provoked by the town and the old house. The history presented in the novel stems largely from the coincidence in the narrator's mind of private and public facts: the atmosphere of the book owes much to the examination of the way in which the larger movements of what we call 'history' are subjugated by and incorporated into the fabric of more private recollections on the part of a sensitive individual, only to be re-presented as public material in the organized form of a work of art.

There is yet another aspect of Simon's writing in Histoire which is more genuinely innovatory, bringing him closer in a deliberate manner to the theme of Orion now definitely established as the core of his research in fiction. Here there is a much more intensified exploration of language itself as a poetic and synthetic medium. Not only history, but the text itself by which history is reflected, becomes 'a pattern of timeless moments' as the theme of search and discovery becomes more pronounced. The apparently accidental network of echoes and resemblances connecting one historical event with another,

and the haphazard development of one individual's life, give rise to a textual pattern in which the critical moments are suspended and become 'timeless' within the artistic framework of the novel. This is to say, then, that Histoire is no longer purely Faulknerian in inspiration but also Joycean, both in respect of its surface plot and of its inventive manipulation of language:

Retirée de toute situation, l'oeuvre se donne par là-même à explorer: devant celui qui l'écrit ou la lit, elle devient une question posée au langage, dont on éprouve les fondements, dont on touche les limites. L'oeuvre se fait ainsi dépositaire d'une immense, d'une incessante enquête sur les mots. On veut toujours que le symbole ne soit qu'une propriété de l'imagination. Le symbole a aussi une fonction critique, et l'objet de sa critique, c'est le langage lui-même. Aux Critiques de la Raison que la philosophie nous a données, on peut imaginer d'ajouter une Critique du Langage, et c'est la littérature elle-même.¹

To a certain extent, because of its link with Ulysses, Histoire is the expression, in a modern French setting, of Joyce's own variation on an epic theme. Equally important is Simon's assumption that the Cubist technique of collage will assist him in the attempt to display, within the limits of novelistic form, the breathtaking multiplicity of exterior and interior worlds. Here the artist begins to assume the mantle of Orion as he searches for elucidation of the puzzling amalgam of fact and fiction misleadingly labelled 'history', and examines the potential within himself for the artistic re-creation of an indomitable reality.

To evoke the search as a theme in literature is to think immediately of The Odyssey, and then inevitably of Joyce's adaptation of the Homeric narrative as a formal archetype for Ulysses. Consequently, the suggestion that Histoire in its turn is based mainly on the element of search is confirmed

¹ Roland Barthes, Critique et Vérité (Paris, 1966), p.55.

by the striking similarities between Simon's novel and the original epic as transposed in the elaborate Joycean system of correspondences. A fundamental feature of The Odyssey is the search undertaken by Telemachus for his lost father Odysseus; this theme is eventually resolved by their reunion and triumphant reaffirmation of power. Similarly, in Ulysses, there is separation of father and son, but in more than a strictly physical sense; Stephen and Simon Dedalus are kept apart by a profound difference of temperament, close as they may be to each other within the city of Dublin, and within the body of their family. The fact that Stephen does not live in the parental home is therefore an extension of the gulf between him and his father. The climactic point of Joyce's novel is the moment at which Leopold Bloom, the wandering Jew, recognizes in Stephen the son whom he has never had, his own boy having died only eleven days after birth. Ultimately these two men come together, however briefly, in the union of father and son, poet and practical man.

This is one point at which Histoire and Ulysses part company, for father and son never at any time come together in Simon's book; no real relationship is established between them except the relative accident of paternity, and the narrator's obsessive re-examination of the enigma of his father's character, during which the man is magnified to almost mythical proportions in the mind of his son. But it is important to note that, in this connection, the figure of Charles adopts a major role as the replacement for the father whom his nephew has never known. Not only was the boy brought up largely in the company of Charles's children, but also there is a strong affinity of temperament between uncle and nephew. Ironic references are made to Charles's success or otherwise with women in particular, and with life in general, while the narrator in turn imagines that he must be considered something of a failure by those who know him best. More specifically, the two have similar ways of expressing themselves, particularly as regards their attitudes to history as a chaotic ex-

perience which can only partly be put into words:

Mais est-ce que tu ne savais pas que ça se passe toujours dans la sueur et les déjections? Est-ce que ce n'était pas écrit dans tes livres de classe? On t'avait pourtant bien dit j'imagine qu'il y avait du sang et des morts seulement . . .

Non Ce n'est pas ça
 ... entre le lire dans les livres ou le voir artistiquement représenté dans les musées et le toucher et recevoir les éclaboussures c'est la même différence qui existe entre voir écrit le mot obus et se retrouver d'un instant à l'autre couché cramponné à la terre et la terre elle-même à la place du ciel et l'air lui-même qui dégringole autour de toi comme du ciment brisé des morceaux de vitres, et de la boue et de l'herbe à la place de la langue, et soi-même éparpillé et mélangé à tellement de fragments de nuages, de cailloux, de feu, de noir, de bruit et de silence qu'à ce moment le mot obus ou le mot explosion n'existe pas plus que le mot terre, ou ciel, ou feu, ce qui fait qu'il n'est pas plus possible de raconter ce genre de choses qu'il n'est possible de les éprouver de nouveau après coup, et pourtant tu ne disposes que de mots, alors tout ce que tu peux essayer de faire...

(152)

The speaker is Charles, but this conviction is reflected faithfully in the accounts of Barcelona and Flanders given by the narrator, and again in the fragmentation inherent in the text of the novel. The full extent of this spiritual similarity can best be seen in the striking section of Histoire where the narrative centre is transposed to the consciousness of Charles, as the nephew imagines himself in his uncle's position and almost assumes his personality. Yet despite this union, the crucial relationship in the novel remains that between father and son, as the latter continues his mental quest to establish the former's character and to assess its effect upon him; as Stephen Heath says; 'What is in question in Simon is exactly the fiction of identity'.² It is fitting, then, that the novel should actually end on a note of interrogation:

la femme penchant son mystérieux buste de chair blanche enveloppé de dentelles ce sein qui déjà peut-être me portait dans son ténébreux tabernacle sorte de têtard

² The Nouveau Roman, p.154.

gélatineux lové sur lui-même avec ses deux énormes yeux
sa tête de ver à soie sa bouche sans dents son front
cartilagineux d'insecte, moi?...

(402)

Throughout the day the narrator questions the evidence left by history, whether in the shape of the house itself, of the postcards sent by his absent and now long-dead father, or in the words of various witnesses who might testify to the personality of this enigmatic figure, as well as to that of Charles, who has died only recently. But his search is to this extent fruitless, that he arrives at no more certain knowledge than he has ever before enjoyed.

In the process of his search, though, he comes round to a position close to that of Stephen Dedalus as far as history is concerned, an attitude which emerges from Stephen's approach to his temporary job as the teacher of the subject:

History, for the boys, is a struggle to learn the record of past events; for Stephen it is a struggle against the past as it is recorded in his body and mind and in the social element in which he lives. History would present him with his life task ready made. He has inherited a religion, a national cause, a social position — all tyrannical agencies jealous of his life and time. Their demand for sacrifice must be continually disputed. It is a wearying struggle, and a mood of weariness dominates the Nestor episode.³

A similar mood characterizes the discussions between the narrator of Histoire and his uncle. At one point the nephew remembers one of his school history books, the final illustration in which was a depressing photograph of a battlefield. This prompts an ironic reflection on his part about the very nature of that history which is such a dominant theme in his mental life:

comme si celle-ci (l'Histoire) s'arrêtait là, comme si la longue suite des chapitres avec leurs résumés en caractères gras à apprendre par coeur, la longue suite des images qui les illustraient . . . n'avaient été

³ Frank Budgen, James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses' and other writings (London, 1972), p.44.

écrites, sculptées, peintes, gravées, qu'en vue de cette seule fin, ce seul aboutissement, cette apothéose: les étendues grisâtres, mornes, informes, sans traces humaines . . . à la contemplation desquelles me ramenait une sorte de fascination vaguement honteuse, vaguement coupable, comme si elles détenaient la réponse à quelque secret capital du même ordre que celui des mots crus et anatomiques cherchés en cachette dans le dictionnaire, les lectures défendues, clandestines et décevantes.

(105-6)

Here is a direct reference to one of the principal elements in the text of Simon's novel: écrites, sculptées, peintes, gravées — all of these reflections of history as artistic material will play their part in Histoire and contribute to Simon's own collage of life. More acutely than Stephen, then, each of the two main protagonists in Histoire is aware that the process of recalling their experience through language is a massive, and in many ways a hopeless, struggle against the cumulative power of time and the fragile instrument of vocabulary. However, the nephew is equally well aware of the vital nature of his attempt to recall and synthesize the past, and of the frustrating distractions which the practicalities of living can represent.

The survival of the past in Histoire is celebrated in the very first pages of the novel. Recalling the presence of birds in a tree outside the room where he used to work in the old house, the narrator effects a comparison between them and the old ladies who formed a coterie around his grandmother; it is as if he could still hear their voices echoing in the house. In this way is introduced the familiar Simonian theme of death:

comme si elles se tenaient toujours là, mystérieuses et geignardes, quelque part dans la vaste maison délabrée, avec ses pièces maintenant à demi vides où flottaient non plus les senteurs des eaux de toilette des vieilles dames en visite mais cette violente odeur de moisi de cave ou plutôt de caveau comme si quelque cadavre de quelque bête morte quelque rat coincé sous une lame de parquet ou derrière une plinthe n'en finissait plus de pourrir exhalant ces âcres relents de plâtre effrité de tristesse et de chair momifiée.

(10)

The whole of the first section of the novel is dominated by

the theme of death and by the attitudes it provokes in people, and by the proliferating activity of memory and imagination as keys to the past in which so many people now dead were very much alive and instrumental in the formation of the narrator's youthful self. First memory, then imagination set up resonances in the mind, helped in its effort of reconstruction by a number of essential landmarks whose full importance will only gradually be revealed. Amongst these are the house itself, a point of material stability, like the 'palace' in the previous novel, at the centre of the lives of a number of transient human beings; the postcards — whose discovery will also be described only later in the novel — sent by various people to his mother, and most frequently of all by his father, suggestions of the sacrificial and vicarious nature of his mother's existence but also symbolic representations of the world she has denied herself. They are so many points of departure for the imaginative descriptions making up so much of the text of Histoire, serving as they do to broaden the horizons of the writing, taking it from the narrower confines of the narrator's immediate surroundings out into a more universal setting:

fragments, écaillés arrachées à la surface de la vaste terre . . . le monde bigarré, grouillant et inépuisable pénétrant ou plutôt faisant intrusion, insolite, somptueux, mercantile, brutal, dans cette forteresse inviolée.

(19-20)

Not only do the postcards have this expansive function, but they also exist as the sole link on a material level between the narrator and his father. The terse and repetitive messages on them merely underline the enigmatic nature of this person who achieves almost legendary status in the questioning mind of the narrator.

On a number of occasions the postcards serve to illustrate, in a literal sense, the broader theme of 'History' itself. For example, the text seems at one point to digress into the sinister description of a violent incident whose relevance is not appreciated until it is made clear that a postcard is in

fact being described:

et à ce moment, de nouveau, un long murmure parcourant la foule, et le jeune officier laissant peut-être alors échapper un juron, s'excusant, riant, déchirant toujours riant les tickets perdants, désinvolte, élégant, trouvant quelque désinvolte et bien-séante plaisanterie comme sur cette carte envoyée trois ans plutôt au libellé juvénile 'Projectiles que nous recevions sur la tête le jour où un pot de fleurs m'a envoyé à l'hôpital' écrit d'une encre maintenant grise dans le ciel au-dessus de la légende:

LES TROUBLES DE LIMOGES
Barricades — Rue de la Mauvendièrre en face de
l'usine Faure, après la manifestation —
17 avril 1905

(65-6)

As well as establishing a rather vicarious relationship between the narrator and his parents, the postcards sometimes serve as the still points — the 'pattern of timeless moments' — from which the text of Histoire, with its descriptive language, sets out to reanimate the restless amalgam of fragments that make up history even at its most decisive and violent manifestations. They also help to emphasize the narrator's feeling of history as a catalogue of hostile moments, pulling together the innumerable levels of time as well as synthesizing, in their illustrated scenes, the geographical vastness of the world: they are a surrogate for the narrator's mental journey through space and time within the framework of his day spent in his old home town:

Les cartes postales collectionnées par la mère du narrateur reviennent comme un leitmotiv à travers tout le livre: ce sont des images 'toutes faites' comme celles qu'on trouve souvent chez Claude Simon, des instants du passé figés une fois pour toutes, mais c'est un passé qui n'est pas celui du narrateur et qui ne semble guère appartenir à quelqu'un d'autre non plus: leur rôle semble plutôt être de constituer ici des témoignages à la fois irréfutables et mensongers du monde et de l'histoire, un rappel de la réalité anonyme et 'objective'. Elles flottent dans le fleuve du temps comme des grumaux [sic] qui refusent de fondre.⁴

⁴ C.-G. Bjurström, 'Dimensions du temps chez Claude Simon', Entretiens, No.31 (1972), pp.141-58 (p.154).

They too are, at certain moments, so many points at which the broader historical movements collide with the personal history of a family:

J'apprends qu'Henri a été tué Que vous dire Vous écrirai
 dès que cela me sera possible Nous traversons en ce mo-
 ment un des passages les plus critiques de la guerre mais
 le bon droit vaincra Nous le vengerons Mes respectueux
 sentiments ainsi qu'à Madame votre mère Colonel Le Mag-
 nien Secteur 212.

(387)

This provides both narrator and reader with limited insight into the past through which he sifts in search of knowledge about himself. It is from their fragmentary and often trivial evidence that he has to piece together the outlines of history — the history which has given him life and has, directly or indirectly, shaped his present self.

It is possible to say that the first section of Histoire stands as a useful prologue to the main body of the novel, since it announces all the fundamental themes and preoccupations to be developed. If the tree stands as a symbol for the work of memory delving ever further into the past, it is because of the vastly complex system of leaves and branches:

puis tout s'apaisait et elles reprenaient leur immobilité,
 les premières que frappaient directement les rayons de
 l'ampoule se détachant avec précision en ayant des rameaux
 plus lointains de plus en plus faiblement éclairés de
 moins en moins distincts entrevus puis seulement devinés
 puis complètement invisibles quoiqu'on pût les sentir
 nombreux s'entrecroisant se succédant se superposant dans
 les épaisseurs d'obscurité d'où parvenaient de faibles
 froissements de faibles cris d'oiseaux endormis tres-
 saillant s'agitant gémissant dans leur sommeil.

(9-10)

The essential nature of the narrator's mental life is implied here in the succession of adjectives describing the increasing dimness with which the tree's branches can actually be perceived. Similarly, the events of the recent past appear more clearly, while those from further back slip steadily into obscurity; what cannot be clearly perceived is then called back to the light by the efforts of the remembering imagination at the heart of the novel. The metaphor of the birds then introduces the theme of death, while a further image is used to

bring in the eponymous theme of History:

les imaginant, sombres et lugubres, perchées dans le réseau des branches, comme sur cette caricature orléaniste reproduite dans le manuel d'Histoire et qui représentait l'arbre généalogique de la famille royale dont les membres sautillaient parmi les branches sous la forme d'oiseaux à têtes humaines coiffés de couronnes endiamantées et pourvus de nez (ou plutôt de becs) bourbonniens et monstrueux.

(10-11)

Already the profoundly inventive character of the writing is firmly established, and one more vital element is added in this initial section which facilitates the untangling of the action, whether actual or imaginary, begun in the following section.

This element is the single most decisive and illuminating theme of the novel, that of language itself, suggested in a brief reference to a postcard sent to the narrator's mother by a Spanish friend:

amie donc qui lui écrivait ces autres missives empreintes ou plutôt parfumées de la lourde sensualité qui semble émaner de cette langue des noms des mots eux-mêmes avec leurs consonances lascives et brutales leur senteur poivrée d'oeillet et d'encens mêlés les exhalaisons langoureuses et un peu moites des chairs virginales des blancheurs des virginales sauvages noires et secrètes toisons ainsi.

(31-2)

This is confirmed in the evocative names of his grandmother's friends. All that will be most instrumental in the elaboration of the text, and not least the stimulation of one sensory impression by another, is thus stated in the introductory section of Histoire; the second part sees the narrator's day begin with his awakening in the old house and hearing birds sing once more in the tree outside.

The events of the day are relatively banal and uninteresting in themselves. What is important is the wealth of associations and echoes inspired by these apparently dull, even depressing activities. On the other hand, some of the situations encountered are crucial as illustrations of several human themes in the novel. His first meeting, however, is more evocative of the past than suggestive of a general thematic point. Walking

into town, he meets an old man, a former friend of the family. The ensuing dialogue has the double function of providing information about the narrator's immediate circumstances, whilst also communicating something of that family history which so deeply concerns him. At the same time, the old man's 'haleine de cadavre' (p.49) is a forceful reminder of the constant intertwining of life and death in Simon's novels. In order not to present a complete and readily accessible account of the situation, the dialogue is not transcribed in its entirety; there is a ceaseless oscillation between the words exchanged and the narrator's continuing perception of the world; there is too his periodic return to the thoughts and memories preoccupying him. The text is made up of the interlocking strands of memory, perception, and imagination, plus the banal conversation which is at present the mark of the social world's demands upon his attention. From the old man's conversation it emerges that the death of Charles has necessitated the narrator's return. The old man is a living source of history in so far as he is able to comment on Charles and other figures he once knew, but the significance of these comments can be measured only by the added impetus they give to the narrator's own train of thought: as the old man may have written postcards to the nephew's mother, the thought of these sets off another chain reaction in his mind.

The next stage of his 'journey' takes him to a bank, and this episode is more directly concerned with one of the major themes of the book: the role of money in human affairs. It is evident that the narrator is in rather straitened financial circumstances, viewing the bank and everything inside it with a jaundiced eye. While still thinking about the old man's words, he reacts to the bizarre atmosphere of the building:

la froide pénombre de marbre où, à travers le silence, parvint de nouveau (en réalité n'avait jamais cessé de parvenir) le lointain et diligent cliquetis des petites machines toujours occupées à calculer, transcrire et comptabiliser, comme un patient grignotement d'insectes, une multiple, sèche et crépitante rumeur de mandibules, comme si avec leurs minces pattes noires, leurs articulations huileuses, leurs brusques détentes, leur im-

pitoyable et monotone application, elles continuaient sans trêve à broyer, mastiquer et déglutir moissons, récoltes, troupeaux, bétail, cargaisons de navires et jusqu'aux pierres elles-mêmes arrachées du ventre paisible de la terre pour être réduites, tout aussi bien ou tout aussi mal que les montagnes de sacs de blé ou les forêts abattues, à de simples additions de chiffres et d'intérêts composés.

(96-7)

As he waits to be interviewed, money becomes a tangible and obsessive presence interrupting the processes of memory now growing increasingly complex. His experience in the bank is humiliating in that it renews his understanding of the tyrannical force of money, and it is with an evident sense of relief that he escapes into the warmth and light of midday.

Since it is now lunchtime, he encounters groups of school-children on their way home. Two of them, trading old stamps, introduce another dominant theme: the notion that life is based on an elaborate system of exchanges giving free rein to the aggressiveness of human nature. Furthermore, he is reminded of his own school days, and in particular of his relationship with one Lambert. As the novel progresses, Lambert comes to typify humanity, since he goes through the standard progression of the radical dissenter, but has now become a politician, a stock figure from the Establishment. A mediocre acceptance of the status quo has taken the place of a professed desire for authenticity. The theme of exchange, with the concomitant idea of diminution, affects the whole of the novel, and includes the activity of writing, also an elaborate form of exchange.⁵

Next in the narrator's activities is lunch, which provides Simon's equivalent of the 'Lestrygonians' episode in Ulysses. It is the occasion of an unnerving discovery about the erosion of values. In a scene strongly reminiscent of Roquentin's experiences in La Nausée, the narrator struggles with the lurid writing on a menu, and ponders the act of 'decomposition' which he performs in eating. Here he also comes across a garrulous

⁵ For a full and illuminating discussion of this theme, see John Sturrock, The French New Novel, pp.89f.

middle-aged woman, snatches of whose conversation are overheard; and a hunchback, provoking memories of an incident in Spain involving a similarly handicapped person. Thus the text of Histoire grows more fragmented as it tries to cope with the constant accretion of material.

On leaving the restaurant, the narrator sees hoardings covered with posters on the subject of the forthcoming elections. It should be noted in passing that, in an oblique sense, these become Simon's counterpart for what Stephen Dedalus had termed 'the ineluctable modality of the audible'.⁶ Torn and incomplete, the posters and their slogans present a truncated and distorted version of language; this is one more example of the inevitable destruction of meaning. His next encounter merely reinforces this feeling, when he negotiates with a shrewd business-woman the sale of some fine old furniture from the family home. The system of exchange, at its worst, is a series of degenerations, substituting for the rich substance of the world its mere synthetic counterpart in money. The remainder of the narrator's activities simply underline this fact. Visiting a cousin whose signature he requires, he finds repugnant the signs of slavish materialism in the man's life; in a bar in town, he hears a banal conversation among soldiers who fail to make themselves understood; he hears the broadcast voice of Lambert thundering out electoral platitudes; and finally, after savouring the atmosphere of the darkened old house, he retires for the night. As thoughts pass chaotically through his mind prior to sleep, past and present intermingle, while the final question holds the promise of similar mental activity in the future.

This, then, is the day spent by the narrator in his home town; but it is only a surface account, banal in tone, of what is in fact a profoundly active period of time. What these activities and encounters translate is simply a social

⁶ Ulysses (Penguin Books edition), p.42.

persona, the mask which the man presents to the world while he carries out the business of living. The reason for the vastness and complexity of Histoire is that so much attention is paid to the real man behind the façade; that man is interesting, because he attunes his intelligence to the need for creating something out of the information which he obtains from the community. This is to say that everything he does, sees, and hears, is of the greatest relevance to him in the ever-intensified search for his own identity; this is again proof of Simon's affinity with Proust:

Une heure n'est pas qu'une heure, c'est un vase rempli de parfums, de sons, de projets et de climats. Ce que nous appelons la réalité est un certain rapport entre ces sensations et ces souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément.⁷

Emerging from the bank, for example, the narrator offers clear evidence of the Proustian quality of sensorial recall in Histoire, when he sees schoolchildren in the street:

Et alors . . . tout revenant à la fois: les re-
lents de réfectoire, de craie, de la peinture noire
des pupitres, et cette odeur particulière des planchers
gris, rugueux, arrosés chaque jour, fleurant le moisi,
et l'excitation, l'espèce de fièvre, les mots latins,
crus, violents . . .

(106-7)

His mental processes are engaged in a ceaseless labour of assimilation and imaginative re-creation:

By affording his narrators the power to recreate events of which they have little direct knowledge, Simon provides them with much of the freedom of authorial omniscience at the same time that he offers insight into the characters themselves. In their need to recreate the past, in their effort to understand their present lives as a product of their past, in their need to make of their lives — past and present — a formal and consistent pattern like that of Proust's Marcel, Simon's characters are most enlightening. This compulsion makes them susceptible to disillusionment and makes them figures with whom the reader can identify, providing for character and reader alike the possibility of epiphany and catharsis. The peculiar contemporaneity of

⁷ Marcel Proust, A la recherche du temps perdu, t.III, p.889.

their narrative method arises because their apparent omniscience provides not greater certainty — as in the traditional novel — but greater possibilities of uncertainty, reasons for abandoning their ideals at the same time that they retain them. It is this ambiguity which makes their situations so moving.⁸

Although this judgement places false emphasis on an omniscience which in fact no Simonian narrator ever enjoys — this for one thing is the sense of the final 'moi?...' in Histoire — it serves the purpose of showing the deeper meaning of the narrator's day as a period of tireless, if frequently interrupted, interrogation and rediscovery of the past.

One of Histoire's great strengths is its illustration of the principle of the éternel retour in human history. The narrator comes to realize that there are two key areas in which the principle operates, and these are familiar from La Route des Flandres in particular: love and warfare. It is in respect of these that he has most in common with his uncle. Where love is concerned, each of the two men appears to have suffered an unbearable experience of separation. This, for the narrator, is comparatively recent, since it comes to mind right at the beginning of his waking day:

et moi essayant de bouger de me retourner, puis submergé de nouveau sombrant, et alors seulement elle et moi, et la locomotive haletant là-bas au bout du quai, entendant à intervalles réguliers le chuintement des deux jets de vapeur l'un fort l'autre faible alternant régulateur de pression ou quoi respirant et expirant et ses yeux agrandis immenses me fixant mais pas de pleurs lacs seulement immobiles tremblotants nous dûmes nous reculer pour laisser passer le petit train de chariots chargés de bagages le conducteur actionnait sans arrêt le timbre avertisseur assourdissant puis je perçus de nouveau le halètement de la machine égrenant les secondes, sur le cadran de l'horloge l'aiguille sauta brusquement l'intervalle de deux minutes, et elle et moi toujours debout l'un devant l'autre la machine lâchant et retenant sa vapeur comme si mes oreilles se bouchaient et s'ouvraient tour à tour, c'est-à-dire comme si par moments tous les bruits s'effaçaient et rien que nous deux debout dans le silence,

comme si le monde entier était mort, englouti, comme si plus rien n'existait, sauf son visage, et même pas le flanc verdâtre du wagon derrière, même pas le col de son manteau, ses cheveux, ou le front, la bouche: seulement les yeux.

(39-40)

He will return on several occasions to this moment, as well as to another anguished memory of his relationship with this woman. This concerns a trip to Greece, when the feeling of separation was also strong:

(seuls maintenant elle et moi dans les salles sonores j'avais voulu lui donner le guide mais elle avait refusé malheureux tous les deux non de cette dispute absurde à l'hôtel mais de cette impossibilité emmurés désespérés chacun devant une vitrine différente à chacune des extrémités de la salle moi l'épiant à la dérobée elle regardant ou faisant semblant d'être absorbée . . . je ne pouvais voir que ses cheveux blonds son dos comme un mur énigmatique enfermant cachant cette espèce de tragique mélancolie cette chose sombre noire qui était déjà en elle.

(109-10)

The suggestion of wasting illness in the woman is a source of definite tragedy on a highly personal level.

This is heightened by his fixation with a newspaper headline: 'ELLE SE JETTE DU QUATRIEME ETAGE' (p.115), as if he were afraid of just such a suicide. Death has had, or threatens to have, a profound effect on his private life. Here is one area of close comparison with Charles, to the illness and death of whose wife a number of references are made, especially in the same section (IV) of the novel as contains the narrator's thoughts on his own affairs with the opposite sex.

Firstly there are the insinuations of the old man:

capable d'attendre que je passe en revenant de la banque et me sauter de nouveau dessus pour me raconter ses romantiques souvenirs avec maman ou me faire part à grands renforts de sous-entendus et en m'épiant par-dessous de ses considérations sur l'infortune ou plutôt les infortunes vous me comprenez d'oncle Charles condamné vous me comprenez à perdre toutes les femmes c'est-à-dire à les perdre vous me comprenez dans les deux sens du mot actif et passif et à se perdre lui-même vous me comprenez et le malheur que ç'avait été pour Corinne de n'avoir pas eu de mère oui je sais merci.

(114)

Obviously Charles's wife died at a comparatively early age.

There is also the narrator's reconstruction of the burial of his aunt:

son nom même pas encore gravé sur une dalle, et lui, lui qui ne pouvait que perdre les femmes, se tenant là, devant cette tombe fraîche, à regarder la terre remuée qui commençait déjà à sécher, prenait une teinte plus claire, presque blanche sur le dessus des mottes.

(120)

This in turn is followed quite closely by a number of extracts from a letter written by Charles to his sister:

'Après je suis encore revenu à la tombe. Voici exactement comment elle est maintenant: la terre a été entassée de façon à former une sorte de pyramide tronquée, de faible hauteur. Elle est faite de petites mottes, de grumeaux plutôt, dont la partie supérieure, plus aérée et par conséquent plus sèche, commence à se décolorer, devenant d'un jaune blanchâtre en même temps qu'elle prend un aspect friable.'

(131)

The two men have obviously undergone, at a generation's distance, the same distressing experience. Not until later in the novel is it made clear that Charles and his wife suffered a kind of separation even before her actual death. Her illness brought physical separation:

elle ayant ramené le drap par un réflexe non de pudeur mais de désespoir couvrant cachant ou plutôt ensevelissant déjà ce corps devenu maintenant pour elle une charge.

(355)

The consequence of this separation is a similar failure to communicate properly. Left with only words as the means to reach each other, they become tragic and essentially human figures; it is a peculiarly Simonian theme that, more often than not, language is an obstacle rather than an aid to communication. It is one of the ironies of the novel that the narrator's mother and father are in fact united only by language, in the form of the terse messages on the countless postcards sent by the father from various parts of the world.

Warfare is another recurrent human experience which uncle and nephew have both tasted. It is also one of the points in Histoire at which the public and the private worlds converge,

for the narrator is able to draw on his own knowledge of events which enjoyed universal prominence and also stand as landmarks in the historical labyrinth of the text. The theme of violence acts as a link between the 'historic' moments recorded in the novel. The momentous arrival of Lenin at the head of the Russian revolution, for example:

l'intérieur n'était que faiblement éclairé par une seule lampe à arc pendue sous le toit de l'immense salle dont les hauts pilliers et les rangées de fenêtres s'estompaient dans une demi-obscurité Le long des murs les monstrueuses silhouettes des automobiles blindées étaient tapies dans l'ombre . . . Le commissaire du peuple à la guerre grimpa sur l'automobile aidé par de nombreuses mains qui le poussaient en avant et en arrière Trapu court de jambes et tête nue il ne portait aucun insigne sur son uniforme Camarades soldats je n'ai pas besoin de vous dire que je suis un soldat Je n'ai pas besoin de vous dire que je veux la paix.

(127-8)

This passage offers a striking illustration of the warlike atmosphere in which the greater movements of history are forged. One result of the association of ideas in Histoire is that from this twentieth-century event the narrator passes immediately to a much more distant yet apparently no less decisive past:

commemoravit: il rappela
testibus se militibus uti posse: qu'il pouvait prendre
à témoin ses soldats
quanto studio: avec quelle ardeur
pacem petisset: il avait demandé la paix

(128)

Caesar's commentaries serve to highlight the validity of Simon's incorporation of the éternel retour into the thematic structure of his novel, since they show, in juxtaposition with modern history, that the fundamental preoccupations of human nature are unchanging.

The narrator finds this out directly for himself in Flanders and in Spain, where his involvement in major historical episodes reveals to him the true feeling of chaos and death which the manuals of history are unable to translate. At one point he recalls his impressions during a murderous incident in Spain, when all sense of comprehension and reassurance disappeared:

ou plutôt comme quand on a un étourdissement ou qu'on a trop bu c'est-à-dire quand le monde visible se sépare en quelque sorte de vous perdant ce visage familier et rassurant qu'il a (parce qu'en réalité on ne le regarde pas), prenant soudain un aspect inconnu vaguement effrayant, les objets cessant de s'identifier avec les symboles verbaux par quoi nous les possédons, les faisons nôs, pensant Qu'est-ce que c'est?, pensant Mais qu'est-ce qui m'arrive qu'est-ce qui se passe?

(177)

The tremendous importance of this revelation is the narrator's new understanding of the mind's fragile domination of the world in which it functions, symbolized by the supposed power of language. Histoire and La Bataille de Pharsale display a very strong interdependence where this theme is concerned, and in each novel Charles is largely instrumental in confirming the younger man's opinions. Perhaps it is in their attitude to language as the means with which to transmit history that they come closest together.

They both know only too well that there is an unbridgeable gap between experience and its attempted objectification in language, or, for that matter, in any other medium. At the same time, however, and in a manner which will become even more important in La Bataille de Pharsale, the narrator realizes that certain works of artistic representation can evoke moments of extreme sensation, and once more a familiar name appears:

(il y a un lavis de Poussin bistre intitulé SCENE D'E-POUVANTE représentant dans un contre-jour un personnage roi ou grand-prêtre assis bras et jambes gesticulant convulsif sur un trône une chaire les serviteurs s'écartant courant de droite et de gauche en tous sens le soleil d'orage ou plutôt une lumière provenant d'une source incertaine comme un éclair un incendie des torches traversant les longues robes volantes les chlamydes dessinant en transparence les ombres des jambes fuyantes l'un se cachant la face dans un geste d'affliction d'horreur un autre le bras tendu en arrière de lui à demi replié la main verticale comme pour repousser éloigner de lui)

(209)

By a curious and revealing inversion, it is not the picture which calls up the memory, but the remembered experience which seems to find expression only through the evocation of such

an artistic representation.

With language, too, such an attempt has to be made: it is a kind of exorcism. This surely is the sense of Simon's epigraph from the Duino Elegies, with its comment on the enormous task of organization undertaken in the work of art. An artistic representation tries to reach a valid compromise between chaos — the disorder of experience — and the arid assembly of facts put forward in, for example, a manual of history. The surface disorder of the text is the immediate result of this refusal of dry 'logic', for the real experience of chaos has first of all to be reworked in the apparent chaos of language. Statuary, painting, and literature may be exemplary of the imposition of order, but the danger of lifelessness can be compensated for by the exercising of the imagination, so that they possess an intense power of fascination and synthesis. If 'History' as books and 'History' as experience are seen to be very different things, a book such as Histoire can nonetheless become a substantial monument to one man's sense of the past.

The difficulty of searching through that past is alleviated by his discovery and examination of a number of 'artistic representations', to which he applies the inventive genius of his imagination, as well as dredging up from the silt of consciousness those fragments of memory that remain with him. Here the postcards assume their full importance for the novel, standing as symbols both of multiplicity and of the absence of chronology, interspersed amongst the highlights of the narrator's day. The past exists only on a mental, non-material level, except as it is embodied in the old house itself, and in a few individuals. Otherwise, while the physical backcloth to his own history may remain, the events and the principal participants are now so many question-marks in the mind of the narrator. These postcards then act as milestones of memory, landmarks to which his mind can attach itself, and points of departure for a series of imaginative reconstructions. Within the unanchored framework of the novel's 'pattern of timeless moments', the

cards in fact represent precise moments in time; each carries its own date and a message relating to a set of circumstances applicable to a given point in history. But on the other hand, they come to the narrator as an a-chronological series; or rather, in an incident which may be intended to symbolize the constantly deformative activity of memory and imagination, it is he who drops them and recovers them as an a-chronological jumble. They are thus set free to float back and forward within his consciousness, without ever imposing a damaging fixity upon the activity of mind:

de sorte que les images de femmes laotiennes revenant du marché et celles des villages lacustres se mêlaient avec les vues de la Mer de Glace ou de la cathédrale de Bourges pêle-mêle dans le tiroir entassées sans ordre, les années se confondant s'intervertissant.

(21)

Thanks to this disorder, the postcards finally symbolize those very images of which the mental world is composed. Rather than stages on a mental journey, they are recurrent focal points for his imagination. In this way, the role of the cards in Histoire is an intriguing reminder of a passage from La Corde Raide, relating to the basic theme of memory:

Maintenant tout cela est fini, et depuis si longtemps, et tant d'événements se sont passés depuis, qu'il n'en reste plus, comme au fond d'un tiroir qu'on rouvre après des années, exhalant un mélancolique parfum desséché, qu'une suite confuse d'images et de figures, pleines de violence et de lumière, véhémentes, muettes, dans la pesanteur assourdie du silence, un film gesticulant, sans sous-titres, sans même le secours de l'accompagnement d'un grêle et fantomatique piano.

(La Corde Raide, p.47)

This reflection on the Spanish episode, then relatively fresh in the writer's mind, can be applied in a more general sense to Histoire, where the image is strikingly revived in the act of removing the cards from a drawer. It is as though, on so doing, the narrator had unleashed the imprisoned debris of the past, which he must then try to reorganize and control.

Just before going to bed again, the narrator picks up a bundle of cards which have fallen on the floor. These spark the final chain reaction of the novel, which will culminate in

the frustrated questioning of his own origins. Far from arriving at a conclusion, he has merely re-agitated a set of possibilities; the novel itself is one rearrangement of that 'pattern of timeless moments' which constitutes the past. In a very real sense, as the novelist's own utterances about his craft have shown, all of Simon's novels may be taken as possible arrangements of that pattern, and of the accretions with which the cumulative process of 'history' obscures a meaningful vision of the past.

In all of the novels since Le Vent, a basic element in Simon's work has been the conviction that there are at least two definite meanings of the word 'fiction'. One of these is 'invented narrative', and the other -- an extension of the first -- is 'untruth'. In order to distinguish between the two, it must be seen that the first refers to language as an instrument of communication, while the second relates to the work of memory as a distortive process.⁹ In its simplest terms, the difference is between truth and imagination. This ambiguity is deliberately exploited by Simon in the title given to this novel, which is intended to anticipate the amalgam, within the text, of the factual and the authentically fictive. Histoire is no story in the sense of an entirely invented narrative, since it has a basis in public fact thanks to the great historic moments which it incorporates, and the sources from which it culls some of its material. Nor is it entirely history, partly because there are some moments of which the narrator can have no first-hand knowledge, and partly because of the inadequacy of perception and memory. Thus his imagination approaches history from a number of different angles to form a composite picture. This is not a gratuitous act of intellectual curiosity, but a symptom of his search for greater self-knowledge. It is also a pointer to Simon's use of the

⁹ For Simon's telling comments on the traditional 'fiction', see 'La fiction mot à mot', pp.74-7.

techniques of painting as an aid to that search.

As a means of throwing light on this important aspect of the novel, it will be useful to recall an illuminating passage from Frank Budgen's book on Joyce:

Joyce may be musical in taste rather than pictorial, yet his view of life is that of a painter surveying a still scene rather than that of a musician following a development through time.

Compared with the two preceding episodes, The Cyclops episode is simple to follow. It is a straightforward tale told by one whose name is never mentioned, Noman. This unnamed one meets Joe Hynes, and together they adjourn to Barney Kiernan's in Little Britain Street, where they meet several others, and where a discussion takes place on what, to Englishmen, is known as the Irish question. But the easy colloquial flow of the narrative is interrupted at intervals with barriers of prose of a fabulous, legendary, or merely official and important order. This is the other side of the question. It is the subject of discussion seen suddenly through a telescope.

'Does this episode strike you as being futuristic?' said Joyce.

'Rather cubist than futurist,' I said. 'Every event is a many-sided object. You first state one view of it and then you draw it from another angle to another scale,¹⁰ and both aspects lie side by side in the same picture.'

In Histoire, Simon tries to achieve precisely this combination of possibles, a procedure extended in La Bataille de Pharsale, because the obsessive desire to get at the reality masked by the bland surface of 'history' inspires his own experimentation with Cubist technique. An examination of different facets of 'history' from a number of possible points of view thus culminates in the startling transposition of the narrative centre, from nephew to uncle and back again, in the later stages of the novel.

This is one of Simon's means to counteract the threatened and false fixity of the past. It irrupts into Histoire when the narrator, looking at a photograph, realizes the danger:

¹⁰ James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses' and other writings, pp.156-7.

donnant l'illusion que la photographie est un de ces instantanés, une de ces coupes lamelliformes pratiquées à l'intérieur de la durée et où les personnages aplatis, enfermés dans des contours précis, sont pour ainsi dire artificiellement isolés de la série des attitudes qui précèdent et qui suivent, la trace fuligineuse laissée par le visage au cours de ses divers changements de positions restituant à l'événement son épaisseur, postulant (à partir de l'unique cliché et collé à lui de part et d'autre, formant une sorte de barre quadrangulaire, de parallélépipède se prolongeant à l'infini) la double suite des instants passés et futurs, la double série, dans le même cadrage et le même décor, des positions respectivement occupées par les divers personnages avant et après.

(269)

Nothing, in the Simonian scheme of things, is ever at rest. The text of Histoire bears eloquent witness to his refusal of anything but the briefest stasis, as in the description of those scenes, such as the moment of separation at the station, which are an equivalent of the tableaux vivants of earlier novels. By transferring the centre of consciousness from nephew to uncle, a new impetus is given; one interpretation of events is called into question by the other, appearing side by side within the framework of the novel. This is another aspect of Simon's investigation into history; the disposition of this 'pattern of timeless moments' upon a vast canvas allows each to be seen constantly in relation to the others, in whose light it is formed and ceaselessly reformed:

non pas ce qui ne fut qu'un instant (une simple lamelle d'une infime épaisseur dans la masse du temps et sur laquelle on figure simplement assis dans un fauteuil d'osier) mais une confuse, une inextricable superposition d'images, mordant les unes sur les autres comme ces illustrations dans le dictionnaire ou certaines méthodes de culture physique homme courant ou homme sautant photos prises sur une plaque fixe à l'aide d'un appareil dont l'obturateur s'ouvre et se ferme à des intervalles très rapprochés.

(286)

There is therefore a frequent modification of perspective in Histoire, as the approach is made to the elusive core of truth which must lie beneath the various forms and interpretations of 'history'.

This is the point of the entire ninth section of the novel, which pays attention to the figure of Charles, seen in relation to his Parisian associates rather than as a familiar figure in the eyes of his nephew. For one thing, the photograph of Charles held by his nephew is too lifeless:

il en émanait cette espèce de mystère au second degré caché au-delà du visible, du palpable, cette terrifiante énigme, insoluble, vertigineuse, comme celle que pose le rocher, le nuage, l'esprit décontenancé disant: 'Oui? Simplement du silex, de la chaux, des gouttelettes d'eau? — Mais quoi encore? Rien que de la peau, des cheveux, des muqueuses? Mais quoi encore? Quoi encore? Encore? Encore? Encore?'

(283)

This relentless investigation is the hallmark of Simon's narrators, who pursue truth while reminding themselves constantly of the futility of their search. Theirs is a paradoxical position, not least of all because the intelligent mind helps to create the enigma which becomes obsession:

l'oeil s'acharnant à scruter pour la millième fois la mauvaise photographie, tirée sur un papier trop dur donnant au corps nu et pourtant irrécusable un supplément d'irréalité en le privant de ces demi-teintes, ces reflets qui, dans la vision naturelle, relient tout objet à ceux qui l'entourent . . . en même temps que le flou de la mauvaise mise au point achève de donner au tout cet aspect un peu fantomatique des dessins exécutés au fusain et à l'estompe et où les contours ne sont pas délimités par un trait mais où les volumes apparaissent saillant hors de l'ombre ou s'y enfonçant tour à tour comme dans la mémoire, certaines parties en pleine lumière d'autres . . .

(283)

The novel presents a multiple image of Charles, as seen first of all by the narrator when the latter was a child; by the old man met on the way to the bank; by the narrator as a young man, soon after his return from Spain; as imagined in his artistic and intellectual milieu in Paris. A composite picture of the man emerges, reflecting not only the attitudes of the narrator but also those of his uncle. Histoire derives much emotive strength from this occasional interaction of two men's lives, and the formative influence of the one upon the other. Unfortunately for the narrator, his ability to recall the figure of Charles does little to calm his own feverish curiosity about the totality of the past.

The postcards too are important in the technique of Cubistic reflections, since they arrive from various sources and throw intermittent light upon certain people and moments from the past. As well as the laconic messages from Henri, there are cards from Charles himself, and from Spanish friends of the narrator's mother:

'Acabo de ver a Rosa S. que me ha dicho que nos esperaba a las dós el sabado que viene. Irémos todas juntas al teatro y no le molestará en absoluto de darte un cuarto para dormir; pero vendrás a mi casa si prefieres llegar por la tarde. Si no quieres viajar con tu corpino blanco, puedes ponerlo en un papelito y aqui podrás metertelo.

Te abrazo y te espero el sabado por la tarde. Tu amiga Ninita'

(32)

Some were written by the mother herself at times when she had managed to travel in her own right:

Ma chère Maman

Nous sommes à Mahu sous des torrents d'eau. Je t'écris de l'arrière-boutique d'un marchand quelconque. C'est dommage d'avoir ce temps, car l'escale serait jolie. Cette magnifique végétation tropicale m'émerveille. Je ne mets pas de lettre ici on me dit qu'elle ne partirait que plus tard de Diego. Henri va bien et se joint à moi pour t'embrasser.

(401)

The cards indicate the pattern of movements accomplished by their senders, and reflect the attitudes of one character to another, even though the majority bear only the politely banal messages expected from a rapidly scribbled form of communication. For the narrator, however, they are echoes of the past, clues to which he will return time and again.

If Simon adopts the Cubist approach as one means to apprehend reality in its multiplicity, the technique of collage, so important to the Cubists, is no less valuable to him in Histoire. Simon has a predilection for making his own collages as a parallel activity to his writing, and it is possible to regard the novel itself as a gigantic assemblage of verbal material. As with collage, the juxtaposition of elements in the text is not at all gratuitous. Often the transition from one area to the next is effected through the association of ideas, but just as frequently there is a pictorial resemblance of colour, or of

sound, and so on. Most profoundly of all, however, the technique of collage is used to reveal the multiplicity of language itself, and the distortions which may be inflicted upon it. Here is the basic theme of the novel, that of language as a plastic and ceaselessly malleable medium:

Il y a deux aptitudes du langage et chacun, comme par option fondamentale, se sent enclin à majorer l'une au détriment de l'autre. Les uns considèrent le langage comme un moyen, capable de véhiculer un témoignage, une explication, un enseignement. Pour ces informateurs l'intérêt se porte exclusivement sur le message à communiquer; l'essentiel se trouve hors du langage, qui n'est que le support de la transmission.

D'autres, moins nombreux, se méfient de 'l'innocente' fonction instrumentale du langage. A les croire, le langage serait plutôt une sorte de matériau qu'ils travaillent patiemment, avec d'innombrables soins. Pour ces gens, l'essentiel c'est le langage même. Ecrire pour eux, c'est, non la prétention de communiquer un savoir préalable, mais ce projet d'explorer le langage comme un espace particulier. L'on a reconnu les écrivains.

No writer is more conscious than Simon of the malleability of language as it is commonly used, or more willing to allow language to dictate the development of the fictional text, instead of communicating a mass of pre-existing 'philosophical' or 'moral' material. It is essential to see that language, in Histoire, appears and functions on a number of different levels, each of which throws light upon the major theme of the novel.

Although language is most often referred to in Histoire in the shape of the written word, Simon also makes telling use of snatches of conversation to demonstrate the extent to which language may act as a barrier between people. This applies to the narrator in his childhood, when he comes up against the swaggering Lambert, whose speech is merely a façade behind which hides a confused child:

enfin bon s'il te fait tes versions de latin c'est
 toujours ça
 il ne me les fait pas il m'aide quand

11 Jean Ricardou, Problèmes du nouveau roman, p.18. The italics are Ricardou's.

moi l'année prochaine je laisse tomber le latin
 Y en a marre Pap... Mon père a dit que de toute façon
 ça servait à rien que c'était un truc bon pour les
 curés alors tu penses bien que je . . .

(221)

It is no less true many years later as the narrator sits in
 a bar and overhears a conversation that goes nowhere and fails
 to achieve anything but confusion:

Champenois dit-il Alors j'y ai dit oui quoi Champenois
 alors i me dit on est pays
 comment que je lui dis
 ben Champenois qu'i me dit moi je suis de Reims on
 est pays la Champagne quoi
 Champenois que je lui dis c'est mon nom
 ton nom comment qu'i me dit
 mon nom quoi t'as un nom toi aussi non
 ah i dit j'avais cru qu'on te disait comme ça Champenois
 parce que t'étais . . .

(333-4)

In this case it is a question both of the complete failure to
 communicate, and at the same time of the actual distortion of
 meaning and of language, conveyed here by the small 'i' instead
 of 'il': this is an instance of the truncation of words which
 Simon refers to at other points in the text. This reported
 conversation comes at the end of a frustrating day for the
 narrator during which he has had to use language in the effort
 to make himself understood, but has generally failed. Try
 as he may, there is no way in which he can surmount the obstacle
 of language between himself and, for example, the women at his
 cousin's home. This is typical of his whole day, and of his
 encounters with females. Here he cannot get to grips at all
 with what they are saying:

Ce que j'aime dit l'une c'est la façon dont il est
 monté juste avec ces trois griffes j'ai horreur de
 ces montures compliquées comme on en fait maintenant
 vous savez lourdes avec. Elles continuèrent à par-
 ler mais je ne pouvais pas comprendre J'essayai mais
 je n'y réussis pas Je pouvais comprendre chaque mot
 mais je ne parvenais pas à suivre c'était comme si
 elles avaient parlé dans une langue étrangère comme
 un agréable et léger bruit d'oiseaux langage de
 femmes . . . De nouveau j'essayai elles parlaient de
 quelque chose concernant les enfants et un coiffeur
 je parvins à suivre le temps d'une ou deux phrases
 puis cela m'échappa encore comme une corde savonnée
 qui me glisserait entre les mains.

(309)

Perhaps this failure could be treated lightly if it appeared in another novel; but in one so closely concerned with the notion of language in all its aspects, this is one more manifestation of the narrator's struggle with words. The women's conversation is one of several 'foreign' languages with which he has to cope during the day, and they also reintroduce the bird simile with which the book opened, underlining the importance of sounds for the narrator, and consequently for the pattern of the text.

This obsessive piping is only one example of the distortion of language, which stems also from the narrator's childhood and his 'innocence' in the sense of sheer lack of knowledge about human society. His growing-up is a process of demystification, inseparable from his changing attitude to the words in which his experience is expressed. There is a deliberate distinction between words as signs of something unknown, and the reality which they effectively conceal. The drab alignment of terms in a dictionary has to be superseded by his experience — a theme which dominates Simon's next novel — before he in turn can string words together in trying to transmit, in an organized and meaningful pattern, his own apprehension of reality. Histoire is a superb paradox on the nature of language.

The narrator's failure to communicate, throughout the day, recalls other failures from the past, with people more close to him. With Charles, for example, in discussing the Spanish experience, or with the woman he loved, in Greece:

écoute, c'est idiot
 elle ne tourna pas la tête. Yeux secs, fixes.
 Minerve aveugle aussi. Je pris son bras, un peu au-
 dessous de l'aisselle. Elle me laissa faire, se pen-
 chant seulement en avant comme pour mieux regarder un
 détail du bas-relief. Dans le mouvement qu'elle fit
 son bras glissa de ma main, m'échappa) (116)

More recently, too, at the station where they parted:

je me demandais depuis combien de temps nous étions là
 lacs de larmes à un moment j'ai dit Tu veux que j'aille
 t'acheter des journaux Elle ne bougeant toujours pas
 incapable d'articuler sans doute ayant peur que sa voix
 la trah ou peut-être n'entendant même pas seulement ses
 yeux . . .

(390)

Thus the narrator suffers defeat at the hands of language and, as in the case of his uncle, this defeat serves to accelerate rather than to prevent a distressing separation; for the time being, at least, he does not even have the consolation of a postcard to make up for the absence of the woman concerned.

The postcards are one of the principal components of Simon's collage, and it is interesting to note the variety of ways in which they make their appearance, sometimes heralded by punctuation, paragraphing, and typographical adjustment, sometimes having their messages transcribed without punctuation, and sometimes simply swallowed up by the surrounding context, so that it is left to the reader to recognize them as and when they arrive. Here too there is distortion of language:

'Madame au moment ou j'allier vous écrire le facteur ma apporter votre lettre, mais je me disais que j'avais le temps Donc c'est bien entendu je rentrerai au service de madame le 1er Octobre je partirai de Sahurre à 9 h 45 pour arrivé à 19 moins 10 j'espère bien que madame fera venir quelqu'un à la gare parce que je ne connais pas la ville en attendant de se revoir recevez madame mes sincères salutations Angèle Lloveras (Les Hautes-Pyrénées. SAHURRE)

(21)

The word as sound and the word as written sign are quite different things — a process which Simon will adopt for purposes of irony in La Bataille de Pharsale, even in his transcriptions of Proust. This theme of distortion reaches comic proportions as the narrator recalls the verbal acrobatics, at school, of the omnipresent Lambert:

A côté de moi Lambert gueulait à tue-tête n'en ratant pas une Bite y est dans le caleçon au lieu de Kyrie Eleïsson ou encore Bonne Biroute à Toto pour Cum spiritu Tuo il en avait comme ça pour presque tous les répons chaque fois à peu près de cette force En trou si beau adultère est béni au lieu de Introibo ad altare Dei.

(43)

These too are the child's defence against the world rather than the sign of his scorn for it; they are simply a façade, and Lambert remains true to character in becoming a politician, professional verbalizer par excellence, one of whose

electioneering speeches the narrator hears in the evening:

je me suis tenu immobile là pendant un moment à l'écouter levant la tête regardant en haut de la cour le rectangle de ciel où persistait encore un peu de la lumière du crépuscule avec les premières étoiles allumées silencieuses d'où elle semblait tomber maintenant arrivant par-dessus les toits: pas des mots des phrases articulées mais seulement un bruit quelque chose comme du métal qui parlerait c'est-à-dire incompréhensible cyclopéen dans la nuit immobilisée au-dessus des maisons le son montant descendant remontant se perdant dans un brouhaha indistinct électrique.

(327-8)

It is not the man who dominates the scene, but his amplified and distorted voice; Simon seems fascinated by the modern oracles of loudspeakers, radios, television sets, and most of all, telephones: the narrator of Histoire also struggles with a telephone call to the office of his cousin.

One of the most interesting examples of the distortion of language in Histoire is related to the theme of illness concentrated on the narrator's mother — another link with Stephen Dedalus and his obsession with the memory of his dead mother. The narrator of Simon's novel remembers the musical gatherings in the parental home, at which his mother would insist on appearing:

Une fois dans le brouhaha j'entendis quelqu'un dire qu'elle était à faire peur pensant faire-part pensant qu'on enverrait ces cartons bordés de noir où ont la douleur de vous faire part de la mort de leur mère fille soeur tante cousine pieusement décédée en sa quarante-cinquième peut-être sixième au maximum année le problème étant combien de temps un organisme vivant peut-il continuer à fonctionner lorsqu'il reste sur les os un simple sac de peau.

(77)

The significance of the effect upon the child is indicated by the recurrence of the phrase on two more occasions. Once, during the day, when he is remembering the hunchback in Barcelona, and thinking too of his own mother's funeral:

L'imaginant rigide un crucifix aussi dans ses mains à peu près au-dessous de celui qui était fixé sur la planche de chêne avec son visage supplicie de polichinelle à faire-part on les avait envoyés maintenant.

(227)

The second time is toward the end of the day. It is his

curiosity about the character of his parents that provides the human focus for his thoughts, more often than not around the theme of death. From the thought of Barcelona suffocating under the pressures of the Civil War, for example, he comes again to the figure of his mother:

l'un deux montant sur la passerelle voir si par hasard pendant la nuit elle ne s'était pas décidée à mourir, rendant machinalement son...
 se décider à décéder. Faire part. Faire peur.
 (362)

She is never far from his mind as his thoughts stray across the canvas of 'history' to return constantly to the central enigma of his own past, and his relation to the 'unreal' figures of his parents.

As well as transcribed passages from postcards and letters, and snatches of reported conversation, Histoire's collage of verbal material turns to other sources of quotation, most of which have a bearing on the theme of 'history'. The narrator's search takes him from school textbooks through to history in its most recent form; sitting at lunch, he casts a glance at newspaper headlines:

et alors appuyant le journal dessus, interposant...
 UN COMMISSARIAT DE POLICE CAMBRIOLE

... cette espèce d'écran grisâtre opaque où sont échoués ça et là (comme dans ces filets ou ces vans que les chercheurs de pépites plongent dans les ruisseaux puis remontent à la surface, ramenant sur un lit de sable et de vase non pas l'or...

SE JETTE

... les diamants eux-mêmes mais) quelques-uns de ces grumeaux couleur...

D'UN QUATRIEME ETAGE

... d'encre d'imprimerie et faits de lettres agglutinées signalant comme certaines boues ou certaines argiles que...

FERMETE DES COURS SUR LE MAR

... quelque part dans le temps grisâtre l'espace grisâtre...

(140)

Newspapers are 'history' given material substance which can be destroyed in a moment, but constantly renewed in a phoenix-like process. Here there is an interesting anticipation of one of the major elements in the text:

Il avait fini de manger ouvrit le journal sa tête disparut derrière je pouvais voir les petits carrés

où étaient dessinées les images brutales féeriques avec leurs personnages musculeux ou suaves immobilisés inoffensifs dans des postures de violence de trahison l'hercule la dangereuse femme noire les paroles foudroyantes sortant du téléphone pouvant lire en haut de la page qu'il tenait pliée SE JETTE DU QUATRIEME ETA et plus bas ONIQUE VITICOLE.

(197)

Seeing a strip-cartoon in the newspaper, the narrator muses on its illustration of the paradoxical power of language, which may be not only a means of communication with great shortcomings, but also a weapon brandished against the listener, as in the case of Georges and Louise in L'Herbe. In La Bataille de Pharsale Simon develops this notion, using the same cartoon sequence, into a highly effective mise en abyme about the nature of language.

Perhaps a more serious form of language is to be found in the quotations lifted from school textbooks which play a large part in the textual pattern of Histoire; not surprisingly, they appear first in the third section, when the narrator, leaving the bank, sees the schoolchildren. Such is the Proustian force of the Simonian narrator's memory that, as has been seen, the time-level seems to shift directly back to his childhood. In the ensuing passage, the themes of language and of 'history' are foremost. Remembering a school history book, he again visualizes a photograph of Lenin addressing an historic meeting on his return to Russia. Suddenly a complete paragraph from the history book irrupts into the text of Histoire:

se tenant sur le rebord de la tribune, il promena sur l'assistance ses petits yeux clignotants, en apparence insensible à l'immense ovation qui se prolongea pendant plusieurs minutes. Quand elle eut pris fin il dit simplement Nous passons maintenant à l'édification de l'ordre socialiste. De nouveau ce fut dans la salle un formidable déchainement humain

(108)

As already suggested, this is one of the great moments of History, and presumably one which has struck the narrator forcibly; two pages later, the concomitant theme of violence reappears with the second italicized text from the history manual:

A ce moment une fusillade éclata à peu de distance
Sur la place les gens s'enfuirent ou se jetèrent à
plat ventre, et les izvoztchiks arrêtés au coin des
rues prirent le galop dans toutes les directions A
l'intérieur du bâtiment tout le monde se mit en branle
les soldats courant en tous sens et empoignant à la
hâte fusil et cartouchières en criant Les voilà! Les
voilà! Quelques minutes plus tard le calme était re-
venu Les izvoztchiks reprirent leurs places les gens
se relevèrent.

(111)

Around these quotations is given a description of other illustrations of 'historic' moments, each of which takes place in an atmosphere of hostility, leading in to the narrator's own direct experience of warfare on a more recent time-level. This aspect of Histoire anticipates the basic theme of La Bataille de Pharsale: the apprenticeship, through reading, to the actual experience of life.

In this third section of the novel the technique of literary collage is at its most striking and complicated. Along with the Lenin passages are transcribed sequences from a Latin textbook used by the narrator when a child. They have a double significance: they show him struggling against language in a vain effort to dominate it; and they reveal the profoundly beguiling nature of language itself, as a substitute for experience, especially since they relate to the attitudes of a child:

et l'excitation, l'espèce de fièvre, les mots latins, crus, violents que leur aspect dépaysant, exotique pour ainsi dire, leur sens incertain, chargeaient d'un pouvoir ambigu, multiple.

(107)

Like Stephen Dedalus, the narrator of Histoire is fascinated from an early age by words themselves, and it is typical of Simon that the theme of language enjoys a close interrelationship with the theme of sexuality:

remué jusqu'au fond jusqu'aux racines mêmes de mon (inguinum: aine, bas-ventre) respirant l'odeur poussiéreuse et fade des pages du dictionnaire aux coins rebroussés et pelucheux à force d'avoir été tournées d'un doigt léché, cherchant les joues en feu . . . le doigt courant de haut en bas sur les colonnes, les pages jaunies, parmi les mots
cubile
flora

formosus (bien fait, aux belles formes)
 nymp̄ha
 numides (cavaliers)
 nuditas
 Nausicaa
 Nero
 recingo (in veste recincta: avec sa robe dénouée)
 rostrum
 sicera (boisson enivrante)

aux consonances métalliques, dures . . . les mots
 semblables à ces coupes, ces peignes, ces aiguilles,
 ces bracelets de bronze ou de cuivre verdis, un peu
 rongés, mais aux contours précis, ciselés, que l'on
 peut voir dans les vitrines de ces musées.

(108-9)

This childhood reading foreshadows the eventual reality and
 disappointment of the act itself which the narrator as a
 grown man will experience, in Spain, in his role as a soldier,
 and in his most private personal affairs.

Throughout this section of the novel, the technique of
 collage is used to evoke the 'pattern of timeless moments'
 which history resembles in the re-creating mind of the nar-
 rator, and to prepare his own account of the experience which
 supersedes his literary introduction to life. This part of
 the novel is almost a direct antecedent of the first section
 of La Bataille de Pharsale, giving as it does an enormously
 fragmented picture of warfare at a number of different levels
 of time, separated the one from the other only by changes in
 typography within the text. Practically the whole section
 is devoted to the major theme of History as Battle:

depuis la plus haute antiquité on a établi
l'usage de faire sonner de toutes parts les trom-
pettes et pousser par toute l'armée une clameur,
avec l'idée qu'on effrayait l'ennemi et qu'on
excitait les siens propterea quod est: parce qu'il
 y a

quaedam animi incitatio: je ne sais quel enthousiasme

atque alacritas naturaliter: et quelle vivacité naturelle

innata omnibus: innée chez tous les hommes

quae studio pugnae incenditur: qu'enflamme l'ardeur
 du combat les vagues hurlantes des gardes rouges qui
allaient à l'assaut étaient décimées par la mitraille

(118-9)

But as a further demonstration of the variable nature of lan-
 guage, another passage from a textbook is used, this time a

description borrowed from a manual of geography:

beaucoup de roches siliceuses sont constituées par des organismes animaux: monocellulaires à carapaces éponges coraux échinodermes mollusques Sommes-nous par exemple en présence de calcaires ou de marnes finement stratifiées contenant de petits gasteropodes à coquille mince: c'était probablement un lac sans tempêtes Une bouillie de coquilles Saint-Jacques des moules des pastelles de petits gasteropodes: nous sommes au rivage Des sables des marnes contenant des oursins des ammonites des bélemnites des térébratules: la profondeur augmente
(120-1)

On two occasions a quotation from English is employed:

'apothéosis and millennium without end' (p.118, p.121) as if to repeat the truth about what is called 'history', as the straightforward catalogue of human violence; even the sexual act, here described in lines proceeding from the narrator's memory of Apuleius, acts as one of the constants of life and thus as a thread running through all the levels of 'history' and consequently of artistic representation. The theme of éternel retour is thus reiterated by sustained and brilliant use of a collage juxtaposing in space, moments of historic significance taken from a number of points widely separated in time. Simon literally uses fragments of language to compose a complex picture of 'history', both on a personal and then on a universal plane; what is most fascinating about this novel is its ability to remind the reader that what is called 'history' comes down as a mass of language and images, and to incorporate this body of material into the superficially banal but profoundly revelatory experience of the novel's narrator.

If language is taken as the major theme of Histoire, it is then to be expected that much of the text, and the transitions from one section, or even one paragraph, to the next, will be effected on the basis of verbal echoes and resonances. This is certainly the case in Simon's novel, where despite the technique of fluid sensorial association, many of the elements in the text derive from the sound and feel of the words themselves. In a mass of language akin to Ulysses and more coherent than Finnegans Wake, Histoire, with its

plurilingual plays on words and its intricate manipulation of vocabulary, reveals Simon's principle of allowing language free rein within the controlling framework of his artistic preoccupations. Asked about his method of composition, Simon had this to say:

Avec le langage. Avec des mots: c'est un livre. Si je n'ai jamais encore été aussi libre, c'est que cette fois je n'avais absolument rien à 'raconter' au sens traditionnel du terme. J'avais envie d'écrire et je n'avais pas de sujet. Alors j'ai foncé. Je ne me suis point donné d'autre fil que celui d'une journée du narrateur, c'est-à-dire rien. Si vous voulez, j'ai procédé un peu comme les joueurs qui lancent la balle contre un fronton. Comme ce fronton n'est jamais exactement plan, s'ils savent à quel endroit ils vont le frapper, ils ne peuvent pas prévoir comment la balle rebondira. Mon livre est ainsi un jeu avec le mur du langage, jeu vital, car, pour moi, toujours imprévisible.¹²

Simon's is an empirical process of composition, in which language and its self-generating capacities are the principal elements, and will become more obviously so in the work that follows Histoire.

This is to say that Histoire answers, to a certain extent, to Ricardou's theory of 'générateurs de fiction'.¹³ Through a series of verbal trouvailles and a complex exploitation of polysemy, synonym, and homonym, Simon brings the past to life again in the mind of the narrator. Language is not only the means to express a search but, more significantly, the labyrinthine structure within which that search is to be carried out. Simon is concerned to appreciate the vitality of language itself, and here he lends to his narrator the same preoccupations as are shown by Joyce's artist hero:

¹² Quoted in an article by Pierre Descargues, 'Claude Simon publie un nouveau roman: Histoire', Tribune de Lausanne, 9 avril 1967, included without page reference in the dossiers de presse at Editions de Minuit.

¹³ See for example his highly complex 'Esquisse d'une théorie des générateurs', in Positions et Oppositions sur le roman contemporain, edited by Michel Mansuy (Paris, 1971), pp.143-50.

The story of Stephen's early years has one peculiarity that marks it off from the general experience of boys, sensitive or insensitive, weak or strong: that is his intense preoccupation with words. To most boys words are convenient counters and no more . . . But to Stephen they were mysteriously alive. In a sense, they were much more potent than the objects, actions and relations they stood for.¹⁴

Recalling, in the first section of Histoire, the names of some members of his family, the narrator explicitly states his fascination with words:

cette baronne Cerise . . . dont le nom était pour moi la source de multiples associations . . . les vieilles lèvres crevassées peintes d'un rouge évoquant de façon bouffonne la fraîcheur du mot cerise qu'on retrouvait aussi dans les couleurs pimpantes agrestes (casaque verte, manches et toque cerise) portées par les jockeys que grand-mère et maman m'avaient montrés à Pau la première fois où j'avais assisté à une course de chevaux, le mot toque lui-même amenant à mon esprit . . . le qualificatif de toquée qui paradoxalement la nimait pour moi d'un prestige particulier.

(12)

This is a valuable pointer to Simon's method. It is also an effective introduction to the theme of language as obstacle, since it is a barrier of words alone that separates the child from the fascinating world of the adult. Language plays a major part in creating the mystique of Charles, which the narrator will eventually penetrate.

At a much later point in Histoire the theme of language is brought close to the theme of defeat haunting the narrator's thoughts. Again, however, he is remembering his childhood:

Quand j'étais enfant je me rappelle que dans les journaux ce mot m'avait paru drôle marron médecin marron banquier marron homme d'affaires marron dans l'argot d'écolier marron voulait dire qu'on s'était fait rouler on disait aussi être chocolat.

(308)

Just as jaune and noir will dominate La Bataille de Pharsale, so in Histoire the colour marron reappears in the unlikeliest

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Frank Budgen, James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses' and other writings, p.58.

places, as one more link between events and characters widely separated in space and time:

La tête du taureau terrassé inclinée en avant touchant le sol du front le mufle humide et baveux frotté d'une mince couche de poussière ocre devenant marron là où (près des naseaux et des lèvres) elle est imprégnée de bave.

(115-6)

This describes a bas-relief in a museum. When the narrator imagines himself in his uncle's place, there is a moment of confrontation with the model in the studio of the artist Van Velden in Paris:

du menton elle désigna de nouveau la toile fraîche Vous n'aimeriez pas?
je relevai la tête. Simplement marron. Pas provocants. Légèrement apeurés même ou plutôt précautionneux Dans l'épaisseur de la tablette de chocolat je pouvais voir la trace de ses dents comme deux coups de pelle jumeaux parallèles légèrement concaves deux petites falaises striées.

(300)

One word and the colour it denotes can tie together disparate areas of the narrator's experience and set up cross-references within the text. When the text passes from this moment in a Paris studio to the home of the narrator's cousin in the south, because the little niece Corinne — also a wilful female — has the same marks of chocolate on her face, the strength of such linking images is clearly demonstrated.

Throughout the day it is the sound and shape of words that most occupy his attention. Even the house itself is a mausoleum where echoes persist:

les événements heureux, malheureux ou neutres . . . étaient indifféremment réduits à ces bribes de phrases navrées, ces commentaires suspendus dans l'air immobile comme ces vibrations qui persistent longtemps après que les cloches se sont tues, tournant en rond, se répétant, comme si les ors ternis, les pendeloques des bobèches et les guirlandes des trumeaux se les renvoyaient en un inaudible et lancinant écho, continuant à se répéter entre les murs nus, les plafonds écaillés, dans la grande maison vide, noire, sonore.

(26)

The narrator tries to recall the whole atmosphere of his childhood and adolescence in this great house. Another

of his fixations is the Spanish writing on some of the cards; here, in a deeply significant passage, Simon reveals the richness of his sensorial imagination by evoking the resonances created by one sense in relation to the others. Much of his writing is based upon a system of fascinating 'correspondences' where one sensory perception stimulates another in a seemingly endless process.¹⁵ Here it is the sight and sound of language which conjure up feelings of smell and touch, and a welter of emotive connotations:

ces autres missives empreintes ou plutôt parfumées de la lourde sensualité qui semble émaner de cette langue des noms des mots eux-mêmes avec leurs consonances lascives et brutales leur senteur poivrée d'oeillet et d'encens mêlés les exhalaisons languoureuses et un peu moites.

(31-2)

As is to be expected, this exceptionally sensual feeling for language is brought together with the Simonian theme of sex. In a phrase recalling similar jugglings in La Route des Flandres, the narrator plays with the name of his cousin and the ideas brought to mind: 'Corinne aux boucles d'oreilles corail' (p.123), allowing variations on sound and rhythm to exert their fascination.

But in the same passage he moves from the childhood image of Corinne in the cherry tree to another area of verbal and sensual fascination:

Elle les détacha de son oreille ses cheveux étaient dénoués emmêlés crinibusque dissolutis paulisper etiam glabellum feminal rosea palmula potius obumbrans de industria quam tegens verecundia ombrageant dissimulant mal . . . la rose, la mince ligne l'étroite fente couleur de pétale rosea placé entre feminal et palmula comme une source unique de couleur . . . qui les teintait tous deux.

(123)

In its turn, this memory of words on a page leads him to the memory of an actual experience seemingly inspired by his reading, when his mistress — or wife — had put into action

¹⁵ This is corroborated by the fact that Simon actually quotes from Baudelaire's 'Correspondances' in 'La fiction mot à mot', p.84.

the sexual game suggested by that passage. As if to underline the endless possibilities of these verbal acrobatics, it is from the thought of that act that he reiterates the actual physical properties of language itself, as a fillip to the imagination, as if words were an actual material representing the shape of the objects they are designed to name:

Quand ils recommencèrent à pousser pendant un temps ils furent courts et durs irritant rosissant le haut de ses cuisses à l'aine haec simul dicens insenso grabatulo escaladant le lit elle accourt aile de ses cheveux défauts figure volante les deux boucles jumelles de l'c double alanguies inclinées par la course les deux C semblables à deux dos ou plutôt au même dos répété deux fois comme les contours d'un personnage sur une photo bougée.

(124)

Such passages leave the reader in no doubt as to the evocative potential of language, guiding the narrator from one area to another of his experience. Some are more direct than others, some first-hand, some gleaned from books; but the manner in which words lead from one aspect of 'history' to the next is intensely significant in Simon's text.

At one point the narrator recalls his dealings with Lambert over their collections of stamps. As well as being intricate and magnetic images, the stamps bear names that his mind picks up and manipulates, so adding new material:

nom (Memel) qui faisait penser à Mamelle avec dans son aspect je ne sais quoi (les deux e blancs peut-être) de glacé ville noire couronnée de neige auprès d'une mer gelée livide habitée par les femmes slavonnes aux cheveux de lin aux seins lourds (les deux l de mamelle suggérant la vision de formes jumelles se balançant) et neigeux.

(213)

Again it is extraordinary that one name should set up so many resonances in the mind; Histoire is a vital stage in Simon's work because it takes him even further in the direction of a systematic exploration of language and its synthetic potential.

Words of all kinds obsess the narrator's consciousness. In the bar where he has supper he deciphers the name on the

window and begins to muse on its significance in this context:

Comme si par une sorte d'humour facétieux il fallait que ces endroits soient obligatoirement baptisés d'enseignes aux résonances à la fois fastueuses galantes légères Rialto Trianon Tivoli ou cette guinguette comment s'appelait-elle Frascati un peu en dehors de la ville sur la route de Nancy pendant longtemps rien qu'un nom un mot vaguement fabuleux légendaire dans les vantardises des anciens du régiment racontant devant les bleus leurs beuveries et leurs conquêtes mot pour ainsi dire feuillu...

(335)

Once this 'correspondence' has been established, it is inevitable that further associations should come to mind, adding to the picture of the narrator's past because they are closely bound up with his own experience:

bruisant frondaisons cascades fontaines comme dans ces tableaux ces gravures de jardins de ruines aux environs de Rome et en même temps indissociable des retours dans la chambrée des permissionnaires de minuit ivres vomissants l'odeur vineuse écoeurante d'un gris rouge frasques dans Frascati pas tellement différent de fiasque et Chianti un son...

(335)

Constant emphasis is placed on the words which can be seen within other words, causing the mind to probe deeper into the range of experience which these words are intended to summarize:

Fiaschanti . . .

fracas aussi dans Frascati Et alors sans doute à cause de la consonance italienne du mot l'image stéréotypée non de soldats en uniformes de la dernière guerre mais les silhouettes serties de plomb d'officiers sabre au clair et de turcos chargeant à la baïonnette au milieu des éclatements rouge et jaune des boulets de la fumée dont l'odeur se confondait pour moi avec celle de l'encens pantalons écarlates des zouaves pontificaux que je pouvais voir dans une des rosaces quadrilobées de ce vitrail de la chapelle Lambert chantant à tue-tête . . .

(336)

Again the interaction of perception and memory leads into a network of sensorial imagery, as is so often the case in this novel.

On his journey back from his cousin's home — even the change from 'Paulou' to 'Paul' is a verbal reminder of the difference between childhood and maturity — he drives along beside the sea, fascinated by the protean symbol of constant

change within changelessness:

pensant de nouveau à elles sous les froides et mouvantes
épaisseurs d'eau depuis toujours ou plutôt plissé:
vieille peau de ce vieux monde ce vieux monstre Plissé
pliscénien ou quoi Plioscène Sans doute rien à voir
mots qui simplement se ressemblent plésiosaure et plus
loin là où elle moutonnait maintenant bleu-noir milliers
de mètres de fond paraît-il tonnes et tonnes d'eau et de
silence s'écrasant dans l'éternelle obscurité.

(318-9)

What is important is his own admission that he is being
guided by the mere sound and shape of words, although this
innocent disclaimer does not hide the fact that all of them
have historical connotations. This is also the point of a
later passage based on sexual experience:

tendant vers elle ce porphyresque quel est donc aussi
ce saint hagiotes ermite au nom grec Porphyre Polycarpe
Polyphile ou quoi lui aussi agenouillé en prière au
sommet d'une colonne dans le désert . . .

(343)

Not only the similarity of actual experience but also the
resemblance between words is an important element in the de-
velopment of the text, while the basic posture inspires an-
other of Simon's jugglings with language. Paradoxically,
the mere shape, sight, and sound of words inspire the verbal
fireworks of the novel, and as always this is a means of
guiding the text through the maze of history which Simon's use
of language is also trying to suggest.

One way of evoking history is simply to include frequent
allusions to historic names; this too is closely related to
the theme of language, as so many of the proper names in
Histoire have the function of inspiring more word-games by
the narrator. Again these go back to the memories of child-
hood and the group of old ladies gravitating around the old
grandmother:

les noms aux consonances rêches médiévales — Amalrik,
Willum, Gouarbia — assortis de titres de générales
ou de marquises, puis s'effaçant laissant pénétrer
dans leur aura d'éclatantes évocations où chatoyaient
les images de barons germaniques de hallebardes de
cités italiennes de gardénias.

(11-12)

These are not so much names, as evocations of historical

grandeur, incidentally serving the ironic purpose of comparing name or reputation with disappointing reality. Geographical names too play their part:

les laconiques missives arrivées de pays aux noms de
fièvre Majunga Haiphong Mandalay . . .

(30)

while lists of historical personalities may be introduced with the aim of showing that 'history' is simply a repetitive process wherein only the names vary:

comme si le même modèle au masque pensif, impitoyable et désabusé posant pour le même peintre avait revêtu chez un costumier de théâtre leurs défroques successives, réincarnations, réapparitions sporadiques d'un unique personnage répété à travers les siècles dans la même attitude tranquille, perfide et lasse devant d'allégoriques fonds de glaives, de trophées, de galions, d'épis et de balances et sur lequel la mémoire identifiant armures, hermines, perruques ou cravates victoriennes pose un de ces noms interchangeable aux creuses et poussiéreuses sonorités de plâtre César, Verrius, Charles, Laurent, Philippe, Law, Rothschild, le Bref, le Chauve, le Bel, le Magnifique.

(84-5)

The names of the old baronesses reappear from time to time, expressing the inevitable decay involved in the simple passing of time:

Baronne Cerise

Générale Amalrik Marquise de Villum Vilhelm

Guillem Guillaume Guarbia Gorbio Gardénia

ténébreuses toujours assises dans le noir sur

les fauteuils de soie jonquille se tenant là chuchotant

rigides avec leurs noms wisigoths de vieilles cités de vieilles forteresses se démantelant.

(380-1)

Another way of alluding to this destructive process is to include examples of the word at its most perishable:

UNION POUR LE PROG . . . UNION UNION

(215)

VOTEZ VOTEZ VOTEZ . . . UNION POUR LE PROG

(289)

UNION DEMOCR VOTEZ PROGR TOUS RASSEMBL

(296)

This unites the themes of fragmentation and dissolution, and language at its most puffing is seen to be vulnerable in the extreme. Almost everything in Histoire comes back round to words in one shape or another.

But since these words are used in a novel whose theme is also history, another aspect of language in Histoire, as in much of Simon's work, is connected with the notion of ephemerality. Can words do anything to withstand the historical process? This is especially interesting in view of what uncle and nephew say about the relative futility of language. Several times in the novel words are compared with other 'historical monuments':

les mots semblables à ces coupes, ces peignes, ces aiguilles, ces bracelets de bronze ou de cuivre verdis, un peu rongés, mais aux contours précis, ciselés, que l'on peut voir dans les vitrines de ces musées, ces petites constructions à l'ombre de trois cyprès, installés sur les lieux mêmes des fouilles et où somnole un gardien dans le torride après-midi...

(109)

At such points they seem to enjoy a certain dessicated permanence as actual objects of history, as if language were a hard material out of which a monument could be fashioned.

Yet straight away the evanescence of language is reaffirmed:

prêts à tomber (les mots), aurait-on dit, en une poussière de particules friables brunâtres de rouille qui semblait s'échapper des pages du dictionnaire en même temps qu'un impalpable et subtil relent de cendres, comme le résidu, les indestructibles décombres de ces villes anéanties.

(110)

This surely is the meaning of Simon's use of language: to show that for all its limitations it can stand as the embodiment of experience. This too is the significance of Histoire: within a text whose purpose is to demonstrate the splintered and incomplete nature of verbal reconstruction, and the overwhelming variability of language, there is nonetheless an artful and artistic reconstitution of the experience of one individual, and of his apprehension of the fragmented reality commonly known as 'history'.

It is not enough, however, to assert the validity of the novel in these terms. Attention must be paid even to single words as they appear in the text, in a manner that is continued in subsequent work. There is in Histoire a basic foundation of key words and phrases which appear and reappear, and a number of plays on words, sometimes from one language to

another. Some of these features are relatively simple to detect. The word grenadier, for example, can mean both the tree outside the family home, and a kind of soldier, and thus contain the themes both of passing time — the tree is a constant presence — and of warfare. Similarly, the term marteau enjoys a variety of meanings: as the position of fingers on the strings of a violin, during the musical soirées at the parental home; as the blunt instrument wielded by the symbolic figure in a statue called Les Temps Futurs; in the general evocation of noise in a city such as Barcelona. A favourite word of Simon's is triangle, which carries a number of thematic strands through the fabric of the novel: as a musical instrument; as an Impressionistic description of the play of sunlight on a wall, another of the narrator's favourite sights; as the shape of a flag ('de minces et funèbres triangles' (p.108)); as one of several geometrical shapes suggested by Latin inscriptions (p.118); in the simple but deliberately named shape of potatoes in the restaurant (p.140); in a torn piece of wallpaper (p.160); and as a Cubistic design on a tube of glue found in a drawer (p.248). These are so many guidelines for the text to follow, as the perceptive eye picks out points of resemblance between one area of experience, one level of time, and another; and they are proof of the astonishing multiplicity of language itself, to which Simon will allude directly in the preface to Orion Aveugle.

Others are less obvious at first. The word lézarde is used to designate a little creature seen in the Grecian sunlight as well as the place in which it appears:

fêlure lézarde déchirant le marbre qui de part et d'autre s'affaisse légèrement, les deux plans séparés formant un angle dièdre à grande ouverture . . . tout à coup un lézard apparut aussitôt immobilisé . . .
(117-8)

But later the English equivalent appears in disguise when the nephew is chided over his Spanish adventure:

Bien sûr et le vieux était suffisamment râpé et sali Seulement est-ce que tu leur as dit que ce n'était pas dans le premier métro ou les trams de cinq heures du matin mais sur des rochers à deux mille mètres d'al-

titude et pas pour passer une frontière sans papiers
mais en t'amusant à chasser l'izard et...

(150)

Much play is also made on the word bosse and its variants:

le plan du mur se situe sans doute obliquement par
rapport au couchant de sorte qu'elle semble un double
funèbre et caricatural le sommet du dos et le ventre
saillants étirés en sens inverse bossue...

(201)

This allows a transition from describing a postcard to re-
calling the Spanish scene involving a hunchback. At another
moment the connection is established by a figure on a banknote:

(son visage dur, un peu triste, son anatomie en quelque
sorte douloureuse comme celle non des sportifs, des
baigneurs aux membres dorés que l'on peut voir sur les
plages, mais des terrassiers ou des manoeuvres dont
les muscles noueux, utiles, forment des excroissances,
des espèces de gibbosités...

Il était arrêté devant l'hôtel de ville se dé-
tachant de profil sur le damier multicolore des affi-
chettes . . .)

(206)

It recalls phrases which have already appeared: 'pour cacher
sa double gibbosité' (p.196), and the play on the notion of
maternity and the female anatomy in an earlier section:

presque bosse gibbosité proéminente dont on se
demandait comment le poids ne les entraînait pas en
avant rappelant ces réclames Pilules Orientales ou
Kala Busta (avec ce B majuscule au double renflement
opulent et majestueux initiale aussi de Barcelone
comme un poitrail de pigeon imposante et orgueilleuse
géante fardée de bleu de blanc gras en robe safran)

(168)

The whole text is based on this exploitation of the physical
properties of language, in its various manifestations. Many
of the most profoundly human themes of Histoire are directly
suggested and underscored by the mere sound of words. The
themes of separation and loneliness are brought to the fore
by the noun used to describe Charles:

veuf mot boiteux tronqué restant pour ainsi dire en
suspens coupé contre nature comme l'anglais half moi-
tié sectionné cut of coupé de quelque chose qui manque
soudain dans la bouche les lèvres prononçant VF conti-
nuant à faire fff comme un bruit d'air froissé déchiré
par le passage rapide étincelant et meurtrier d'une lame

(82)

The physical act of pronunciation sets up one of the most tragic resonances in the novel, as well as showing the way in which Simon approaches language. Attention must be paid to the associative connotations of single words and even letters:

(ou du moins ce qu'on pouvait en voir: c'est-à-dire, comme dans ces rébus où un objet, une lettre majuscule se déplace sur une paire de jambes en fil de fer (canne va, A court), des théories de sacs pourvus de cuisses et de mollets décharnés)

(165)

Sights and sounds, movements and gestures are ceaselessly called to the narrator's mind by the way in which he approaches the language he is using, and so the novel becomes a majestic exploration of verbal possibility.

Words are distorted and reshaped to give new impetus to the text. Aisselles gives rise to essaim d'ailes and a fantastic reverie on birds, recalling the opening section of the book; there is punning use of English, when the narrator sees a ring on a waitress's finger:

cerclant la peau rougie et gonflée alors mariée sans doute ring the bells belles en robes à cloches comme sur cette photo où elle jouait au tennis en corsage blanc à jabot le col fermé par un camée coiffée d'un canotier la jupe en forme de tulipe renversée balayant le sol.

(199)

In the same intricate way, the term caraco leads to caracoler, to carré accolé and to the pun on carats per mia cara (p.310), as Simon finds a wealth of verbal material within him in the process of writing the novel. As one commentator has said, the work of art is achieved through the imaginative search amongst the debris of language itself:

On a final and most complicated level, Histoire embodies also the eternal problem of creation. The narrator who speaks constantly creates himself, regenerates himself, thanks to the continuous flow of words. Everything — the characters out of the past and their passions, the cities of the postcards — all the myriad pieces of a puzzle form a meaningful mosaic only insofar as they stem from the consciousness of the writer-speaker-protagonist. The narrator's day and the lives perceived through it, both pedestrian and adventuresome, are not only a collage of life, they are the inexhaustible words of the book he is setting down. It is the

reality of language that has the maximum consistency in Histoire.¹⁶

This surely is the reason for the analogy drawn between language and sculpture: to bring out the material hardness of a medium thought of as ephemeral and fragmentary, and to underline Simon's convictions about the paradoxical possibilities of the language on whose validity he so often casts doubt.

It should also be said that one of the pleasures of reading a novel such as Histoire is that, despite the surface anarchy of the text, and despite the distortion of language, there are certain pages which are content to display writing of the highest calibre:

il faisait presque noir dans la maison à présent l'ombre du toit était déjà à mi-hauteur du mur qu'éclairait le couchant . . . le vent hurlait par moments sous les portes il y avait toujours quelque part un volet mal fixé qui grinçait sur ses charnières cognait contre le mur et se rabattait . . . parfois il se passait un moment pendant lequel on n'entendait rien puis il semblait pousser un gémissement aigu bref et frappait violemment le mur.

(223)

In a passage of intensely evocative power, Simon transmits indirectly a sense of desolation and nostalgia which is one of his novel's most memorable features.

The true test of a work of art is that it should mean different things to different men, or that it should display something new at each renewed apprehension of it. Histoire, of which one reviewer said, 'In its grand, ghostly, questing way it is profoundly disturbing',¹⁷ seems likely to stand the test, since its complexity is such that it can be taken on a number of levels, and reveals further depths at each re-reading.

¹⁶ Thomas Bishop, 'Fusion of then and now', Saturday Review, 30 March 1968, p.28.

¹⁷ Christopher Wordsworth, 'Complex Simon, and others', The Guardian, 6 March 1969, p.9.

A traditional thematic framework, always secondary to the purely artistic intention of Simon, is nonetheless strong, and it is precisely in his ability to reconcile tradition with research that Simon acquires his power and originality. There is much to be learned from Histoire's painstaking approach to the fascination of 'history', both on the universal and the private levels, and a great deal of insight is offered by the narrator's wrestling with the problem of his own identity; in a sense he is a mirror reflecting the chaos of history and trying to make a pattern of it. Not least of all, the novel is rewarding for its creation of a temporary suspension of the divisions between one time-level and another; for within the mental world of the narrator time seems to be abolished and events brought side by side for comparison and contrast. Yet time passes, as he returns home at the end of the day; the feeling is, however, that this is only one period typical of his constant questioning of the past and its influence upon present circumstances.

Ultimately it is the theme of language that dominates the novel. Simon progresses through the illustration of language in its various and plastic aspects to the affirmation of words as an artistic medium, a living and seemingly inexhaustible organism. This novel is only one combination of the patterns that language can create; Simon, in evoking the experience of one individual within the grander scheme of history, has taken only some of the directions presented by the interchanging network of words that make up the novel, an eminently poetic structure: Histoire is an immense verbal kaleidoscope. The abolition of chronology within the creative memory, and the function of words as points of intersection between space and time levels, allow the 'history' in Histoire to stand as one memorable 'pattern of timeless moments'.

Chapter VII: Experience and Art:

La Bataille de Pharsale 1969

Un général est comme un écrivain
 qui veut faire une certaine pièce,
 un certain livre, et que le livre
 lui-même, avec les ressources
 inattendues qu'il révèle ici,
 l'impasse qu'il présente là, fait
 dévier extrêmement du plan préconçu.

Marcel Proust

Language, then, for Claude Simon, is not simply a means to an informative or didactic end, but a structure within which to formalize and discover his experience. Histoire seemed to represent the limits of his experimentation with novelistic form; La Bataille de Pharsale is, however, in its first two sections at least, an equally involved and problematical novel. Its complexity stems in part from the author's concern to demonstrate within the text some of the principal guiding-lines in its creation and composition. Although it has a recognizable surface theme, La Bataille de Pharsale, 'a work of massive intellect',¹ is basically a novel about language, a monumental verbal collage made up of fragments of the narrator's experience, direct or indirect. Replying to Butor's dictum, 'le roman doit suffire à susciter ce dont il nous entretient',² Simon's novel gives a convincing demonstration of the generative capabilities of language. The narrator's past experiences now exist only on the level of language and memory, and can be re-created only within the limits of that verbal structure; but they are also crystallized in certain works of artistic representation described in the novel. La Bataille de Pharsale comments upon the nature of experience as metaphor in action, and displays a constant alertness to the multiple possibilities of language; it is therefore all the more surprising that critical attention

¹ Janet Burroway, 'Blunt Cudgel', New Statesman, 26 November 1971, pp.752-3.

² Répertoire I (Paris, 1960), p.8.

should have focussed upon the alleged impoverishment of Simon's text by comparison with its predecessors.³ Here Simon also continues to work on the principles of painting and music. The latter is a time-form which can be adapted to the presentation of themes and harmonies in unfolding sequence and repetition, while with its fluid movement from one area of space and time to another, and its variation of the point of view, the novel has clear affinities with the preoccupations of Cubism. La Bataille de Pharsale tries to capture something of its author's understanding of the ceaseless interaction of perception, memory, and imagination, in balancing past against present, real against imaginary, and, in the last analysis, experience against art:

L'oeuvre d'art est interrogation. Elle pose des questions, sans arrêt. Elle se demande quelle est la limite entre l'imaginaire et le vécu. Chaque question débouche sur une autre question. Il n'y a pas de fin.⁴

The interplay of characters in Histoire depended in part on the feeling of frustration, shared by uncle and nephew, over the incapacity of language to re-create faithfully the experiences which had marked them. This theme is further developed in La Bataille de Pharsale, again with reference to the familiar figure of Charles as remembered by the novel's narrator. At this point it is interesting to recall a comment made by Simon about an earlier novel:

La mémoire ne nous restitue jamais que des fragments de notre passé. Vous souvenez-vous de ce manuel d'histoire de Mallet et Isaac que nous avons en

³ See for example François Nourissier, 'La Bataille de Pharsale, roman de Claude Simon', Nouvelles Littéraires, 2 octobre 1969, p.2.

⁴ Quoted in Richard Garzarolli, 'Interview de Claude Simon: "pas de crise du roman français!"', Tribune de Lausanne, 7 juin 1970, included without page reference in the dossiers de presse at Editions de Minuit.

classe? Une de ses illustrations représentait une mosaïque: la défaite de Darius, je crois. Rien que des morceaux, des fragments.⁵

The style and structure of La Bataille de Pharsale attempt to embody this fragmentation. Language may well falsify reality, but language is all that the novelist has; he is faced with the problem of putting into words that experience which at its most intense overthrows the illusory power of language. Simon is profoundly disturbed by his realization that we tend to lapse into complacency because words come between us and the world, nullifying our reactions by clothing reality in the neutral garb of uninspired language; he is therefore concerned to make the reader aware of this fundamental inability of language either to express a man's experience, or even to start preparing him for it.

The very title of La Bataille de Pharsale is a throwback to its predecessor, because in Histoire the narrator recalls some Latin translations which, as a schoolboy, he had to prepare with the help of his uncle. These translations reappear more significantly in La Bataille de Pharsale, not merely for the intrinsic interest of Caesar's own account of the Civil War which brought his army face to face with that of Pompey at Pharsalus. In two different ways, these Latin texts relate to the dichotomy between language and experience, which Charles had attempted to describe: first of all, because they create in the mind of the schoolboy a form of myth around the very name Pharsalus. At this point, Simon's debt to Proust is again very clear, for this sensitivity to names also figures strongly in the third part of Du côté de chez Swann:

Les mots nous présentent des choses une petite image claire et usuelle comme celles que l'on suspend aux murs des écoles pour donner aux enfants l'exemple de ce qu'est un établi, un oiseau, une fourmilière, choses conçues comme pareilles à toutes celles de même

⁵ Quoted in André Bourin, 'Techniciens du roman: Claude Simon'.

sorte. Mais les noms présentent des personnes — et des villes qu'ils nous habituent à croire individuelles, uniques comme des personnes — une image confuse qui tire d'eux, de leur sonorité éclatante ou sombre, la couleur dont elle est peinte uniformément, comme une de ces affiches, entièrement bleues ou entièrement rouges, dans lesquelles, à cause des limites du procédé employé ou par un caprice du décorateur, sont bleus ou rouges, non seulement le ciel et la mer, mais les barques, l'église, les passants.⁶

The myth is subsequently deflated when the narrator of Simon's novel visits the scene of the battle and cannot meaningfully connect what he sees with what he had read. Secondly, evocative though they are of the noise and confusion of warfare, the texts do not prepare the narrator for his own initiation into battle in the Spanish adventure or as a soldier in the Flanders campaign, which also figures prominently in La Bataille de Pharsale; not until he himself is caught up in the turmoil of battle does he realize the full extent of their divorce from reality.

When, during a trip to Greece, he comes across a road-sign bearing the name FARSALA, the dislocation between that remembered text and the actual site of the battle is brought forcefully home to him. His hurried translations had produced only a meaningless jumble of words:

regard me dévisageant derrière les lunettes d'un
air las vaincu d'avance Je m'asseyais posais le livre
ouvert sur les papiers Je t'écoute Je me raclais la
gorge

dextrum cornu ejus rivus quidam impeditis ripis
muniebat Je m'arrêtais

alors? . . .

tu pourrais peut-être te donner la peine de chercher
plus loin que le premier mot que tu trouves dans le dic-
tionnaire combien de temps as-tu passé à préparer cette
version? . . .

allons finissons-en sans ça c'est à neuf heures que
nous allons dîner tu pourrais quelquefois penser au chag-
rin que tu fais à ta mère écris Une rivière aux rives es-
carpées protégeait son aile droite

Est-ce que tu vois quelque chose qui ressemble à une
rivière?

(51-3)

The last line of this passage refers to the narrator with his friend in Greece, where he is ready to devote more attention to his Latin reading than in his school days. This gives a clue to Simon's intentions in this novel, and a definite indication that the Orion analogy now dictates his way of working:

Je ne savais même pas que Pharsale se trouvait là. D'après les vagues indications dans le guide nous avons cherché le champ de bataille de Pharsale. Cela m'a donné une idée. Recherche d'un champ de bataille et recherche d'un livre d'écriture. En grec ancien le mot istoria ne signifie pas 'histoire' dans le sens où nous l'entendons aujourd'hui, mais recherche, enquête. C'est cela qui m'intéresse, cette recherche de ce que l'écriture va m'apporter.⁷

Precisely because he has been fortuitously reminded of the texts by the name FARSALA, the narrator is keen to see for himself the place where a battle of such historic importance was fought, and to find out whether it will match the vague mental picture which his reading has given him. Imagine his immediate disappointment, then, on discovering that what was once a great battlefield is now the scene of a football match in which the players and the meagre attendance alike seem thoroughly uninterested: something less than the fate of the world is at stake here.

Nevertheless, what he can perceive in the present is juxtaposed in his mind with the memory of his reading of Caesar:

D'ici c'étaient juste des points de couleur pas plus gros que des petits pois rose fané vert l'unique maillot blanc se détachant un point aussi se déplaçant parmi les autres s'immobilisant repartant en sens inverse je me demandais comment

s'élançèrent comme on le leur avait commandé
tous ensemble et toute la multitude des archers se
repandit notre cavalerie n'en soutint pas le choc
 Mêmes clameurs sans doute absorbées se diluant dérisoires aussi quoique par milliers sous l'étouffant ciel blanc et cette mêlée ce tumulte cette confusion.

(59-60)

⁷ Quoted in Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Claude Simon', p.189.

The minuscule figures of the footballers, and their thin cries lost in the vast surroundings, are scarcely the clamour and movement of a battle, but as he looks down on the scene another war experience comes to mind: that of Flanders, in which he himself has taken part. Again it is thanks to earlier novels, La Route des Flandres and Histoire, that the reader is familiar with his account of the French debacle and of his own part in it. To talk of his part is, as he realizes only too well, a gross exaggeration, for he is aware only of having been a passive spectator almost mesmerized by events.

As the Flanders experience appears and reappears throughout the text, the sense of chaos emerges most clearly from it:

la pagaille les cris ordres sans doute que je n'arrivais pas à entendre ou criant simplement pour crier . . .
(60)

le cheval couché sur le flanc moi-même à quatre pattes maintenant par terre en train d'essayer de savoir où étaient le haut et le bas ou même s'il y avait un haut et un bas et si j'avais encore des bras et des jambes c'est-à-dire si je pouvais encore me servir de mes bras et de mes jambes je ne souffrais pas.

(72-3)

Here, in the theme of suffering, is another of the links between the events described in La Bataille de Pharsale and the narrator's previous experience, gleaned from his reading. In Caesar he had found the account of a warrior's death from a violent sword-blow in the mouth, evoking thoughts of intense physical suffering; thus it comes as a surprise to him to recall that, unsaddled and bewildered in the midst of the Flanders battle, he himself suffered no great physical pain.

Yet suffering of another kind catches up with him when he experiences jealousy, 'ce dur apprentissage, la jalousie',⁸ and is subjected to strictly mental agonies. In this way the novel comes into association, not only with Caesar, but

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, Les Mots (Paris, Gallimard, 1964), p.17.

with Proust as well, and with the related experiences, in A la recherche du temps perdu, of Swann and the narrator; the one suffers jealousy because of his exclusive passion for Odette, the other as a result of his problematical relationship with Albertine.⁹ For the time being, however, the narrator of La Bataille de Pharsale perceives the reality around him as reduced to a cacophonous mass of sounds, brief impressions, and disorganized movement. When the Latin translations next crop up, it is significant that they are immediately juxtaposed with another account of the war in Flanders:

non solum loco excederent: non seulement ils
 cédèrent le terrain
 sed protinos incitati fuga: mais aussitôt s'é-
 lancèrent dans la fuite
 prirent la fuite. De nouveau je le regardai.
 Mais ce n'étaient rien que des mots, des images dans
 des livres, je ne savais pas encore, je ne savais pas,
 couché ou plutôt aplati sur l'encolure je pouvais voir
 en bas son ombre . . . j'entendais des claquements secs
 métalliques je ne savais pas.

(81)

The most important word there is encore, because it indicates that as the narrator looks back to various levels of his past experience he is now in a position to understand that his appreciation of Caesar was necessarily diminished because it bore no relation to any direct experience he could have had at that age.

Furthermore, when the experience does present itself, it in no way resembles the actuality of battle as that reading might have led him to anticipate it. War is a new and quite

⁹ In two interesting articles, 'Ut pictura poesis: une lecture de La Bataille de Pharsale', Het franse boek, 40 (1970), pp.91-100, and 'De Claude Simon à Proust: un exemple d'intertextualité', Lettres Nouvelles, 4/72 (septembre-octobre 1972), pp.107-37, Françoise van Rossum-Guyon discusses Simon's borrowings from other artistic sources in the light of the linguistic theory of intertextualité; but it seems equally profitable, and in no way contrary to Simon's object, to consider these borrowings for their precise thematic relevance.

chaotic collection of sensations which his exercises with language cannot help him to understand. This incomprehension is underlined by that same passage of description when he goes on to say je ne sais pas and je ne sais trop comment non plus and je ne sais plus. By this modified reiteration is rendered his feeling of the incapacity, first of perception and then of memory, to record in anything like its integrality the fragmentation of intense experience. As the narrator became immersed in the events of Flanders, like Fabrice at Waterloo he was only beginning to awaken to the truth; but as he thinks back to that disaster he is no longer able to recapture it fully. Time takes him from his youthful innocence to the initiation into warfare, and time separates him from that period, now become almost as effectively a piece of history as is Pharsalus; and history threatens to become a sterile alignment of words again, when he cannot reconstitute it as directly as he would like.

Even as he stands on what is probably the stone that Caesar used as a vantage-point at Pharsalus, the narrator comes to a bitter appreciation of language as being perfidious in its expression of reality:

pierre sur laquelle Mais douteux La même pour-
tant et ici même depuis et moi dessus Rien d'autre
que quelques mots quelques signes sans consistance
matérielle comme tracés sur de l'air assemblés con-
servés recopiés traversant les couches incolores du
temps des siècles à une vitesse foudroyante remontant
des profondeurs et venant crever à la surface comme
des bulles vides comme des bulles et rien d'autre.
(91)

This relates, then, to the theme of materialization so much in evidence in earlier novels. Standing there, he can bring back the Roman general's words about the battle, but no other convincing evidence of the battle itself. Language cannot bring him any closer to Pharsalus than his presence at the historic site, and he is left with a feeling of its vacuity, and of disappointment in the outcome of this confrontation between indirect and direct experience.

Yet when La Bataille de Pharsale takes up from Histoire the familiar theme of the ordure involved in war, most signi-

ificantly in the 'Bataille' section of Part II, it begins to seem that in some respects language is not as far removed from reality as he had feared. 'Bataille' is composed, once more, partly of the narrator's confused memories of his presence at the military debacle, and again it is the impression of ordure and destruction that he tries to conjure up, dwelling in particular upon the sight of fire and smoke which had been an ever-present element during the troops' movements from point to point:

des tessonns de bouteille des valises crevées je vis
même des matelas des édredons un agrandissement
photographique d'un couple de mariés dans son cadre
le verre étoilé ça et là dans l'obscurité bitumeuse
on pouvait voir s'élever des flammes des incendies
il est difficile la nuit de se rendre compte . . .

(110-11)

From this initiation into chaos there emerges one more positive discovery in the mind of the narrator, and it relates to the nature and meaning of language. Before Flanders, the only insight he had into the atmosphere of battle was through the imperfect medium of language, and in particular of metaphor, seeking to translate into words the ineffable reaction to a uniquely violent experience. Fire is the key element in this language of warfare, and as the narrator finds himself surrounded by gunfire and by other fires dotted around the horizon, he realizes that to no small extent life, for him, has become the enactment of metaphor in actual experience:

je ne savais pas encore que des expressions comme marcher
au feu le baptême du feu voir le feu n'étaient pas des
métaphores armes à feu et que les traces que laisse la
guerre derrière elle sont simplement noires et sales
exactement comme la suie d'un conduit de cheminée.

(111)

This is one of the central insights of La Bataille de Pharsale, demonstrating that once the narrator finds himself abstracted from the comfortable world of language, his awareness of life through metaphor is forced to stand up to his introduction to life through participation. In so far as war is concerned, he is brought to a new respect for language, in which certain aspects of the war experience have found expression. In the same way, the atmosphere of certain paintings takes on new

relevance once it can be seen to match the atmosphere of his own war experience:

Il fait sombre. Sans doute la journée touche-t-elle à sa fin. L'obscurité commence à envahir la plaine, les collines, la campagne où les feuillages des haies, des arbres ont maintenant pris une teinte uniformément marron, bitumeuse . . .

(105)

Paradoxically enough, it is through these metaphors that a number of experiences, ranging over centuries and widely separated in space, can be brought together within the body of language that Simon employs in La Bataille de Pharsale; the novel may be seen as his own attempt at materialization, as the printed word is intended to leave a record of his own experience, indirect or direct.

Another point which Simon emphasizes is that the narrators of Histoire and La Bataille de Pharsale are left unprepared by language for the crises that they eventually must face. In the language of artistic representation they find experience distanced and controlled, until once again it begins to lose its relevance to the reality which they encounter, a feeling to which Sartre has also referred:

C'est dans les livres que j'ai rencontré l'univers: assimilé, classé, étiqueté, pensé, redoutable encore; et j'ai confondu le désordre de mes expériences livresques avec le cours hasardeux des événements réels.¹⁰

Art, in Simon's text, tends to be found wanting as the summation of experience. This realization pertains both to warfare and to the bitter emotion of jealousy which is perhaps the major surface theme of La Bataille de Pharsale, around which the 'plot' of the novel revolves.

It has already been seen that the Latin translations pertaining to Pharsalus are a recurrent source of fascination for the narrator, culminating in his juxtaposition of representation and reality as he stands overlooking the battlefield itself. The 'Bataille' section of Part II is a collage of

¹⁰ Les Mots, p.39.

artistic and literary quotation, plus the recalled experience of the narrator; as he thinks of the one he is constantly reminded of the others and led into weighing them against one another. Charles had spoken in Histoire of the difference between being present at a battle and seeing it 'artistiquement représenté dans les musées' (p.152), and the narrator of La Bataille de Pharsale makes the same point:

Le soleil aveuglant immobilisé aurait-on dit, comme s'il était lui-même fatigué d'éclairer, la lumière brûlant les yeux, les paupières, salie, jaunie, devenue poussiéreuse depuis le temps je ne savais pas que la guerre était si sale et moi non plus étranger, spectateur regardant les élégants et barbares condottieri aux armures d'azur, entendant le bruit creux des planches du théâtre sous les sabots des palefrois ingénieusement disposés dans diverses postures, couchés sur le flanc parmi les débris de lances ingénieusement disposés, ou ruant, mais maintenant au centre même de ce maelström: l'espace, l'air lui-même tourbillonnant, furieux, la lumière, l'obscurité tourbillonnant je ne savais pas.

(116)

The transition from museum, or theatre, or books, with their artfully presented battles, to the field itself and the physical involvement in warfare, has been a disturbing one, affecting the whole understanding of the suspended animation of art in a profound manner which, in turn, will determine the nature of La Bataille de Pharsale. To the calm recording of scenes depicted in paintings — of Ucello (p.226: The Battle of San Romano), of Bruegel (p.229: Schlacht zwischen Israeliten und Philistern), of della Francesca (p. 163, p.153: La Défaite de Choroès) — is contrasted the pell-mell language of those fragments in which the narrator tries to give adequate expression to his personal memory. The battles become for him an artistic scene given movement and life, and chaotic to a degree that he could never have foreseen, despite the force of these representations; nature not only imitates, it also seems to transcend art where this particular experience is concerned.

If warfare is one of the experiences around which the thematic fabric of the novel is woven, there is another major preoccupation in the narrator's mind: his feeling of jealousy.

Here too there is occasion for him to weigh what he has read and seen of jealousy, in works of art, against his own reactions. The theme of jealousy is focussed upon a precise situation; when the narrator hears tell-tale sounds coming from his mistress's room, the memory of his own sexual relations with her combines with a vivid imagination to produce a violent emotion like nothing he has ever encountered:

se ruant comme un aveugle contre la trappe le leurre frappant et cognant et non plus alors la porte elle-même mais ce quelque chose d'invisible d'innommable d'impossible à atteindre à combattre sans forme l'intolérable en soi et de même qu'il avait maintenant oublié renié jeté par-dessus bord tout ce que son éducation son hérédité lui avaient appris amour-propre respect de soi parvenu ou plus exactement précipité dans un au-delà où toute décence tout contrôle étaient de simples mots privés de sens.

(63-4)

Just as the involvement in battle had borne little relation to the language used to describe war, so too the emotion aroused here goes beyond the limits of what can be expressed in words. Unable to exorcize through speech the torment inside him, he turns instead to violence against the inanimate object, the door behind which the fatal infidelity is believed to be taking place. The intensity of his feeling is strictly innommable, and desperation drives him to a purely physical repudiation of this painful emotional blow.

One of the principal sources for whatever knowledge he had previously enjoyed about the effects of jealousy is his acquaintance with Proust. The first evidence of this appears immediately after the jealous watcher in the square beneath the mistress's window has cast one of his regular glances upward:

Peut-être le rideau derrière le vantail de droite avait-il légèrement bougé? Ou le vent?

Disant que la jalousie est comme... comme...

Me rappelant l'endroit: environ dans le premier tiers en haut d'une page de droite. Pouvais ainsi réciter des tartines de vers pourvu que je réussisse à me figurer la page et où dans la page . . .

(20)

There follows a series of quotations from the early pages of Le temps retrouvé, suggesting that in Proust the narrator has

found what he considers to be an important pronouncement on the subject of jealousy. An artistic parallel for this experience of jealousy is offered in Simon's novel by a post-card bearing a copy of Cranach's painting Die Eifersucht (p. 228); but personal emotion is somehow more profound, at least in the immediacy of its awakening, than the generalized situation of which the artistic representation is a reminder.

It is in Un Amour de Swann that Proust's contribution to the thematic complications of Simon's novel are most appreciable. One evening, Swann, beginning to suffer from jealousy, is disturbed by Odette's sudden dismissal of him. Resolving to come back unexpectedly and put his suspicions to the test, he is startled to find a familiar light still shining:

Parmi l'obscurité de toutes les fenêtres éteintes depuis longtemps dans la rue, il en vit une seule d'où débordait — entre les volets qui en pressaient la pulpe mystérieuse et dorée — la lumière qui remplissait la chambre . . .

Certes, il souffrait de voir cette lumière dans l'atmosphère d'or de laquelle se mouvait derrière le châssis le couple invisible et détesté, d'entendre ce murmure qui révélait la présence de celui qui était venu après son départ, la fausseté d'Odette, le bonheur qu'elle était en train de goûter avec lui . . . il allait frapper aux volets comme il faisait souvent quand il venait très tard; ainsi du moins, Odette apprendrait qu'il avait su, qu'il avait vu la lumière et entendu la causerie, et lui, qui tout à l'heure, se la représentait comme se riant avec l'autre de ses illusions, maintenant, c'était eux qu'il voyait, confiants dans leur erreur, trompés en somme par lui.

The similarity between this and the experience in La Bataille de Pharsale is obvious, but there is in the account of Swann's jealousy none of the frenetic emotion that invests Simon's description of the enraged eavesdropper. It becomes clear that in one instance the literary language has cooled the emotion involved in the critical discovery; the skilfully described anguish of Swann has little in common with the sudden violence of Simon's character. What until now had been only another word, has ceased to be something abstract seen on a printed page, and occupies the centre of his emotional being.

The quotations from Proust help to point up the suffering aroused by jealousy, and the gulf which separates experience, as shown in the work of art, from experience in the moment of its being lived: it is the difference between the abstract and the concrete, the impersonal and the immediately personal, the artistic and the real — in other words, between fact and fiction. Language cannot express the emotional charge felt by the narrator coming into contact with one of the most intense sensations of his life, although it may offer some consolation to see it exteriorized in artistic form.

There is another interesting way in which Swann resembles the narrator of Simon's novel, not because of his experiences in love, but by his habit of trying to find parallels for the real people he meets in the figures seen in well-known paintings:

Swann avait toujours eu ce goût particulier d'aimer à retrouver dans la peinture des maîtres non pas seulement les caractères généraux de la réalité qui nous entoure, mais ce qui semble au contraire le moins susceptible de généralité, les traits individuels des visages que nous connaissons.

(I, pp.222-3)

At once this likens Swann to the Simonian narrator, not only in La Bataille de Pharsale; this text is the culmination of a constant tendency in Simon's work. Here there is constant juxtaposition, not so much of 'real' with 'painted' characters, as of his actual experience with his knowledge of certain basic situations as depicted in the work of various artists:

Il s'agit d'un narrateur . . . qui essaye d'imaginer alternativement ou en même temps la manière dont sa maîtresse le trompe et la bataille de Pharsale. Comme on n' imagine bien que ce que l'on a vécu soi-même il fait appel pour cette bataille à des souvenirs de guerre personnels ou à des tableaux qu'il a vus et sur lesquels il projette d'écrire un essai: Pierre della Francesca, Uccello, Bruegel et même des tableaux tout à fait académiques et pompiers comme celui d'Alphonse de Neuville 'Les dernières cartouches'.¹²

¹² Quoted in Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Claude Simon', p.181.

This is corroboration of the feeling that the borrowings in La Bataille de Pharsale are most important for their contribution to a collage constructed around the themes of emotional and physical violence. In the 'Voyage' section of Part II, where the jealous narrator is on his way from one museum to another in preparation for his article, this systematic comparison reaches its most extreme point:

chez della Francesca: cette caractéristique flétrissure de la plupart des visages et qui ne tient pas tant à la morphologie première (faciès de brutes — naturels dans la soldatesque —, d'empoisonneurs, de bellâtres, de gitons, comme, par exemple, dans la Défaite de Choroès, le page qui souffle de la trompette, un adolescent à première vue mais, si on l'examine plus longuement, une lourdeur opaque dans le regard, et les poches sous les yeux, l'impassibilité) qu'à quelque chose qui les a prématurément, sournoisement usés, marqués. Comme une tare. La richesse. Ou le pouvoir. Expression semblable sur les photos de vedettes de cinéma ou de milliardaires.

(153)

Nowhere is this interrelation between the living and the represented more evident than as it affects the guerrier figure around whom the text of the novel regularly plays. The interpretations which can be placed upon the warrior are numerous, and they contribute to the continual displacement of the text through time and space, embracing paintings, a drunken scene in a barracks, and even a miserable parody attempted by a Parisian student in fancy dress.

The first appearance of the barrack-room scene is late in the first part of the novel:

chancelant la bouche ouverte proférant d'incompréhensibles menaces le sabre qu'il faisait tournoyer au-dessus de sa tête étincelant accrochant les reflets de la veilleuse tandis qu'il allait et venait entre les deux rangées de lits dans l'allée centrale de la chambrée son grand corps blême de rouquin vaguement phosphorescent avec au centre cette tache fauve imprécise.

(75-6)

It is immediately followed by several short paragraphs in which other 'warriors' appear. Simon deliberately confuses the issue by first calling them joueurs and then referring to a damaged mosaic on which these 'players' had been seen — not exclusively on a football pitch. Another warrior is then

described in the following terms:

un guerrier au corps nu les genoux à demi fléchis oscillant d'avant en arrière soit qu'il essaye de parer ou d'esquiver les coups qui lui sont portés par un adversaire invisible (c'est-à-dire caché par un nuage de poussière ou dans une zone détruite de la fresque) soit qu'il vacille comme un homme ivre sous le poids du sabre avec lequel il fait de grands moulinets au-dessus de sa tête frappant manquant sans doute sa cible de sorte que l'élan la masse du sabre déplacé l'entraîne tantôt d'un côté tantôt de l'autre son pénis pendant au-dessous d'un buisson de poils roux.

(76-7)

One of the strengths of La Bataille de Pharsale, and indeed one of the principal marks of Simon's originality, lies precisely in his power to animate, by the exercise of the imagination, scenes and figures which appear in the frozen motion of art and statuary, and then to juxtapose them with scenes from remembered experience, treated as human tableaux; the slowing-down or arresting of motion in the one comes to meet the imagined animation of the other, so that, more often than not, it is difficult to distinguish between them. The attention paid to paintings in La Bataille de Pharsale prefigures the actual incorporation of illustrations into the text of Orion Aveugle.

Images of memory, thus made static, are open to careful scrutiny, and common elements can be picked out from one to the other. For the narrator of La Bataille de Pharsale, this means being able to place side by side those scenes vividly captured in his memory as quasi-static tableaux and those witnessed in the suspended animation of the work of art. As was seen in relation to Le Vent in particular, this device has some similarity with one used frequently by Faulkner:

The tableau vivant is an image of stasis which betrays the desire to cherish memorable experiences and, especially, to understand their significance. As a narrative technique, the tableau vivant is a means of dramatizing or heightening the significance of an event. The suggestion is strong with this image that we perceive the fluid world in static moments which follow one another in rapid sequence, each one intact and complete in itself — like the

still frames of a motion picture. Such recognition of symbolic moments constitutes a degree of transcendence of inexorable change. It is a moment of insight into true meaning.¹³

Simon is equally well aware of this heightened intensity, and in his novel he is constantly concerned to set artistic stasis beside the crucial images retained by memory, and to allow them to interlock. There emerges from this an almost hypnotic system of transfers from the real and remembered to the artistic and remembered; from memory, which is experience on a personal level, to art, which is experience on a universal level. The novel in fact sets out to ask whether the embodiment of life in artistic form can create meaningful stasis; there is inherent meaning in the vivid images seen in the narrator's mind's eye, but can they, and indeed should they, be elaborated into art?

It is impossible not to compare this aspect of Simon's work with the preoccupations implied in a particular passage from Proust, based precisely on the guerrier motif, occurring in the description of the scene at an aristocratic soirée attended by Swann:

A quelques pas, un grand gaillard en livrée rêvait, immobile, sculptural, inutile, comme ce guerrier purement décoratif qu'on voit dans les tableaux les plus tumultueux de Mantegna, songer, appuyé sur son bouclier, tandis qu'on se précipite et qu'on s'égorge à côté de lui; détaché du groupe de ses camarades qui s'empresaient autour de Swann, il semblait aussi résolu à se désintéresser de cette scène, qu'il suivait vaguement de ses yeux glauques et cruels, que si c'eût été le massacre des Innocents ou le martyre de saint Jacques. Il semblait précisément appartenir à cette race disparue — ou qui peut-être n'exista jamais que dans le retable de San Zeno et les fresques des Eremitani où Swann l'avait approchée et où elle rêve encore — issue de la fécondation d'une statue antique par quelque modèle padouan du Maître ou quelque Saxon d'Albert Dürer. Et les mèches de ses cheveux roux crespelés par la nature, mais collés par la brillantine, étaient largement traitées comme elles sont dans la sculpture grecque qu'étudiait sans cesse le peintre de Mantoue, et qui, si dans la création elle ne figure que l'homme, sait du moins tirer de ses simples formes

¹³ Karl E. Zink, 'Flux and the frozen moment: the imagery of stasis in Faulkner's prose', p.299.

des richesses si variées et comme empruntées à toute la nature vivante, qu'une chevelure, par l'enroulement lisse et les becs aigus de ses boucles, ou dans la superposition du triple et fleurissant diadème de ses tresses, a l'air à la fois d'un paquet d'algues, d'une nichée de colombes, d'un bandeau de jacinthes et d'une torsade de serpents.

D'autres encore, colossaux aussi, se tenaient sur les degrés d'un escalier monumental que leur présence décorative et leur immobilité marmoréenne auraient pu faire nommer comme celui du Palais Ducal: 'l'Escalier des Géants' et dans lequel Swann s'engagea avec la tristesse de penser qu'Odette ne l'avait jamais gravi.

(I, pp.323-4)

The organic links are many between this and Simon's novel: the sculpted stillness giving the men an air of lifelessness, which elicits the comparison with the frozen movement of art; the tension between art and reality captured in the pregnant phrase ou qui peut-être n'exista jamais; the durability of art — et où elle rêve encore — matched by Simon's attention to a Greek frieze at the end of La Bataille de Pharsale; the reddish hair of the footman recalling that of some 'warriors' in Simon's text; the remarkable network of associations stemming from the sight of that hair; and even the staircase, which, with its giant figures, anticipates the 'César' section of La Bataille de Pharsale and the pilgrims' ascent past imposing statuary (pp.126-7). All of these suggest that in Proust Simon finds not only a convenient source for a statement about jealousy, but also, where their respective attitudes to art are concerned, a kindred spirit.

At first it seems as though the point in juxtaposing the artistic against the real as experienced by the narrator is to expose the shabbiness of the latter at the same time as demonstrating the untruthful and stylized beauty of the former. This point is made forcefully in the 'Bataille' section itself, where the narrator ironically compares the pathetic sight of the drunken soldier in the barrack-room, with the heroic figures of art:

le grand corps (avec cette chose bistrée, ce tuyau semblable à quelque viscère flétri, froissé, quelque boyau intérieur mis à nu, pendant de l'obscur flambée qui s'étalait au bas du ventre) comme une dérisoire parodie, une dérisoire réplique de tous les Persée, les Goliath, les Léonidas, la cohorte des guerriers figés

dans les bitumeuses peintures des musées parmi le cliquetis des armes entrechoquées, témérairement nus ou équipés, comme les gladiateurs, d'armures disparates ou burlesques (à la manière des personnages de ces groupes bouffons que les soldats s'amuse à composer, les soirs de beuveries, pour les traditionnelles photos-souvenirs, posant seulement vêtus de leurs cartouchières et de leurs casques, alignés comme pour une revue et présentant leurs armes — ce qui, pour un ou deux farceurs, consiste à brandir en direction de l'objectif leur pénis raidi), héros surgis des profondeurs ombreuses des légendes ou de l'Histoire, la tête surmontée d'un cimier étincelant, portant pour tout vêtement des jambières d'airain, leurs corps glabres, trop roses, aux musculatures académiques, ceints d'un baudrier, et lui, répudiant encore jambières et casque . . .

(137-8)

Here, as in La Route des Flandres, there is direct tension between myth(art) and reality (his experience of life) as a situation from the one is echoed by the tableau vivant created by memory from the other. The beau mensonge of the work of art is laid bare by placing it beside the essentially squalid truth of life as lived by the narrator. Yet the point is to see that Simon is pointing to the inexorable way in which nature and art become virtually indissociable:

C'est que l'homme ne vit pas seulement des sensations qu'il enregistre, il vit aussi des oeuvres d'autrui, art ou littérature, où il retrouve exprimés ses drames, son expérience, ses recherches.¹⁴

The narrator's experience is a visual one, more than a moral or psychological one, and it is to the sensorial experience that La Bataille de Pharsale directs its attention. The images of several 'warriors' are firmly engraved upon the consciousness of the narrator, who can elaborate various parallels from memory and imagination without implying necessary condemnation of any one amongst them. This motif of the guerrier provides a link between layers of time and experience, ranging from Greek statuary through Old Masters

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Jacqueline Piatier, 'La vie dans sa substance même... La Bataille de Pharsale de Claude Simon', Le Monde, 25 octobre 1969, pp.i-ii.

to his days as soldier and as witness of parodies of soldierly activity. Sounds and movements in each of these scenes are similar, and this continuity emerges most strikingly from Simon's arrangement of them.

Added relief is given to this interchangeable quality of the images stemming from his aesthetic or indirect experience, as well as from his direct involvement in life, when the various 'warriors' are brought close together in the final part of the novel. Already, in describing the battle scenes in paintings, the narrator has pointed out that one artist frequently borrows from another; for example, one of the paintings adopts a soldier from Caravaggio (it seems likely that this figure comes from the original composition for The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew: p.200). When this is restated, the painting concerned is not differentiated from the memory-image of the drunken soldier:

Le bras gauche est levé, la main en avant du corps. Le haut du buste est tourné vers le spectateur tandis que le bas du corps, du fait que la jambe droite se porte en avant, est plutôt tourné vers la gauche, l'ensemble du corps subissant une torsion sur lui-même, de sorte que l'on voit en même temps la poitrine, le ventre et les fesses. Cette figure est empruntée à une composition de Polidoro da Caravaggio. Le flanc gauche, le bras gauche et la main gauche appuient contre le plateau de la lourde table dressée obliquement et dont les pieds pèsent sur le battant de la porte.
(242)

The use of the term emprunté, and indeed the very fact that the narrator points out this borrowing at all, make it clear that he is consciously acknowledging his own debt to other sources. La Bataille de Pharsale is anxious to profit from the kinship of posture, gesture, and composition, which has significant results for the texture of the novel and its abrupt interchanging from 'fact' to 'fiction', from one geographical location to another, and from one level of time to another.

Furthermore, Simon is also indicating again, as in other novels, the force of the éternel retour, which operates in art as well as in life; a reminder of this is given in the

joke about a newspaper headline: 'LES COUPS ONT NORMALEMENT REPRIIS A LA FACULTE DE NANTERRE' (p.64), with its comment on affairs topical at the time of writing the novel. Clearly, too, the theme of sex is another area in which the éternel retour is at work, and as in La Route des Flandres Simon presses the story of The Golden Ass into service to illustrate his point. The sexual act exists in the narrator's mind both as a distinct memory and as a figment of his jealous imagination. His vivid mental picture of the scene of infidelity from which he is firmly excluded is directly related to the literary antecedent of Apuleius as a means of underlining the effects of jealousy:

m'embrassant plus étroitement encore ç'est tout entier
oui tout entier qu'elle me reçut et même chaque fois
que pour la ménager je me retirais elle se rapprochait
avec frénésie et saisissant ma pine à pleines mains
elle l'enfonçait dans une étreinte encore plus profonde.
(93)

The narrator's jealousy causes echoes of this passage to appear at numerous stages in the novel: 'un machin de cheval' (p.62), 'membre d'âne' (p.159), and 'cette espèce de lance rouge' (p.86); the quotation from Apulieus provides in fact the culminating description of the sexual act in the first part of the novel; the metamorphosis in the Latin text provides an obsessive picture of the act taking place behind the locked door.

That two of the epigraphs employed by Simon in this novel should come from Proust and Valéry is important in itself, for they also contribute much to La Bataille de Pharsale, as has been seen with regard to Proust already. But Jean Ricardou has made an interesting point about the use of the epigraph taken from Valéry, which has far-reaching implications:

Dans son usage expressif, l'exergue, en s'appuyant sur une approximative analogie de leurs signifiés, fait survenir, à l'ouverture du livre, un emblème capable d'en évoquer la substance et surtout de l'inscrire sous le patronage d'une autorité. Mais supposons qu'au lieu de survenir après coup selon une posture illustrative, le fragment

serve de précis programme thématique. Alors le principe de l'épigraphe est transformé en rôle générateur de fiction.¹⁵

Ricardou goes on, in a most complex essay, to establish a host of thematic and verbal connections between the Valéry stanza and the text of Simon's novel. But with regard to the use of the éternel retour, it seems that Simon has in fact taken the whole poem, 'Le Cimetière marin', and transposed its atmosphere into the pages of his book. In a more general sense, too, Simon has more than a little in common with Valéry as far as their attitudes toward their art and its demands upon the reader are concerned, and in respect of the poet's own theory of literary creation:

D'une part, mon poème étudié comme un fait accompli, révélant à l'examen de l'expert sa composition, ses intentions, ses moyens d'action, sa situation dans le système de l'histoire littéraire; ses attaches, et l'état probable de l'esprit de son auteur... D'autre part, la mémoire de mes essais, de mes tâtonnements, des déchiffrements intérieurs, de ces illuminations verbales très impérieuses qui imposent tout à coup une certaine combinaison de mots -- comme si tel groupe possédât je ne sais quelle force intrinsèque... j'allais dire: je ne sais quelle volonté d'existence, tout opposée à la 'liberté' ou au chaos de l'esprit, et qui peut quelquefois contraindre l'esprit à dévier de son dessin, et le poème à devenir tout autre qu'il n'allait être, et qu'on ne songeait qu'il dût être.¹⁶

Like Proust's remark on writers and generals, Valéry's statement is almost a direct anticipation of Simon's own willing submission to the 'dynamic' of language leading the writer away from the careful paths of preconceived intention. In this respect, at least, the nouveau roman is poetic in its

¹⁵ Pour une théorie du nouveau roman, p.122.

¹⁶ Paul Valéry, 'Au sujet du Cimetière Marin', Oeuvres (Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), t.I, p.1499; the poem itself appears on pp.147-51. See also the interesting general article by W.N. Ince, 'Valéry and the Novel', Australian Journal of French Studies, 8, No.2 (May-August 1971), pp.193-205.

attention to the feel and shape of words; and if this reverence for language is taken as a criterion, then no novel is more poetic than Simon's.

From Valéry, Simon takes the theme of tension between movement and stasis. A painting is recalled on the very first page of La Bataille de Pharsale; like Valéry's stanza on Zeno, the novel is going to occupy itself with the paradoxical situation of suspended animation, especially in relation to the stasis created by art, but also with regard to those actions suspended within the consciousness of the narrator, as memory and imagination throw up vivid scenes: 'choses qui s'immobilisent tout à coup et dont on garde l'image précise' (p.60). As a pointer to this contrast, the formula Achille immobile à grands pas does duty as the heading for the first part of the novel, and is incorporated at several points within the text itself. The most important of these, which again creates a relationship between the situations encountered in art and those of life itself, appears toward the end of the first part of La Bataille de Pharsale (pp.83-4) when, in an ironic way, it is the narrator who remembers having been the victim of the temporal paradox, having the feeling of motionless movement as he fled from enemy gunfire but found himself hampered by the dead weight of all his equipment; he too became an Achilles losing the race against time. Later references to the same phrase (p.118, p.163), evoke the same comparison between the narrator's direct and indirect experience, alluding to motion frozen in the work of art: the second of these refers in glowing terms to the painting by Poussin, Orion Aveugle marchant vers la lumière du soleil levant, with its striking impression of 'movement into space' as a contrast to the dull and academic canvases, such as Les dernières cartouches, which simply lay a dead hand on the vitality of experience.

Some of the natural settings in La Bataille de Pharsale recall the Mediterranean graveyard and its atmosphere of heat and vastness. 'Tout est brûlé, défait, reçu dans l'air', a verse from the twelfth stanza of the poem, corresponds to the

Greek landscape:

comme si l'air incandescent le ciel blanc les collines,
de pierres chauffées à blanc le vaste paysage nu désolé
absorbait tout décourageait tout.

(55)

Parfois un souffle chaud agitait les herbes roussies
froissait avec un bruit rêche les feuilles d'épineux
. . . puis tout redevenait immobile mort.

(66)

The sensations of deathlike stillness, vastness, and aridity are common features, as is the sense of desolation and discouragement in the face of transience. Each of the sites is a kind of natural mausoleum since, despite appearances, the Greek plain is the burial ground of countless soldiers: 'L'argile rouge a bu la blanche espèce' (stanza 15). In both cases the magnitude of nature stirs feelings of humility and ephemerality. Simon's novel draws to a close with the writer's eye following the progress of sunlight across his table; this comes back to the theme of time and its treacherous motionlessness touched on by Valéry:

Tête complète et parfait diadème,
Je suis en toi le secret changement.

Ultimately the two texts combine in exposing this treachery. Simon amplifies this theme with a renewed allusion to Joshua, which figured even in his first novel. Here the narrator, despairing at the dislocation of time, desires to emulate the feat of arresting the sun's progress:

le soleil était déjà haut je me demandais quelle heure
il pouvait être le verre de ma montre était brisé il ne
restait plus qu'une aiguille la petite arrêtée un peu
après huit heures sans doute quand j'avais été jeté par
terre ou peut-être la coquille du sabre au moment ou
mais qu'est-ce que ça pouvait faire la montre l'heure
le matin le soir Josue plus tard de nouveau je me demandai

(115)

The futility of this dependence on a fixed time-scheme is emphasized in the midst of warfare, when the narrator is constantly on the threshold of death, and time is one more useless concept. Time as an indispensable human system is prominent throughout the novel, but the chronology of the creative mind, as the third part of the novel will show, is somewhat different; the text is an extended reverie through

mental time, but the irruption of perceptions in the present, such as the shaft of sunlight advancing across the table, are proof that it is firmly rooted in 'real' time as well. But Simon seems also to share the poet's confidence and limited optimism about the 'monumental' qualities of the work of art. The principle of the éternel retour is thus used as a pointer to the recurrence of basic situations and to their equally constant representation in works of art, some of which are more praiseworthy than others in their approach to the task of combatting impermanence. It is in the ceaseless interaction of the artistic and the real that the novel finds one of its most impressive qualities:

Les guerriers et les amants se figent au paroxysme de leurs gestes en figures de bas relief ou de tableaux; les statues s'animent. A l'éphémère universel, le témoignage artistique confère ainsi une vérité durable et exemplaire; et le roman investit l'expérience individuelle des prestiges de la condition humaine.¹⁷

Borrowings from Proust, Valéry, Classical literature, and the world of the great artists exemplify the validity of the éternel retour and bring close together a number of experiences which otherwise would remain scattered in time and space; they are a highly effective means of maintaining the tension and the balance between the represented and the real — or between experience and art.

The experience of the narrator, then, has made it clear that language is to be approached with circumspection as an instrument for the forging of human experience; not only that, it is also a dangerous weapon which can deliver crushing blows and distort truth grotesquely, as is suggested in the account given by Simon of a strip-cartoon familiar from the newspaper described in Histoire. The cartoon is in itself a miniature illustration of the theme of jealousy, since it shows a boxer in anguished conversation with a woman who may well be deceiving

17

Jean V. Alter, 'Claude Simon: La Bataille de Pharsale', French Review, 44, No.5 (April 1971), pp.970-1.

him (pp.65-70). Since their conversation takes place over the telephone, he is as effectively cut off from the truth as the anguished narrator outside the locked door; the boxer's 'cordon auditif' (p.70) is a parallel for the striking use of the phrase 'oreille qui peut voir' (p.23) which translates the force of the jealous imagination. This is then underlined by a reference to words as 'redoutables énigmatiques chargés de sens multiples' (p.68), so reflecting the narrator's suspicions about the remarks addressed to him on the subject of his mistress, and the tenseness of the section headed 'Conversation' in the second part of the novel. The cartoon is interesting above all in providing two crucial analogies which facilitate the understanding of the novel's structure, and of Simon's conception of the potential of language and of novelistic form.

The first derives, not surprisingly, from the realm of painting, as La Bataille de Pharsale continues the parallel with Cubism, begun in the previous novel:

Dans Histoire il se produit une constante confusion entre le neveu et l'oncle. Le narrateur peut être l'un ou l'autre cherchant à se mettre à la place de l'un ou de l'autre et derrière lequel il se dissimule.

Si on a parlé de 'cubisme' à propos de La Bataille de Pharsale, on pourrait aussi parler d'un système de 'rabattements de plans' comme on le fait en géométrie descriptive, ou encore d'un jeu de miroirs (on sait que l'une des tentatives du cubisme a été de représenter à la fois sur une même toile les diverses faces d'un objet).¹⁸

The term rabattement occurs in La Bataille de Pharsale itself, in the description of the strip-cartoon (p.70), and it is of general relevance to the text of the novel, whose fractured appearance and interplay of points of view stem from the desire to gain a comprehensive vision of the subject:

The motion-picture camera encircles a figure — shooting it from all angles. The Cubist tries to combine all these viewpoints in a single canvas. Not only that.

¹⁸ This was said by Claude Simon during a conversation with the present writer, in Paris, 27 February 1971.

He often ignores size and perspective, making a banana as big as a barn in a painting which is depthless. He is experimenting, then, in the medium of time-space. In a single instant in a single painting — which may appear tortured and formless — the Cubist strives to capture an entire form, sometimes together with its movement.¹⁹

For Simon, consciousness is a canvas upon which images from multiple levels of time appear, side by side as it were, on a plane surface, each element in this 'painting' having as much validity as any of the others. What the novel seeks to achieve is the distribution of these elements in a dynamic composition. There was already a hint of this desire to see the many facets of reality in La Route des Flandres; near the end of that novel Georges realizes what would be necessary for a total clarification of the enigma:

l'oeil immobile et attentif de son assassin patient
 . . . voyant pour ainsi dire l'envers de ce que je
 pouvais voir ou moi l'envers et lui l'endroit . . .
 il lui aurait fallu une glace à plusieurs faces.

(313)

A clearer indication of this fragmentation is given in the 'explanatory' final section of Part II of La Bataille de Pharsale where, under the neutral heading 'O', a geometrical résumé is given of the principles upon which the novel is constructed:

Soit donc O désignant le point occupé par l'oeil de l'observateur (O.) et OF la droite qui joint ce point à la fenêtre F au cinquième étage de l'immeuble en face duquel se trouve O., cette ligne OF brusquement coupée par la forme sombre d'un pigeon, O. se tenant du côté ensoleillé de la place, de sorte que . . . sa rétine est alors violemment impressionnée pendant une fraction de seconde par la silhouette obscure du pigeon, ailes déployées, en forme d'arbalète, se découpant en sombre sur le disque éblouissant du soleil: donc jaune, arbalète noire, puis jaune de nouveau.

Et, si l'on cherche à se faire une idée globale de l'ensemble des relations, il faut aussi considérer

¹⁹ Arthur L. Scott, 'The myriad perspectives of Absalom, Absalom!, American Quarterly, 6, No.3 (Fall 1954), pp.210-20 (p.216).

la droite OF dans son sens FO: soit un autre obser-
vateur (ou observatrice) O. se tenant en F. . . .
(184)

Angles, straight lines, and their intersections: these are equivalents of the strands of memory, perception, and imagination that come together to form the intensely complex texture of the novel. 'O' can designate, it seems, any one of a number of points of view, thus expanding the technique of the first section with its interplay of an unspecified 'je' and an equally problematical 'il'. These points of view are separated both in time and in space, as is made clear by the number of lines conceivable in the limited confines of the square where the narrator stands, or on which the writer can look down as he works. In the third part of La Bataille de Pharsale, the cipher 'O' supplants proper names and even pronouns, at times, leaving the reader to sort out for himself the situations and characters concerned. The text takes its complexity from the interplay of points of view on certain experiences held in common. The section 'O' makes this abundantly clear:

si l'on tient également compte que dans l'exposé ci-dessus on a simplifié la figure en choisissant une seule coupe pratiquée selon un plan vertical et dans un moment donné (et que l'on pourrait concevoir quantité d'autres schémas, d'autres coupes, soit dans l'espace (horizontales ou obliques), soit encore dans le temps), on doit se figurer l'ensemble du système comme un mobile se déformant sans cesse autour de quelques rares points fixes, par exemple l'intersection de la droite OO' et du trajet suivi par le pigeon dans son vol, ou encore celle des itinéraires de deux voyages, ou encore le nom PHARSALE figurant également dans un recueil scolaire de textes latins et sur un panneau indicateur au bord d'une route de Thessalie.

(186)

Time and space are evoked by the references to the battlefield and the two places at which it has affected the narrator, while the importance of immediate perception is underlined by the renewed image of the pigeon with which the novel opened and on which it will close. Most of all, it is in the recurrent emotion of jealousy that past and present come together, and imagination allows the constant combination of the two.

The language of geometry invades Simon's text continually, to establish one of the basic elements in its complexity. It refers to machines, quite naturally: 'Une sorte de tablier . . . de forme trapézoïdale, est disposé verticalement au plan dessiné dans l'espace par cette équerre' (p.148); but it also describes human anatomy:

Le membre de l'homme, tout entier sorti de la femme maintenant, est représenté d'une façon schématique, arqué vers le haut, plus étroit à sa base qu'à son extrémité, le gland figuré par un triangle à peu près équilatéral pourvu d'un point près de son sommet. .
(254)

Intermittent attention is paid to graffiti on the sexual theme, incorporating schematic drawings in straight lines, ovals, and triangles, with attendant lettering in roughly geometrical shapes (p.39). But fittingly enough, it is in the section most concerned with painting, 'Voyage', that the specific term cube appears:

les losanges étant de trois couleurs noirs blancs et gris de sorte que leur combinaison dessinait comme certains carrelages de petits cubes en perspective accolés les uns aux autres et qui selon la façon dont on les lisait horizontalement verticalement ou en oblique semblaient tour à tour saillir ou s'enfoncer à l'intérieur d'un espace à trois dimensions cela jusqu'au vertige.

(160-1)

Reading like a layman's description of a Cubist painting, this passage further emphasizes the close kinship between this conception of art and the interlocking fragments of his novel. Is it stretching a point to see, in the substitution of lisait for regardait, another indication of the way in which the novel is composed, on the basis of a constant oscillation from one art form to another?

Painting is a spatial form, depending for its effect upon what has been termed 'une habile disposition scénique' (p.109). The other artistic structure on which Simon calls in La Bataille de Pharsale is music, a time-form which combats linearity through the exploitation of harmony and counterpoint. In a more deliberate way, perhaps, even than in La Route des Flandres, Simon has adopted the principles of music for this novel too:

J'ai cherché à composer ce roman à la façon de certaines oeuvres musicales, en trois parties:

- 1) Exposition des thèmes (ce qui signifie aussi leur invention), tâtonnements.
- 2) Exploration plus poussée et développements de certains de ces thèmes.
- 3) Reprise et synthèse de tous ces thèmes dans une structure différente et un 'tempo' plus rapide.

J'ai intitulé 'Chronologie des Evénements' la troisième partie pour bien faire sentir que le temps du roman c'est le temps de la chose écrite et que ce qui importe et ce qui détermine l'ordonnance du texte c'est non pas, comme dans le roman traditionnel, une suite d'événements s'enchaînant 'comme dans le temps des horloges' et de façon arbitraire, mais la façon dont les événements écrits se commandent les uns les autres dans le jeu du langage. Le langage littéraire ne 'reproduit' pas des événements ou des objets: il en produit: 'Peindre n'est pas dépeindre', disait Georges Braque. Comme la peinture, la littérature ne peut être jugée en fonction de référents pris dans le monde dit réel et plus ou moins bien copiés. Il en est ainsi des 'collages' ou des 'assemblages' faits par certains artistes modernes et où il n'y a rien d'autre à voir (ou à comprendre) que ce qui est donné à voir.²⁰

This dense comment helps to explain the irony involved in the headings of the second and third parts of the novel, in both of which the elements familiar from Part I are reworked time and again. 'Lexique' broadens the bases of many of the images and elaborates segments of the text that have surfaced from time to time, while 'Chronologie des Evénements', with its sustained Present tense, proves that the only time-system Simon is prepared to admit is the here and now of the creative moment itself:

Quant à la dernière partie de Pharsale (autre tournant) elle résulte de ce que j'avais enfin compris que l'on n'écrit — ou ne dit — jamais que ce qui se passe au présent de l'écriture (voir Stendhal dans Henri Brulard, lorsqu'il s'aperçoit, essayant de raconter son passage du Grand Saint-Bernard avec l'armée napoléonienne, qu'il est en train non pas de raconter ses souvenirs 'véridiques',

²⁰ This remark was also made during a conversation with the present writer.

mais de décrire une gravure représentant cet événement qu'il a vue depuis et qui, comme il le dit, 'a pris la place de la réalité').²¹

Memory, perception, and imagination battle for supremacy in the consciousness. The analogy with musical form in this novel underlines this constant process. Just as the first few pages of La Route des Flandres gave an initial picture which the remainder of the novel then proceeded to restate and to elaborate into a dense pattern, so too the essence of La Bataille de Pharsale is contained in its opening paragraphs, which provide invaluable insights into the book's thematic and technical intricacy: its patterns of sensorial imagery, the sexual preoccupation, the éternel retour in life and in art, and the interaction of art and experience, of memory, perception, and imagination.²²

After approximately the first half of the first section, the whole novel is there en puissance in the mind of the reader, and at this stage the opening image reappears, by way of a deliberate double entendre:

tu as raison ça ne mène à rien on va revenir d'où
on était partis peut-être que cette fois on
Jaune puis noir puis jaune de nouveau, le corps
lui-même, dans l'ascension rapide, verticale, réduit
à un trait . . .

(40)

From a snatch of conversation in Greece between the narrator and his companion, pertaining to the search for the battlefield, the text takes fresh impetus as the writer renews the intensity of his search through language for the book he is creating. Everything until now has stemmed from that one initial image and its proliferating associations, which are regenerated in a passage (pp.40-1) reiterating the tensions

21 Claude Simon, 'Réponses à quelques questions écrites de Ludovic Janvier', p.17.

22 Ricardou gives a very detailed summary of these opening paragraphs: Pour une théorie du nouveau roman, pp.124-7.

inherent in the Valéry stanza and in the first pages of the novel: perception and memory ('seulement cette impression, déjà souvenir'), movement and stasis ('foudroyante montée . . . cette image d'arbalète'), experience direct and indirect ('et alors la vouête de flèches . . . ils lancèrent leurs javelots'). Once again the image sets up a string of associations and themes around which the text continues to play, stating and restating them as in a musical development until they become lodged in the mind of the reader. 'Lexique' is a form of second movement in its detachment of themes for closer consideration and expansion: 'Bataille', 'Guerrier', 'Voyage', and so on, where the textual fragmentation of the first part is maintained. The final part then places all the elements in the uniform setting of an eternal Present tense and, by dispensing with typographical variations, contrives what might be termed a literary sostenuto.

A further little hint at the analogy with music is included in 'Conversation', where the narrator overhears music from a neighbouring flat:

La guitare joue un air syncopé scandé assez rapide
fait de variations du même accord sur lequel ou
plutôt à travers lequel se détache une dentelle de
petites notes aiguës séparées.

(129)

On entend de nouveau la guitare C'est toujours le même
air scandé sur un rythme toutefois plus lent maintenant
comme quelqu'un qui travaille un morceau attentif à la
bonne position de ses doigts.

(131)

Like the language of Cubism, with its attention to the arrangement of planes and geometrical shapes, musical form too is concerned to find the proper disposition of its component elements. La Bataille de Pharsale, perhaps more a novel in progress than a novel, can be looked at as a whole whose parts are arranged and rearranged within a dynamic framework, and no absolute pattern ever emerges. Simon is the artist distributing elements over a plane surface, and at the same time the composer arranging his parts one after the other in search of harmonious order: tone and harmony are the twin pillars on which the text is erected. 'Lexique' underlines the

way in which the novel grows out of a number of basic themes around which a pattern of incidental but related harmonics must be allowed to take its place.

Two other minor analogies help the reader to follow Simon's intentions. The first of these, already announced in the previous novel, is the comparison of consciousness with the massive network of a railway, which closely resembles the intricacies of music:

les violons tissant un invisible réseau de cordes tendues à se rompre, s'entrecroisant, se rapprochant, se confondant, s'écartant, divergeant de nouveau à la façon dont, du train lancé à toute vitesse, on voit les rails de chemin de fer aux aiguillages.
(Histoire, p.87)

This image is taken up again in the 'Voyage' section of La Bataille de Pharsale:

les rails se divisant bruyamment s'écartant bifurquant se rapprochant divergeant de nouveau se dédoublant encore se multipliant s'étalant sur une grande surface.

(164)

Spatial form is allied to the temporal development of music in the use of the term surface in that passage; consciousness is a network along which the text moves in any given direction until an intersection — what Simon would call a carrefour — is reached: here is a direct anticipation of his reference, in the preface to Orion Aveugle, to the narrator and his 'journey through language'.²³ 'Voyage' is an underlining of this notion of a journey through mental time and space; hence the narrator's reverie on the signpost for Verona. It is, moreover, the occasion of a consideration of the novelist's position in time, evoking the suspension of consciousness in the creative act while time and movement continue about him. As the train moves steadily on and the sun sinks in the sky, the narrator's attention flits from the perception of external reality, both inside and

²³ See also Jean Ricardou, Pour une théorie du nouveau roman, p.202.

outside his compartment, to the memory of various moments from his past, including the climactic scene of discovery and the awakening of his jealousy, to his speculations on such topics as the nature of art, since he is visiting a number of museums in preparation for his article. This is then a metaphor for the novelist himself: he resembles a literary signalman whose job it is to organize the traffic along the lines existing within his mind.

One final analogy for the process of selection involved in writing appears in the perusal of the strip-cartoon, when the narrator dwells upon the vibrant power of words suspended in mid-air:

jusqu'à ce que la phrase la réplique suivante les repousse s'installe à leur place (à la manière de ces images des lanternes magiques glissant de droite à gauche puis de gauche à droite, l'une chassant l'autre, chacune immobile un moment pendant que l'opérateur cherche à tâtons dans l'obscurité la plaque suivante, l'installe, et la fait brusquement coulisser).

(68)

Clearly the darkroom is a metaphor for the obscure chamber of the writer's consciousness. Simon, the novelist as Orion, refers to his exploration as a tâtonnement, and it is this process of groping for the right image, for the next sentence, that the symbol of the projector and its slides conveys. This process is of course closely allied to the nature of perception as a series of fixed frames which memory later reorganizes and re-runs in the mind's eye. All of these — painter, musician, signalman and projection man — are important metaphors for the situation of the novelist picking his way through a verbal labyrinth built by the intersection of memory, perception, and imagination, and the fecundation of the one by the others during the act of writing.

Ultimately, however, the novelist deals with language and language alone. Words are his material for setting down themes and preoccupations. Since La Bataille de Pharsale does so much to undermine language, what can be expected of it with regard to that language in which the novel itself takes shape? Can a writer so keenly aware of the evanescent

quality of words and the ambiguities of artistic representation make language achieve anything positive? Simon's use of language to create an 'architecture sensorielle' is of course an extension of the techniques of the stream-of-consciousness novel:

The chief technique in controlling the movement of stream of consciousness in fiction has been an application of the principles of psychological free association. The primary facts of free association are the same whether they are suspended in the psychology of Locke-Hartley or Freud-Jung; and they are simple. The psyche, which is almost continuously active, cannot be concentrated for very long in its processes, even when it is most strongly willed; when little effort is exerted to concentrate it, its focus remains on any one thing but momentarily. Yet the activity of consciousness must have content, and this is provided for by the power of one thing to suggest another through an association of qualities in common or in contrast, wholly, or partially — even to the barest suggestion. Three factors control the association: first, the memory, which is its basis; second, the senses, which guide it; and third, the imagination, which determines its elasticity.²⁴

The transitions in La Bataille de Pharsale are contrived on the rigorous application of this system, allied to those verbal trouvailles which illuminated certain pages of the previous novel. The text moves from image to image within the restricted area of certain dominant preoccupations: jealousy, combat (sexual, athletic, or armed), past and present, art and representation. These are the areas of tension within which the fluently descriptive text of the novel comes and goes, producing a pattern of associations condensed by the structure of the language used to align them. A remark by the writer himself bears this out:

Il est d'autant plus nécessaire que tout soit rigoureusement bâti que les éléments ne sont plus réunis entre eux par leur simple succession chronologique, comme dans le roman traditionnel . . .
Il me semble plus intéressant de chercher comment

24

Robert Humphrey, Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954), p.43.

peuvent se grouper les images, les événements, en fonction de ce qui les apparente: une certaine coloration, des qualités communes. Tout mot, toute image, suscite un ensemble d'harmoniques et de complémentaires.²⁵

The novel has to be carefully constructed, and despite superficial appearances to the contrary, La Bataille de Pharsale fulfils that condition. The text is a vast collage combining shreds of description, sometimes in rapidly changing but controlled patterns:

Il n'y avait que trois tables alignées sur l'étroit trottoir la théorie topographique et tactique de cette bataille a suscité plusieurs hypothèses . . . Est-ce que par hasard tu aurais de l'aspirine sur toi . . .
(26)

The alignment of tables suggests military formation and the lines of soldiers in battle order, and from there it is an easy step to the battlefield of Pharsalus itself on the recent trip to Greece, where the heat caused him some discomfort. Later, a transition is effected by another common and recurrent factor — the sexual preoccupation of the jealous narrator:

le type qui brandissait son énorme godmiché à tête cramoisie comment avec de si grosses et si longues pattes pourrais-je chevaucher un corps si délicat . . . rouquin fils de pute HIJO DE PUTA.
(92-3)

The memory of an incident in a Parisian street calls back the metamorphosis of The Golden Ass and then the exaggerated suspicions of the jealous man, with the Spanish phrase taking the text back again to a photograph which appeared first at the start (p.13) of the novel. As has been suggested, 'Bataille' and 'Voyage' bring out most clearly the nature of the text as an assemblage of the various images brought to mind by this systematic technique. Throughout the novel there are leitmotive which guide the reader along:

Simon's style is not a function of his novel, it is his novel. Words float back and forth, connecting different levels of time and experience; images call

²⁵ Madeleine Chapsal, 'Claude Simon: "Il n'y a pas d'art réaliste"', Quinzaine Littéraire, No.41 (15-31 décembre 1967), pp.4-5.

to mind related images and whole scenes, only to dissolve again, as in Bergman and Resnais films, into fresh associations. The author's unit of composition is the paragraph, structured around one theme but radiating in all directions to other paragraphs, each complementing the other. The almost total lack of punctuation is no novelist's trick. It is, in fact, essential to the incessant motion of the narrative, which never pauses in its constant wandering through myriad layers of memory, and this very technique helps create the compelling, hallucinatory rhythm of the work.²⁶

That remark, made with regard to Histoire, loses little of its validity when applied to La Bataille de Pharsale, which sometimes destroys even the unit of the paragraph. In the first two parts of this novel, Simon employs the same apparently chaotic but closely controlled technique in linking one image to the others which precede and succeed it.

As Ricardou has shown,²⁷ one of the principal leit-motive is the colour yellow and its variants, running right through the text, the symbolic trace of the narrator's own jealousy. It brings to mind Pope's couplet from the Essay on Criticism:

All seems infected that th'infected spy
As all looks yellow to the jaundiced eye,

but it also reminds the reader of a passage from Robbe-Grillet:

La tache est sur le mur de la maison, sur les dalles, sur le ciel vide. Elle est partout dans la vallée, depuis le jardin jusqu'à la rivière et sur l'autre versant. Elle est aussi dans le bureau, dans la chambre, dans la salle à manger, dans le salon, dans la cour, sur le chemin qui s'éloigne vers la grand-route.²⁸

²⁶ Thomas Bishop, 'Fusion of then and now'.

²⁷ Pour une théorie du nouveau roman, pp.129ff.

²⁸ La Jalousie (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1957), p.141.

Simon has openly stated his admiration for La Jalousie,²⁹ and La Bataille de Pharsale is close to Robbe-Grillet's novel in its exposition of jealousy as a perniciously obsessive force in the mind of a susceptible narrator who is unable to distinguish truth from imagination, fact from fantasy. The text is regularly brought back, by this use of colour, to its central theme. From the same theme is developed another of the leitmotive, connected with a particular posture, that of sexual intercourse, also invading the consciousness of the narrator relentlessly:

Le gardien de but se détacha comme à regret de son poteau et se mit au milieu de l'entrée de sa cage, les deux jambes écartées, le buste penché en avant, les mains en avant, les deux bras écartés eux aussi.
(54)

This precise description of posture prefigures an even more graphic image also stemming from the football match:

celui au maillot rose renversé sur le dos dans la poussière les quatre fers en l'air c'est-à-dire les bras à demi repliés levés au-dessus de la tête et un peu en avant les jambes à demi repliées aussi un peu écartées les tibias à l'horizontale et l'autre au-dessus de lui en l'air figure volante à peu près dans la même position c'est-à-dire les bras à demi repliés en avant de lui mains vers le sol comme s'il essayait déjà d'amortir sa chute les jambes peut-être moins ployées mais écartées aussi comme un cheval.
(61)

The term écarté is perhaps the most frequently used epithet in the whole novel. This posture also links up with the scene from the metamorphosis in The Golden Ass, as with the remembered death of Wack on the Flanders road:

arraché de son cheval comme si une invisible main de géant l'avait saisi par le col de sa tunique et tiré le tenant là planant sur l'air suspendu au-dessus de moi comme une ombre jaune soufre les jambes encore écartées chevauchant une monture absente les genoux à demi pliés les bras à demi pliés étendus en avant.
(118)

²⁹ See Madeleine Chapsal, 'Entretien avec Claude Simon', L'Express, 10 novembre 1960, pp.30-1.

These postures are a parallel for the imagined scene of copulation which is the root cause of the narrator's anguish:

comme s'il planait gigantesque le buste horizontal
les jambes à demi repliées et légèrement écartées
ses couilles pendantes son membre raidi tendu pres-
que plaqué contre son ventre les bras à demi repliés
en avant au-dessous de lui.

(119)

From sport to battle to sex, the posture is the same, and constantly brings the text back round to the central physical encounter. Posture, noise, and paroxysm: these three elements bind the images of war, of sport, and of sex firmly together in the obsessed mind:

maintenant elle ne fait plus que crier mais je
ne l'entends pas crier presque tous ont la bouche
ouverte sans doute crient-ils aussi les uns de dou-
leur les autres pour s'exciter au combat le tumulte
est à ce point où l'on n'entend plus rien.

(122)

That final paragraph of 'Bataille' brings them all into a rich and exemplary synthesis, which is repeated with other sensorial leitmotive such as 'le bruit de soie déchirée l'air froissé' (p.9), a sound which recurs constantly: 'un bruit de papier froissé' (p.17: the theme of money and the image of Caesar); 'froissait avec un bruit rêche' (p.66: the Greek landscape); 'froissement soyeux des coussins' (pp.70-1: the strip-cartoon); 'sentir l'air fouetter' (p.83: gunfire in Flanders). As Ricardou has demonstrated in a manner which renders repetition unnecessary, other phrases, words, and their variants spread out through the whole fabric of the text and create innumerable cross-references.

But two other examples show Simon's exploitation of the adaptability of words. In the strip-cartoon a boxer makes or receives a telephone call; in 'Voyage' the narrator refers to warriors in certain paintings:

(les guerriers de della Francesca s'assommant immobiles
avec des gestes lents 'téléphonés' comme on dit dans
l'argot de la boxe comme ces mauvais poids lourds
plantés ou plutôt enracinés au milieu du ring.

(163)

Slang is another productive level of language in the novel, contributing to the dynamic movement of the text. In the cartoon the speeches appear in the traditional 'bubbles', and Simon also puts these to use:

il crie VOUS N'AVEZ PAS POUSSÉ LARRY A ÇA?, la réponse qui lui parvient par le combiné dans un cartouche au contour de nouveau déchiqueté.

(69)

This then anticipates the reader's recalling an earlier piece of description of a derelict bus in Greece:

Dans un cartouche au-dessus de ce qui avait été la cabine du chauffeur on pouvait lire en lettres blanches sur fond noir PHARSALA-LARISSA.

(41-2)

The name undergoes only a slight rearrangement to become once more LARRY A ÇA, while two different kinds of cartouche are involved, further echoed in the title of an academic painting.

Another way of demonstrating the malleability of words is to distort the language taken from other sources, a procedure which Simon extends even to the quotations from Proust: 'tous laids souvenir voluptueux kil emporté de chézelle . . .', thus communicating the force of his own severity against sentiment and moralizing in literature; in the same section of the novel, 'Voyage', there is savage satire against a book being read by a woman in the same compartment:

elle avait lu environ une trentaine de pages maintenant . . . arrivée apparemment au plus épais de la forêt vierge des bambous torturée par les sangsues les moustiques et l'angoisse métaphysique du whisky débattant dans la sueur tropicale des problèmes conjugués et conjugaux du désir des difficultés du pouvoir et de la redemption par le péché ou les soins aux lépreux quelque chose d'anglo-chrétiano-saxon de moite et de...

(177)

This fierce parody of The Heart of the Matter is only the most extreme example of his scorn for all art forms which set out with such pretensions. In this section there is regular contrasting of 'pictorial' with 'expressive' art, and from the narrator's own descriptions of certain of the

paintings, it becomes abundantly clear which of them he prefers:

fracas tumulte confus d'armes et de cris mêlés indistincts continu s'élevant de cette mêlée écaillée qui semble couler se bousculer à l'étroit entre les rochers les pentes des montagnes de Bruegel alors que chez della Francesca il semble qu'on puisse entendre nettement détachés dans le silence les chocs les tintements clairs des glaives des boucliers dans le tourbillon des batailles de Poussin on dirait que c'est l'air lui-même qui . . .

(171-2)

The last-named is a recurrent point of reference throughout Simon's career, and in La Bataille de Pharsale the novelist himself has reached the climactic point of his own efforts to capture in the medium of prose fiction that 'perpétuation du tumulte' which he finds exemplary in these paintings:

into space au-dedans ou à l'intérieur de Par exemple l'extraordinaire Orion aveugle marchant vers la lumière du soleil levant s'enfonçant le spectateur s'enfonçant en même temps . . . dans cette grisaille qui précède le lever du jour dans ce moment où la couche des ténèbres s'amincit achève peu à peu de se diluer transparentes s'égouttant lentement comme si on pouvait les entendre se retirer.

(162-3)

Admiration for the vital sense of life that comes from such a painting can easily be discerned in such descriptions, and Simon has always expressed his desire to arrive at a truly sensorial form of writing. The 'Voyage' section of this novel gives a clear indication of his conception of the novel as a purely pictorial form, which will be confirmed in his subsequent work.

Finally the pigeon returns to provide the closing image of the novel:

S'élevant à peu près verticalement à partir du fond invisible de la rue un pigeon passe devant le soleil, dans cette phase du vol où les ailes sont déployées. O. sent l'ombre du pigeon passer rapidement sur son visage, comme un frottement rapide. Il reste un moment dans la même position. Après quelques minutes il abaisse la tête. Maintenant seul le coin supérieur gauche de la feuille est dans l'ombre. O. écrit: Jaune et puis noir temps d'un battement de paupières et puis jaune de nouveau.

(271)

It seems that Simon is deliberately creating confusion, by making the reader wonder whether the novel has just ended or in fact begun, which is also the point of his describing the objects on the table — ashtray, coin, box of matches, dictionary, packet of cigarettes — which seem to contain within them the germ of all that has gone before. But the sun has moved and time has passed, and in that time a novel has come into the light as well. As in the case of Histoire, the novel demonstrates the astonishing multiplicity of the perceptions, memories, and imagined moments which go to make up the fabric of consciousness during any given period, and which are open to constant renewal. Moreover, he is also creating the same similarity between 'fiction' and 'reality' as does Robbe-Grillet in Dans le Labyrinthe, where descriptions are given of ceaselessly re-animated scenes from a painting taken as the original point of departure. It is interesting to bear Robbe-Grillet's own warning in mind:

Il s'agit pourtant ici d'une réalité strictement matérielle, c'est-à-dire qu'elle ne prétend à aucune valeur allégorique. Le lecteur est donc invité à n'y voir que les choses, gestes, paroles, événements, qui lui sont rapportés, sans chercher à leur donner ni plus ni moins de signification que dans sa propre vie, ou sa propre mort.³⁰

Less coy, perhaps, than Robbe-Grillet, Simon is also more intensely concerned with the sensorial and pictorial potential of words, and with their endless patterns. If he is at pains to create his own suspended animation, he is no less keenly aware of the need for constant rearrangement of those patterns: 'Il n'y a pas de fin'. Here Simon is in agreement with Eliot:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. . . .
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. . . .

³⁰ Dans le Labyrinthe (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1959), p.7.

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.³¹

The end for the writer is merely a temporary suspension, before the task begins all over again. The paradox and the originality of La Bataille de Pharsale is that it takes the most fleeting impression and elaborates it into art by putting into words the mental universe which that impression opened up. This novel, difficult and essentially simple at one and the same time, 'clair pour qui ne cherche pas à l'approfondir' (p.91), is a remarkable example of the purely synthetic power of language, a comment upon the way in which an artist works, and, in the last analysis, a monument lifted from the chaos of experience and transposed into the dynamic stasis of artistic form.

³¹ 'Little Gidding', vv.214-6, 224-5, 239-42.

Chapter VIII: A Constellation of Words:

Orion Aveugle and Les Corps
Conducteurs 1970-1971

La forme de l'oeuvre littéraire
doit être sentie comme une forme
dynamique.

J. Tynianov

The third part of La Bataille de Pharsale contrasts in dramatic fashion with Simon's previous novels; the style and the syntax tend toward a much more rigorous order than was ever evident on the surface of his work since 1957. In Orion Aveugle, and in the longer text which stems directly from it, this new directness is continued and developed. It finds its source in Simon's increasing conviction of the need to divorce the time-scheme of his novel from the external time-scheme of the normal world; it is also the result of the particular format and conception of Orion Aveugle, a creative text taking a number of artistic representations as its point of departure. Thirdly, this newly confirmed attitude to writing can be traced to a recent experience in Simon's private life:

C'est en écrivant cette dernière partie de La Bataille de Pharsale que j'ai eu l'idée de la forme des Corps conducteurs, parce qu'un livre c'est beaucoup aussi l'idée d'une forme. Et La Bataille de Pharsale a été un livre important pour moi, parce qu'il a constitué un tournant, nettement. Et je suis reparti pour Orion Aveugle et pour Les Corps conducteurs sur cette idée de forme, c'est-à-dire le présent de l'indicatif, des phrases très courtes, quelque chose de très abrupt. Cette idée de forme n'était pas gratuite d'ailleurs: c'est la vision, une certaine vision de l'Amérique et de New York qui me l'a suggérée: cette espèce d'ensemble très vertical, de plans, d'angles, de choses très dures, nettes, sans fioritures... .¹

In architectural terms, Simon is no longer a baroque novelist, but a writer whose text is influenced by the cut-and-dried lines of an aggressively modern style. Although there is this general conception of form, Simon's development is such

¹ Quoted in Gerhard Dörr, 'Biographie oder Bildersprache? Claude Simon über sein neuestes Werk Les Corps Conducteurs', Die neueren Sprachen, Heft 5 (Mai 1972), pp.294-6.

that language itself is the single most important element in the elaboration of his text.

Far from being pessimistic about the limitations of language, Simon is profoundly excited by the possibilities of words, and by the changing patterns they produce even as the creative act is taking place. Orion Aveugle is the eighth volume in a series called 'Les Sentiers de la Création', in which a number of writers and critics are invited to formulate their own theories about their craft, and Simon's short but fascinating Préface is his only concession to Gaëtan Picon's request for an explanatory essay of that nature. The peculiar interest of this book is that it presents, side by side, the theory and the practice of one of the foremost writers of the post-war period. Any discussion of Orion Aveugle will therefore have to pay close attention both to the text and to its preface, as well as to the significant essay 'La fiction mot à mot', which was Simon's contribution to a colloquium on the nouveau roman held at Cerisy in 1971. In this preface, then, Simon dwells at considerable length upon the rich potential of language:

Si la description est impuissante à reproduire les choses et dit toujours d'autres objets que les objets que nous percevons autour de nous, les mots possèdent par contre ce prodigieux pouvoir de rapprocher et de confronter ce qui, sans eux, resterait épars.

Parce que ce qui est souvent sans rapports immédiats dans le temps des horloges ou l'espace mesurable peut se trouver rassemblé et ordonné au sein du langage dans une étroite contiguïté . . . L'un après l'autre les mots éclatent comme autant de chandelles romaines, déployant leurs gerbes dans toutes les directions. Ils sont autant de carrefours où plusieurs routes s'entrecroisent. Et si, plutôt que de vouloir contenir, domestiquer chacune de ces explosions, ou traverser rapidement ces carrefours en ayant déjà décidé du chemin à suivre, on s'arrête et on examine ce qui apparaît à leur lueur ou dans les perspectives ouvertes, des ensembles insoupçonnés de résonances et d'échos se révèlent.

(9-11)

Simon's appreciation of the power of words clearly dictates his theory of the novel. Each book is an adventure, a voyage of discovery whose course and eventual end reveal

themselves only in the actual writing: the novel grows out of itself, as words call forth other words.

Whereas in previous novels Simon was trying to make his words capture remembered or imagined scenes and events on the written page, there is now a much firmer emphasis on a series of ready-made images being described. This is progression rather than change, since the events in the pages of such novels as Le Palace and Histoire were reproduced very much in terms of fixed images being re-animated by the remembering imagination. The illustrations of Orion Aveugle are transposed into the language of the text, while further creative impetus is provided by the words themselves and the connexions they provide. Simon's main guiding-line is a technique of controlled sensorial association combined with this spontaneous procreation of language. His theory of writing is directly allied to his conception of time; language redeems events from time by bringing images together in the body of language that a novel represents.

'One's work should have composition, because composition alone is positive beauty', said Henry James;² in producing what can be called 'a constellation of words',³ Simon is not indulging in gratuitous verbal pyrotechnics, but attempting to create a disciplined and pictorial work of art. In 'La fiction mot à mot', he refers directly to this question of coherence:

Certaines qualités communes regroupent ou si l'on préfère cristallisent dans un ensemble des éléments

² The Art of the Novel (London, 1947), p.319

³ The term is not a new one, of course; it appears in Mallarmé's 'Coup de Dés' in the phrase, 'Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu excepté peut-être une constellation'. Ludovic Janvier makes passing reference to Simon's later work as a 'constellation anonyme de figures', Entretiens, No.31 (1972), p.17. See also Sylvère Lotringer, 'Une révolution romanesque', in Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui, t.I, pp.327-48 (p.348).

apparemment aussi disparates que ceux dont je parlais tout à l'heure (le fleuve tropical, l'enfant sur le trottoir, la vieille dame dans le hall de l'hôtel), exactement comme certaines qualités communes (harmoniques ou complémentaires, rythme, arabesque) rassemblent dans un tableau, permettent d'y cohabiter en constituant un ensemble pictural cohérent, les objets ou les personnages qui y sont représentés, même si, dans la 'logique' du 'réel' ils paraissent absolument incroyables, comme par exemple les monstres de Jérôme Bosch, les deux yeux dans un même profil de Picasso ou une Pêche à la baleine de Paul Klee, car, là aussi, ce n'est pas la vraisemblance imitative qui importe mais une autre espèce de vraisemblance et de crédibilité, autrement dit, la crédibilité picturale.

Faute de ces liens, ou articulations, ou encore passages qualitatifs, il n'y a pas tableau et il n'y a pas de véritable discours littéraire, c'est-à-dire un système structuré, mais seulement, alors, en effet, simple succession, sinon même cacophonie.

(80-1)

Jean Ricardou's cryptic observation, 'Si tout est permis, rien n'est possible',⁴ is particularly relevant to Simon's most recent writings; moreover, in dissociating himself from the écriture automatique of the Surrealists, Simon, not for the first time, recalls the views expressed by the Russian Formalists:

Le fait artistique n'existe pas hors de la sensation de soumission, de déformation de tous les facteurs par le facteur constructif. . . Mais, si la sensation d'interaction des facteurs disparaît . . . le fait artistique s'efface; l'art devient automatisme.⁵

Faithful to the painterly inclinations of his youth, Simon has been concerned all along to release the novel from the restrictions of linearity imposed by its essential nature as a time-form, and to reconcile his writing with the spatial principles of painting or collage by disposing related elements as though on a plane surface, with a practically inexhaustible

⁴ Pour une théorie du nouveau roman, p.118.

⁵ J. Tynianov, 'La notion de construction', Théorie de la littérature, pp.114-19 (p.118).

number of cross-references liberating the text and imparting to it that dynamism advocated by Tynianov.

Before examining in detail the text of Orion Aveugle, it is interesting to remember that this is not the first Simon work directly inspired by a series of artistic representations, as in 1966 he wrote a fictional text, Femmes, based on twenty-three paintings of Mirò, and published in a de luxe edition by Maeght. Reiterating his reluctance to attempt a critical essay on Mirò's art, Simon made a remark which is very relevant to the present subject:

On retrouve dans la peinture de Mirò une quantité de formes de mon pays que je connais bien car je suis aussi catalan par ma mère: les plages, les objets (les cailloux, les bois flottés, les étoiles de mer) qu'on trouve sur les plages. J'ai parlé de tout ça. Et finalement les images, les mots, amenant comme toujours d'autres images, cela fait un texte.⁶

Several years before the publication of Orion Aveugle, then, Simon was already intensely concerned with the plasticity and ductility of words, and their role as generative agents: visible in Histoire and more so in La Bataille de Pharsale, the second section of which signposts the novelist's technique, this concern reaches its ultimate expression in Orion Aveugle and by extension in Les Corps Conducteurs.

Although the text of Femmes contains a slender narrative thread following the progress of one group of women along the shore, the writing displays that quality of continuous expansion which is evident in Orion Aveugle. At one point Simon includes in Femmes an image and a theme which recur in the subsequent texts:

chaque soir ahanant dans la nuit marron la mer
marron ahanant les étoiles qui vont et viennent sous
eux arc-boutés poussant du dos les éclats du fanal
sur leurs épaules luisantes de sueur dans la nuit
épaisse à chaque poussée on peut entendre craquer
les membrures l'énorme barque se profilant mon-
trueuse noire au-devant des constellations le Bouvier

⁶ Quoted in Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Claude Simon', p.190.

les Chiens de Chasse, l'Hydre Femelle leurs jambes pataugeant dans les étoiles entrechoquées la masse obscure gémissant oscillant mais toujours désespérément inerte chaque soir les vagues marron sortant l'une après l'autre du fond de la nuit se brisant avançant lentement en lignes parallèles déferlant déroulant le tapis de reflets la Tête du Serpent l'Aigle le Cocher s'allumant et s'éteignant enfin il bougea glissa ils crièrent plus fort entonnant un chant de triomphe mais presque aussitôt il s'immobilisa le chant cessa.⁷

The constellation as an erotic theme, and as a symbol of regular renewal and dissolution, reappears in Orion Aveugle, where the image of the giant figures is only one variation on the term géant, and the notion of a constellation of words, a dynamic group of words fading and reappearing throughout the text and subject to constant reworking, is the single most important feature of the writing. In order to come to grips with Simon's approach and achievement as a manipulator of words, it will be necessary to examine closely the frequency with which certain terms occur, the dominant sensorial impressions which the language of the novel conveys, and the underlying themes which emerge, lending the text its fundamental meaning as a work of art.

Orion Aveugle opens with a description of the blind giant as he appears in Poussin's painting, Paysage avec Orion Aveugle (1658), which had also been included in the 'Voyage' section of La Bataille de Pharsale:

Un de ses bras étendu en avant tâtonnant dans le vide, Orion, le géant aveugle, avance sur un chemin en direction du soleil levant, guidé dans sa marche par la voix et les indications d'un petit personnage juché sur ses épaules musculeuses.

(19)

Although the essential meaning of this image lies in its value as a metaphor for the novelist setting out to work his way through the uncharted landscape of language, it is

⁷ Femmes (Paris, 1966), pp.11-12. This text is also reprinted in Entretiens, No.31 (1972), pp.169-78.

only the first in a number of references to the image and theme of 'groping' in the text. The sick man whose journey from a surgery back to the sanctuary of his hotel provides the slight narrative basis of Orion Aveugle sees various people on the way, including a Negro unloading a lorry:

Tandis qu'il attend que quelqu'un à l'intérieur du camion lui passe une autre caisse, le blanc de ses yeux apparaît, la pupille en coin, dirigée une nouvelle fois vers la bouche d'eau. Son visage marron et luisant est orné d'une courte moustache. La mâchoire inférieure est démesurée et ses joues gonflées comme s'il avait la bouche pleine. Puis le blanc des yeux disparaît. Cette fois, quand il repasse, une nouvelle caisse serrée contre sa poitrine, ses paupières sont baissées, toute son attention semblant être concentrée à ses pieds pour ne pas trébucher sur le seuil du magasin où il s'engouffre sans marquer de temps d'arrêt.

(28)

There is a twofold resemblance between this personage, seen by the fictive character resting on the hydrant, and the blind giant: because of a trick of perspective, the Negro looks enormous to the seated man; because he cannot see where he is going, the Negro is thus a blind man groping toward the entrance to the building.

Two pages further on, there is a description of a scene reproduced on a stamp:

Un personnage au crâne chauve, à la longue barbe, le buste revêtu d'une cuirasse qui fait place, à partir de la taille, à une courte jupe, se tient debout sur une plage. Il a retiré son casque et le tient au creux de son bras replié dont l'index tendu est pointé en direction d'un crucifix que son autre main élève vers le ciel vert.

(30)

Again this image resembles the figure of Orion: firstly in the purely visual similarity of gesture, because of the outstretched hand, and secondly on the figurative level. The blind giant is reaching toward sunlight; the figure here is pointing to the symbol of religious or divine light, the cross, and inciting the natives at his feet to 'see the light' for themselves — which in turn is one variant on the theme of exploitation subtending the text as a whole.

The theme of 'groping' recurs in the context of a medical

examination undergone by the sick man:

A force de tâtonner, les doigts du docteur ont trouvé un point précis où une très légère pression provoque une douleur aiguë.

(76-7)

In a figurative sense, the doctor is also groping toward some illumination of his patient's condition. But there seems to be only a visual correlation between this and the next example:

Conservant difficilement son équilibre sur ses hauts talons et pliant lentement ses jambes arquées, la vieille dame se courbe progressivement, tâtonne de la main sur le tapis, atteint l'extrémité inférieure de la canne qu'elle attire à elle jusqu'à ce qu'elle puisse en saisir de nouveau la poignée.

(112)

The resemblance is in the relative blindness of the old lady, unable to see the object she seeks; in this way she recalls the other figures reaching toward some dimly apprehended goal, whether it be a material object or a figurative illumination.

Not surprisingly, the image is also brought into the sexual scene described in Orion Aveugle, when a sleeping woman is touched by her partner:

Comme animée d'une vie autonome la main velue posée un peu au-dessous des seins se détache de la poitrine, glisse lentement sur la paroi de plexiglas au-dessus des organes aux couleurs violentes ou tendres, descend lentement et, tâtonnant en aveugle, vient à la fin se fixer sur le pubis, l'enfermant, le majeur légèrement engagé dans la fente.

(116)

As with statues and paintings in earlier novels, so in Orion Aveugle the static figures in artistic representations or in models and diagrams are endowed with their own life. It is impossible not to place this description side by side with another reference to Poussin's painting:

Il est représenté de trois quarts et de dos, sur la droite du tableau et dans l'attitude de la marche, la jambe gauche tendue en arrière, la jambe droite à demi ployée, l'avant-bras gauche horizontal projetant en avant de lui, comme un aveugle qui tâtonne, l'énorme main ouverte cachant presque toute entière une légère éminence dans le lointain.

(99)

Since one of the illustrations in Orion Aveugle is Brassai's Ciel Postiche (facing p.100), these two descriptions come

very close together as explorations of geography: the human anatomy too is to be understood as a kind of landscape being explored by a giant hand.

At the end of Orion Aveugle this theme is resolved when the sick man moving slowly through a crowded city is brought into close association with the blind giant Orion. The invalid's progress toward his hotel is reflected in the 'difficile progression' (p.53) of the old woman across the hotel lobby, by an aeroplane which seems 'suspendu sans avancer' (p.79), and finally in the eternalized immobility of the figure represented in Poussin's canvas: on the literal and figurative levels, the notions of 'blindness' and 'failure to advance' encompass each of these apparently unconnected figures, allowing fluid transitions from one to the other.

Two other themes underlying both Orion Aveugle and Les Corps Conducteurs are those of defeat and exploitation. As far as the second is concerned, there is a reminder of certain passages in Le Palace, where the student observed statues of Spain's conquering heroes, and considered history as the rapacious enforcement of 'civilization' by European explorers upon the unenlightened of the world. In Orion Aveugle the theme of exploitation emerges from the description of South American senators:

avec leurs têtes de négriers puritains, de banquiers, d'aventuriers et de politiciens milliardaires légiférant et codifiant à leur usage personnel les ventes de mines de cuivre, de tribus d'Indiens, de champs pétrolifères, de plantations de cannes à sucre et de parcelles de forêts vierges aussi grandes que des royaumes.

(69)

It allows the immediate transition to a description of the stamp already mentioned, and an imaginative animation of the scene represented:

La main du vieillard protégée par un gantelet de fer aux phalanges articulées s'élève dans un geste apaisant. Dans l'autre main il tient la hampe d'une oriflamme dont l'extrémité bifide ondule mollement dans le vent. Au gré de celui-ci apparaissent et disparaissent les mots ou des portions de mots formant la phrase O CRUX AVE SPES UNICA brodée en fils d'or au-dessous d'une croix entourée de rayons.

(70)

This suggests that history is to be seen as the catalogue of one race's subjugation by another. Although this is reinforced by the speech made by one of the senators (pp.106-8), the theme is slightly modified in Les Corps Conducteurs.

In the longer text there occurs a small passage taking the emphasis of this theme away from the element of pure exploitation and closer to that of dispersal:

Les cheveux rejetés et plaqués en arrière, le nez droit, le menton légèrement empâté, il ressemble à l'un de ces bustes de sénateurs romains dont il paraît, à travers les proconsuls d'Ibérie et les générations de gouverneurs espagnols, avoir hérité la solennelle et pesante majesté. Il parle lentement d'une voix grave et basse, un castillan rocailleux.
(129)

Thanks to the effects of history, the transition from one geographical point to another is less of an upheaval than might be expected: hereditary features bring two continents together, and this aspect of the theme seems just as important in the additional material which Simon has added to Orion Aveugle. Both rapacity and hereditary resemblances — a variation on the éternel retour — are emphasized in the longer text.

A further development from Orion Aveugle to Les Corps Conducteurs is that the second text underlines the theme of defeat, although in each case Simon refers clearly to the progress of time, in familiar fashion, as irrevocable decay. As has already been seen, the sick man at the centre of the two texts feels that it takes an eternity to arrive in the relative security of his hotel, after a gruelling journey through the city. In Les Corps Conducteurs this aspect is considerably clearer than in the shorter text. As he progresses from stage to stage toward the hotel, the sick man is threatened by an advancing 'avalanche' which must be taken as a metaphor for the menace of time. This is especially noticeable when he pauses for a rest in a bar:

Poursuivant sa lente progression la masse neigeuse et grisâtre avance irrésistiblement. Maintenant elle obstrue complètement la porte, comme une muraille molle, comme la poussée de quelque excrément décoloré expulsé

par quelque monstre, quelque pachyderme invisible. Des plaques, des pans entiers, comme des gravats, se détachent parfois de son front, basculent, tombent sur le tapis aux couleurs suaves, peu à peu recouvertes par d'autres qui s'amoncellent en déblais au pied de l'implacable falaise en marche. Dans son dos et le long de ses côtes la sueur est maintenant glacée, et ses épaules sont secouées d'un frisson.

(90)

Like Greek friezes and statues, this 'wall' is both the symbol and the victim of time. When the central character is seen trying to telephone the woman with whom he has spent one night, the theme of defeat becomes even stronger, confirming that this 'human interest' makes Les Corps Conducteurs more recognizably a novel than the shorter text:

Dans l'écouteur il peut de nouveau entendre, dans les intervalles entre les sonneries, le même bruit monumental et grisâtre de cette chose en train de s'écouler, le même majestueux chuintement, ce silencieux fracas de lente érosion, de lente dégradation.

(93)

The feeling of personal disaster, both on the physical and emotional levels, is strengthened when, at the same time as listening to the woman, he reads advertising slogans outside the telephone booth:

Cette fois c'est une femme qui répond. La voix est calme, posée. Il dit très vite Allô. Puis, tout de suite, C'est moi. Elle dit Oui. Il dit de nouveau C'est moi, je... je... Puis il attend, l'entendant respirer, entendant sa propre respiration, les battements de son sang dans ses oreilles. IT IS NEVER TOO LATE.

(93)

Encore une fois il répète le nom de la station. Il dit Je veux te voir. Elle dit Je ne peux pas. Il dit Quand? Derrière les barreaux de sa grille de caissier l'homme au menton en galoche guette de son regard en coin. Elle dit C'est impossible. IT'S NEVER TOO LATE. La partie supérieure de la masse grisâtre qui progresse dans le salon affleure maintenant le cadre du bouquet d'anémones.

(95)

Different moments of the central character's experience are brought together in the one thematic element of passing time which signifies defeat. The irony for him is that, all around him, he sees evidence of other people's good fortune:

HONEY WE'RE RICH! THAT'S WHAT MRS JAMES JACKSON SAID WHEN SHE WON 250 000 IN THE STATE LOTERY. Il dit Allô? Tu es là? Allô... Elle dit Oui. Il dit Ecoute... Puis, encore une fois, sa voix meurt, s'affaisse, et de nouveau ils restent là sans parler, s'écoutant tous les deux respirer, et rien d'autre, sauf le chuintement de cette chose qui continue à s'écouler inexorablement, monotone, comme les minces cascades qui s'échappent entre les portes d'une écluse, tandis que, bouchant d'un doigt l'oreille opposée à l'écouteur, il voit de nouveau passer rapidement les silhouettes obscures devant le visage de Gauguin haché par les barreaux de cuivre, la croix qui donne la Vie éternelle, la dame d'âge mûr en tablier de ménagère qui presse son visage contre la poitrine de son mari dont le profil osseux d'Irlandais, ridé et souriant, se penche au-dessus d'elle. SOMEBODY IS ALWAYS WINNING. IT MIGHT AS WELL BE YOU!

(98-9)

So strong is this feeling of defeat that eventually the very sound of the telephone comes to torment him:

Dans l'écouteur du téléphone le bruit confus des applaudissements crépite de nouveau, étale pour ainsi dire, comme la moqueuse et paradoxale concrétisation du silence lui-même, l'ironique et bruyante approbation de milliers d'auditeurs invisibles battant des mains longtemps après que la voix de la femme s'est tue.

(104)

To add to his physical ill-being, the 'conducting body' of the telephone brings the central character defeat in his private emotional life. At a considerably later point in the text, there is a description of a scene which, if the logic of a traditional narrative were being observed, would have preceded the despairing telephone call, since it helps to explain the situation between the man and woman:

La femme est toujours debout à la même place. Ils se regardent dans les yeux. Il répète Mais jamais? Jamais?... Elle fait de nouveau pivoter légèrement sa tête de gauche à droite, aller et retour, deux fois. Puis ses lèvres remuent. Elle dit Nous l'avons toujours su. Il dit Non. Elle dit Si. Nous le savions depuis le commencement. Toute cette nuit nous l'avons su.

(196)

It would seem that this important theme of defeat in Les Corps Conducteurs is a development from one of the illustrations described and enlarged upon in Orion Aveugle. Among the most striking of these illustrations is in fact Picasso's

eau-forte No.308 (Orion Aveugle, pp.96-7), in which an old king contemplates a scene of sexual enjoyment. Serving only as the general point of departure for erotic descriptions in Orion Aveugle, this etching is included in the longer text in a manner which rounds out the theme of defeat:

Rien dans le dessin (c'est-à-dire aucun décor: rebord du lit, angle d'un mur, plafond) n'indique de façon concrète qu'il s'agisse d'une scène réaliste (comme par exemple l'illustration d'un épisode biblique, le bain de Bethsabée ou Suzanne surprise par les vieillards), non plus d'ailleurs que la représentation d'un simple fantasme. Toutefois, le fait que le vieux monarque figuré au premier plan et dont le profil empiète sur l'un des bras de la jeune femme soit dessiné à une échelle plus petite que le couple situé à l'arrière-plan donne à penser que, plutôt qu'un tissu de velours ou de soie, les lignes souples qu'il écarte pour épier l'étreinte des jeunes amants figurent l'écran même du temps.

(135-6)

All this, along with the fact that, in Les Corps Conducteurs, the central character seems finally to succumb — whether in death or the unconsciousness of exhaustion — makes the longer text more of a novel than a descriptive exercise, since it follows the progress and eventual failure of a slight but recognizable character; the additional pages are partly the result of this desire to provide a stronger narrative line, which has also thrown up a number of attendant images and variations after the fashion of the original text itself. The longer work is, as Simon has recognized, the logical extension of his method of composition:

Et voici que ce sentier ouvert par Orion Aveugle me semble maintenant devoir se continuer quelque part. Parce qu'il est bien différent du chemin que suit habituellement le romancier et qui, partant d'un 'commencement' aboutit à une 'fin'. Le mien, il tourne et retourne sur lui-même, comme peut le faire un voyageur égaré dans une forêt, revenant sur ses pas, repartant, trompé (ou guidé?) par la ressemblance de certains lieux pourtant différents et qu'il croit reconnaître, ou, au contraire, les différents aspects du même lieu, son trajet se recoupant fréquemment, repassant par des places déjà traversées . . . et il peut même arriver qu'à la 'fin' on se retrouve au même endroit qu'au 'commencement'.

(Orion Aveugle, pp.13-14)

The ultimate appearance of the theme of defeat concerns the figure of Orion himself, and is inextricably linked with the conception of the novel as a 'timeless' artistic synthesis. Since Les Corps Conducteurs develops and enlarges the basic theme of Orion Aveugle, as has been discussed, it will now be more straightforward to study the mechanisms of the shorter text, working toward the final appearance of the themes of time and defeat, while making occasional references to the longer novel: in Orion Aveugle Simon states and illustrates his own idea of the artist as Orion, which he has so far pursued in his subsequent writing.

The theme and image of tâtonnement are not the only links between the Poussin canvas and other elements in the text of Orion Aveugle. Having exploited a stanza from 'Le Cimetière marin' not only as epigraph but also as source of fiction in La Bataille de Pharsale, Simon now employs the twenty images included as illustrations in Orion Aveugle as points of departure for detailed and imaginative description and with even greater rigour. His descriptive text contains a number of 'echoes', not only of the Paysage avec Orion Aveugle which is its main focus of attention, but also of the others, as with Picasso in Les Corps Conducteurs. At one point, for example, the sick man sees a young mother in the street with her child:

C'est une jeune femme à la chevelure blonde tirée en chignon, au corsage noué sous la poitrine, les hanches, les fesses et les cuisses prises dans un bermuda au dessin fleuri dans les tons vert pomme et jaune citron. Elle porte une sacoche de cuir en bandoulière.

(46)

Simon's original if commercially unviable title for Les Corps Conducteurs was Propriétés de quelques figures, géométriques ou non; one of the properties of the giant in the painting is that he carries a quiver of arrows on his left hip, slung over his right shoulder: the description of the young woman is clearly meant as a visual echo, and it becomes evident that not a single detail of description in the text is superfluous.

There are also several reminders of the rising sun toward which the giant is walking. In the scene depicting the old explorer, for example:

La croix que la main gantée d'acier du vieux guerrier montre aux sauvages est entourée de rayons divergents, comme un soleil, dans le ciel couleur d'absinthe.

(32)

Again, in describing the decor of the South American senate house:

Leurs longs tubes aux pavillons évasés s'écartent en rayons divergents, comme ceux d'un soleil ou les branches d'un éventail.

(62)

When the traveller looks out from his plane, it is almost as if the painting itself were being described:

Du côté de l'ouest on peut voir dans les hublots le ciel indécis où scintillent encore les dernières étoiles. Par une brèche dans le chaos des nuages, à l'Orient, jaillit tout à coup le premier rayon, comme une lame de bronze, l'ensemble restant encore un moment dans une tonalité grise frottée de roses, puis, à partir du trou par où se précipitent maintenant, multipliés, les rayons divergents, se dorant violemment, comme un retable.

(102)

The deliberate choice of Orient for est sets up another echo of the title of the painting, while the image of bars of light pouring from a central opening is one of the recurrent linking elements in the text.

But perhaps the most astonishing reprise of the painting is to be found in Les Corps Conducteurs, when the sick man gropes his way into a bar, trying to adapt to the new and darker surroundings:

Franchi le seuil, il est brutalement surpris par la fraîcheur, le silence et la pénombre épaisse dans laquelle il avance en hésitant, comme s'il pénétrait dans une de ces vieilles photographies tirées sur un papier foncé et rougeâtre supprimant les demi-teintes, ses yeux éblouis par l'aveuglante lumière du dehors ne distinguant d'abord que les petites lampes dont l'éclat assourdi se reflète sur les flancs des bouteilles, les hampes en métal chromé des robinets de bière, le bois ciré des meubles et les têtes dorées des clous qui bordent les sièges des tabourets. Derrière le comptoir une tache claire, à peu près carrée,

semble flotter comme un ectoplasme, dessinant le buste d'un homme corpulent en manches de chemise, le col fermé par une cravate aux couleurs criardes plaquée sur la poitrine par une barrette. Se guidant sur la tache et tâtonnant de la main dans les reflets, il saisit le bord d'un tabouret qu'il tire en arrière et sur lequel il se hisse.

(86-7)

This is an obvious transposition of the basic elements in the painting to a completely different area of description; each of the elements, the movement into a photographic context, the blindness, the blur of light replacing the rising sun, the verb tâtonner itself, the dark background relieved by patches of reflected light, is an echo of the massive canvas which is one of the basic sources of this descriptive writing.

Other such references to the Orion painting abound in the text of Orion Aveugle. As suggested, the Negro carrying boxes is reminiscent of the giant figure; at another point, two Negresses provide a further 'echo':

L'une des deux géantes noires porte un pantalon fait de la même soie noire et brillante que les corsages, l'autre un pantalon rose. Sur un des paquets qu'elles portent est dessiné un oeil énorme, d'un demi-mètre de long environ, agrandissement photographique d'une gravure en taille douce, avec le réseau des courbes entrecroisées des traits au burin suggérant le relief de la paupière bombée. Se tenant très droites, marchant à grandes enjambées, elles dépassent le lapin, puis le groupe formé par la mère et l'enfant. Assis sur la prise d'incendie, l'homme malade voit leurs visages sauvages et lisses passer très haut au-dessus de lui, ténébreux, surpassant les sommets estompés des gratte-ciel.

(45-6)

By another trick of perspective, the two become giantesses, whose strides seem to match those of Orion; the detail on the packet is not gratuitous either, since it shows a 'blind' eye, and thus a further reminder of the canvas, as well as of the anatomical illustrations which also decorate the book.

Thanks to Simon's studied exploitation of words, even skyscrapers (surely the city is New York?) can refer back to the painting of a giant:

A contre-jour les hautes silhouettes des gratte-ciel sont toutes d'une teinte uniforme, brun foncé, à peine

nuancée. Dans l'épaisse brume blanchâtre où disparaissent leurs pieds on ne distingue que quelques reflets fugitifs s'allumant et s'éteignant presque aussitôt.

(47)

These too are giants of a kind, and by an inversion of the point of view, it is their feet and not their heads which disappear into a cloud of mist or smoke. This merely adds one more to the large number of references to Poussin's canvas incorporated into the fictional settings described in Orion Aveugle. That these echoes then set up resonances of their own, can be seen when, for example, an account of the South American jungle is followed by the description of the giant Negresses. The linking element is the term Amazone, both the name of a river and of gigantic women, and the subject of the photograph reproduced in Orion Aveugle (pp.38-9).

All the other illustrations of the book find themselves drawn into the text in a system of constant cross-references. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether the image being described is a remembered or imagined fragment of the central character's experience, an allusion to one of the illustrations, or again a new reference to a work of art or a source not included in the book. Mention has already been made of a stamp which seems to complement the lithograph Christophe Colombe bâtit une forteresse (pp.72-3), which in turn is like the scene described as Foundation of Ciudad Nueva, at first described in terms of movement and only afterwards revealed as a fixed image, like the stamp. This is one aspect of Simon's intention and success in bringing all the elements in his text on to the same plane: he either animates such fixed images as this, or describes scenes from memory or imagination in terms of stasis, while the uninterrupted Present tense of the text neutralizes them all, presenting them as an undifferentiated sequence of images.

Anatomical plates, for example, are introduced and then put into motion:

Les entrailles sont recouvertes d'une membrane diaphane et nacrée. Repliées sur elles-mêmes en méandres compliqués, comme une soie bouillonnée, elles bougent aussi,

mais d'une façon lente, par d'imperceptibles déformations. Au-delà des limites des couvercles de plexiglas, les peaux plus ou moins hâlées recouvrent les chairs.

(114)

On other occasions a seemingly imaginary scene leads into a direct quotation from an encyclopaedia:

Par endroits on aperçoit un arbre aux racines sans doute pourries, abattu par quelque ouragan, à demi immergé, soutenu hors de l'eau par les branches qui plongent dans le marécage. Le serpent est lové sur un tronc où ne subsistent plus que quelques plaques d'écorce et dont l'aubier mis à nu apparaît, d'un blanc jaunâtre, comme un os. L'animal ressemble à un gros tuyau qui s'infléchit sous son poids, pend en courbes molles à partir des points où il est accroché. Le corps est décoré de losanges bruns, d'une géométrie parfaite, avec un point clair au centre. Dessinés par les écailles, les côtés des losanges ainsi que les contours du point central sont découpés en dents de scie, comme ces motifs de broderie qui ornent les rideaux de filet. Sous l'image est écrit le mot serpent, en caractères gras, et au-dessous, en lettres bâton plus minces, boa constricteur.

(37)

Alternatively, a description of the heavenly bodies inspired by the term Orion, also the name of a constellation, merges into a description of an antique astrological chart, which is also spoken of in terms of actual animation:

Les bêtes fantastiques ou les corps musculeux semblent projetés, en état d'apesanteur et gigantesques, sur les parois concaves d'une coupole décorée par quelque peintre, lui-même titanesque, enchaîné par un potentat fou à son échafaudage sous le plafond de quelque Sixtine ou de quelque Panthéon. Les années, l'oxydation, ou les fumées des cierges ont grisé les couleurs, les corps dont les flancs se soulèvent et s'abaissent au rythme de leurs respirations tandis qu'ils sont entraînés par un lent mouvement rotatif, successivement debout, couchés, la tête en bas.

(94-5)

There is incessant movement from one to the other, animate and inanimate alike being transcribed straightforwardly, so that a transition has frequently been made before the reader has quite appreciated the fact. As Simon suggests in his preface, words and images are indissociable, the one leading to or from the others in an unending process.

A reviewer of these two books referred to this ease of transfer from text to image:

Cette fusion et parfaite symbiose de l'image et du texte représente à nos yeux la première originalité d'Orion Aveugle. Sa plus grande originalité, cependant, provient de l'impression dominante que Simon n'agrémenté pas son texte d'illustrations comme cela est communément pratiqué dans une édition d'art ou encore par désir de créer un effet plus dramatique au sein d'un texte, mais que les tableaux, photos, etc., pré-existent au texte, qu'ils en sont, en somme, le point de départ et la condition sine qua non. Autrement dit, au déjà traditionnel 'récit en images', Simon tente de substituer, en renversant le procédé, une forme 'images-en-récit', née de la transformation et recreation en récit verbal de quelques images plutôt disparates au départ.⁸

What Simon attempts is no less than the transposition of one medium into another whose basic principles are different. This is in effect the logical development of Simon's long-standing tendency to present scenes as static images given new life by the power of the remembering imagination, and to refer to artistic 'models' as points of comparison for the experiences transcribed in earlier novels.

As far as the other illustrations are concerned, their importance can be gauged by their interaction with the text itself. Simon is particularly fond of Rauschenberg's great collages, two of which are included in Orion Aveugle. The first, Canyon (p.59), is the obvious source of the description of rapacious birds in the text:

Son cou déplumé, d'un rose vif et couvert d'excroissances charnues, s'étire hors du duvet blanc qui entoure ses épaules comme un châle ou un col de fourrure. Ses plumes ont une consistance et des reflets bleus d'acier. Son crâne chauve, osseux et bosselé, ses pattes, sont d'un gris verdâtre, cadavérique.

(58)

After this, a second reading of an earlier description shows a surprising resemblance:

La vieille dame se lève et s'appuyant sur sa canne se dirige vers la porte. Elle est coiffée d'un volumineux

⁸ Claud DuVerlie, 'Sur deux oeuvres récentes de Claude Simon', Die neueren Sprachen, Heft 9 (September 1972), pp.543-9 (pp.545-6).

chapeau rose garni de pétales de fleurs sous lequel son visage maigre et peint ressemble à un morceau de bois desséché. Un léger manteau trois-quarts, coupé dans un tissu soyeux et rose, pend de ses épaules osseuses et de son dos voûté. Dans les bas blancs et brodés les tibias maigres aux chevilles pointues terminés par des souliers pointus dessinent un V, les talons rapprochés, les pointes des souliers divergentes, les genoux écartés, comme ceux des vieux officiers de cavalerie.

(52-3)

When the fact that she also wears a feather boa is added, it becomes clear that the old woman is a human counterpart for the bird of prey, although Simon never states the simile openly: thin, angular, with the same kind of 'plumage', and displaying the same colours. This is one example of the sheer fecundity of the images aligned in the book. Simon has made enlightening remarks on this aspect of his work:

Est-ce qu'il n'est donc pas permis de se demander non seulement si, de même qu'indépendamment des choses représentées (nature morte, paysage, nu) il existe une logique de la peinture en soi, il n'existerait pas aussi une certaine logique interne du texte, propre au texte, découlant à la fois de sa musique (rythme, assonances, cadence de la phrase) et de son matériau (vocabulaire, 'figures', tropes — car notre langage ne s'est pas formé au hasard), mais encore si cette logique, selon laquelle doivent s'articuler ou se combiner les éléments d'une fiction n'est pas, en même temps, fécondante et, par elle-même, engendrant de fiction.⁹

One of the features contributing to the internal logic of Orion Aveugle is precisely this dynamic interrelationship between the illustrations and the words they call forth.

Canyon, for example, is not only paralleled in the descriptions of a condor and an old lady, but also when the sick man looks ahead toward his hotel, along the towering streets of New York:

Il est impossible de distinguer le trafic et la foule qui s'écoulent au fond des canyons de pierre et de briques.

(45)

⁹ 'La fiction mot à mot', p.78.

Not only the images but their names can be pressed into service as elements of this exploratory text, it seems. The second Rauschenberg collage is Charlene (pp.16-17, p.49), which is the point of departure for descriptions of shop-windows seen in the same street (pp.47f.). A closer look at the illustration shows the image of an éventail (p.62); another of its component features is a piece of lace curtain, and the terms filet and dentelé and their variants punctuate the text, whether to describe the edge of a stamp (p.32), the shape of a coastline (p.116), or the undergarments of dancers seen in a photograph or reproduction in another shop-window.(p.110). In each case the dominant coloration of the collage is also diffused throughout the text of Orion Aveugle, while Canyon displays fragments of words such as SOCIAL, MANH, and LABOR, which are then adapted to the pseudo-political debate in a South American context (pp.63ff.).

Similarly, as already suggested, the Brassai illustration is the source of a number of descriptions involving real and human 'geography'. Louise Nevelson's immense Cathédrale du Ciel (p.135), which recalls the shape of an organ, gives rise to the following comparison:

Les feuilles clairsemées des arbres, d'un vert tirant sur l'ocre ou même rouille, cartonneuses et malades, s'agitent légèrement devant le fond grisâtre du building qui s'élève au coin de la rue et de l'avenue en lignes verticales et parallèles, comme des orgues.

(23-4)

The shape of the New York buildings is also suggested in two other illustrations: Charlene again, with its rectangular composition, and George Brecht's Repository (p.56), which inspires a whole series of descriptions of 'dissection':

Immédiatement à droite est représentée une vue en élévation du gratte-ciel tel qu'il apparaîtra une fois terminé, côte à côte avec une coupe longitudinale de l'édifice permettant de voir, comme si on en avait retiré la façade, l'intérieur divisé en casiers rectangulaires accolés et entassés les uns sur les autres. Aux divers étages, dans les diverses pièces, des hommes et des femmes se tiennent assis dans des fauteuils ou derrière des bureaux, ou debout, ou encore serrés dans les ascenseurs . . . Séparés

par les cloisons et les planchers, s'ignorant les uns les autres, les petits personnages qui peuplent chacune des alvéoles sont représentés dans des attitudes de travail, dictant des lettres, tapant à la machine, recevant des visiteurs, tenant des conférences ou examinant des graphiques. Tout (les peintures des murs, et des machines, les meubles, les rideaux, les tissus des fauteuils, les vêtements et les visages des occupants) a un air pimpant, fonctionnel et imputrescible.
(55-7)

Suggested by the shape of Brecht's composition, this building is a repository of humanity, but a humanity devoid of contact, boxed up and efficient; although too much must not be made of this thematic reference, it is noticeable that the next area of description moves to the more 'natural' surroundings of the mountains and a bird of prey (p.57): the transition is effected by the juxtaposition of opposites.

Repository displays other elements which crop up elsewhere in Orion Aveugle: a bright red heart, evoking the many anatomical descriptions; a wooden puzzle which shows two strips of darker wood in the shape of a cross, echoed in the stamp, the shape of an aeroplane's shadow; a ball with a pattern of stars, reflecting the frequent allusions to stars and, of course, constellations. The dissection of buildings is repeated later in the text, when the skyscrapers are again the focus of attention:

Derrière leurs façades obscures il semble que l'on puisse voir leurs pièces superposées, leurs couloirs, comme des rangées de casiers entassés dans la nuit, seulement emplis, comme les alvéoles éventrées des maisons livrées aux démolisseurs, d'objets inutilisables et dépareillés. Les tables boiteuses, les pieds de chaises cassés, les buffets aux portes sculptées et pendantes, les bureaux à cylindres, les machines à écrire rouillées, les dossiers de sièges à la moleskine crevée, aux crins broussailleux, les poutres, les feuilles d'acanthé des moulures, les balustrades, les pales des ventilateurs, tous les débris, identifiables ou non, sont uniformément recouverts par la nuit d'une épaisse couche de peinture noire.

(133-4)

This refers the reader not only to Repository, but once again to Cathédrale du Ciel, reproduced on the facing page, with its composition of debris all of the same colour and in compartments.

As an incidental insight into the 'correspondences' which Simon finds in objects and illustrations such as these, he has said that this Louise Nevelson montage makes him think of Bach — thus coming round in an oblique way to the comparison with organs.¹⁰

Clearly, however, the theme of dissection is not confined to buildings alone, interesting as they are from that point of view. One of the first illustrations in the book is the montage Petites mains, by Fernandez Arman (pp.20-1), which also recalls the Main écrivain used as a frontispiece (p.5). Scarcely has the text begun than the image of dissection is in the forefront:

Dans la vitrine une dizaine de jambes de femmes identiques sont alignées, le pied en haut, la cuisse sectionnée à l'aine reposant sur le plancher.

(19)

Cross-references to this are then found in the poster on the surgery wall:

L'infirmier (ou le jeune interne) tient sous son bras, comme un paquet, une jambe coupée.

(22)

Again in the various anatomical descriptions:

La planche représente un torse d'homme. Les chairs sont d'un rose ocré. A partir du diaphragme et jusqu'au ras du pubis la paroi abdominale a été découpée, comme un couvercle que l'on aurait retiré.

(24)

This reappears much later:

A travers la paroi transparente on peut voir les organes internes, pourpres, blafards, ou légèrement teintés de bleu, rangés en bon ordre dans la cavité, imbriqués les uns dans les autres et parcourus de veinules qui se divisent, se ramifient à l'infini comme des racines, des radicules, en fines brindilles sinueuses, rouges ou bleues.

(113-4)

As well as reflecting the doctor's examination of the sick man, to discover what is organically wrong with him, this is

¹⁰ Again, this was said by Simon to the present writer during a conversation in Paris, February 1971.

also an anticipation of the final page of the book, where the theme and image of dissection recur:

Sur le dépliant, une coupe longitudinale du fuselage montre les rangées successives des sièges où sont assises comme des mannequins les silhouettes plates des passagers immobiles, le profil tourné vers l'avant, sommeillant, tenant déployées les pages de magazines ou contemplant de leurs yeux aux paupières brûlantes l'étendue monotone et moutonnante qui s'étale au-dessous d'eux. Une coupe longitudinale de la tête de profil permet de voir les principaux organes.

(146)

The metaphor whereby buildings and aeroplanes can be spoken of in terms of organic dissection is an indication of Simon's awareness of the transferability of meaning from one area of description to another, which is explicit in the very title of Les Corps Conducteurs; that novel also exemplifies Simon's long-standing interest in the description of female anatomies as stimulating sources of fiction in their own right.¹¹

From one illustration to another, the current of description is transferred throughout Orion Aveugle and its companion text. In this deliberate failure to differentiate the varied images and imaginative descriptions aligned in his text, Simon is elaborating a procedure already evident in a considerably earlier novel, of which one critic said:

Dans le déploiement de l'imaginaire transissant tout réel, la différence entre le présent et le passé est secondaire; la remémoration et la perception sont homogènes sous le règne du caractère de représentabilité du réel.¹²

By the ease of transfer from illustration to description, the perspective of time is abolished, and a series of images is released in a fluid, a-temporal pattern or 'constellation'. As Simon himself has said:

¹¹ For an interesting reference to this aspect, see the review article, 'When a body', Times Literary Supplement, 4 June 1971, p.638, which describes Simon as a 'professional anatomist of pictorial forms'.

¹² Michel Deguy, 'Claude Simon et la Représentation', p.1019.

Tous les éléments du texte . . . sont toujours présents. Même s'ils ne sont pas au premier plan, ils continuent d'être là, courant en filigrane sous, ou derrière, celui qui est immédiatement lisible, ce dernier, par ses composantes, contribuant lui-même à rappeler sans cesse les autres à la mémoire.¹³

This is an extension of the musical principles upon which La Bataille de Pharsale was composed, and from the final part of that novel Simon has retained and intensified the process of inexhaustible and ever-present cross-references.

Words, however, have the maximum power of transfer in Orion Aveugle, as Simon exploits the polysemantic and therefore synthetic properties of language. Since the system of transfers does seem potentially inexhaustible, in Simon's own admission, it should be sufficient to demonstrate the principle with reference to a few specific examples taken as representative of the text as a whole. The word couvercle, for instance, occurs in an allusion to one of the anatomical plates:

A partir du diaphragme et jusqu'au ras du pubis la paroi abdominale a été découpée, comme un couvercle que l'on aurait retiré.

(24)

Soon afterwards, it reappears in the description of a figurine in the surgery:

L'un des bras de la femme entoure une sorte d'urne ouvragée, pourvue d'un couvercle articulé à une charnière.

(26)

Later still, the traveller looks down from his aeroplane and sees the Amazonian jungle:

la fange verdâtre et puante des marécages et des forêts invisibles, tout en bas, sous l'étouffant couvercle de nuages.

(54)

During the account of the South American parliamentary debate, the word crops up in a different context:

les fantômes de messieurs à favoris comme ceux dont on

¹³ 'La fiction mot à mot', p.89.

voit les portraits à l'intérieur des couvercles des boîtes de cigares dans des cartouches.

(67)

Its final appearance is again in relation to an anatomical plate:

Sur l'ouverture en forme de guitare, légèrement étranglée en son milieu à hauteur de la taille, a été posé un couvercle de plexiglas moulé.

(113)

The rapidity of transfers in Orion Aveugle is partly due to Simon's frequent neglect of the familiar linking phrases like 'comme' or 'à la façon de', which are normally used to effect transitions of this nature: they are merely obstacles to the fluid movement of his text.

Another, even more frequently used term, is paroi, which is not extremely surprising in a book describing the shape of a city like New York:

La chaleur grisâtre, palpable, semble entassée entre les parois brun sale de la rue.

(26)

But not only buildings have walls:

Ils en extraient de volumineuses boîtes de carton qu'ils portent à l'intérieur du magasin en les tenant embrassées sur leurs poitrines, le buste penché en arrière, la tête tournée de côté, la joue collée contre la paroi de la boîte.

(27)

Above the mountains, the traveller sees other walls:

Les nuages fouettés avec violence s'écartent, s'effiloquent en écharpes grisâtres accrochées aux parois éblouissantes.

(54)

South American senators have drinks in their hands:

Écoutant le tintement des glaçons contre les parois de leurs verres, le buste nonchalamment renversé.

(71)

Other buildings have walls: the toilets of the South American Chamber (p.76), the lounge of an airport (p.85), the dome of a chapel (p.94); and while this may seem obvious, the fact that such a banal detail is so often repeated points to Simon's studied use of the same words over and over again. The perspex cover has a wall (p.113), and of course the process of dissection involves cutting a 'paroi abdominale' (p.24); the term is diffused through the text.

As a final example of this multiple usage of words, there is also the term colonne, which has such variants as colon (anatomy) and colonie (exploration). The skyscrapers themselves are gigantic columns (p.28, p.43), which allows the transfer to a page from a dictionary: 'la page est divisée en trois colonnes verticales' (p.44). Similarly, a list of names on an advertising panel necessitates repetition of the same term:

La colonne des noms les uns au-dessus des autres atteint plusieurs mètres de hauteur. Immédiatement à droite est représentée une vue en élévation du gratte-ciel.
(55)

Finally, there is also the decor of the Chamber:

Les colonnes du vaste hall rococo sont surmontées de chapiteaux corinthiens en bronze doré dissimulant les rampes d'éclairage.
(78)

In Les Corps Conducteurs a further expansion of meaning is achieved when a column of men is seen, in a still photograph outside a cinema, making its way painfully through the South American jungle (p.103), while even the bubbles in a glass of beer come under the same global appellation:

Dans le verre de bière toujours intact les colonnes scintillantes des petites bulles ont cessé de s'élever.
(107)

These words are all illustrative of Simon's systematic use of polysemy as a method of bringing disparate areas of description together underneath the same verbal umbrella:

Une épingle, un cortège, une ligne d'autobus, un complot, un clown, un Etat, un chapitre n'ont que (c'est-à-dire ont) ceci de commun: une tête.

(Orion Aveugle, p.10)

The parenthetical correction made to that statement reaffirms Simon's remarks, in 'La fiction mot à mot', about the positive and independent value and logic of the juxtapositions effected within the synthetic body of language represented by the text.

Other such terms are legion: tuyau, branche, dôme, timbre, artères, all are words which facilitate transfer from literal to figurative meanings, taking the writing from point to point on what is a vast verbal canvas. Some words require a bilingual

appreciation. One of the links between the old lady and the bird of prey (pp.53ff.) is the word talon, the French meaning of 'heel' coinciding with the English term 'claw'; at another point there is a transition from decorative architecture to an aeroplane:

Au sommet des fûts de marbre blanc parcourus en oblique d'un lacis de veines grisâtres les feuilles d'acanthé jaillissent en bouquet et se recourbent en avant sous leur poids, comme des plumes ou les gerbes d'un jet d'eau. Loin derrière l'avion maintenant, la montagne a pratiquement disparu.

(78-9)

The transfer is effected through the coincidence of the English 'jet', designating a form of transport, and the identical word in French, with a different meaning. Likewise, the Spanish cuenta and con may well be responsible, in part at least, for the ensuing sexual scene (p.132) where the French meaning of con is applied to the female anatomy; and the noun orgue, almost immediately preceding a description of human anatomy (p.24), comes close to the dual meaning of the English organ, and the French borrowing of stars (p.142) appears side by side with a description of étoiles.

Auditive similarities are as important, at times, as are the visual ones. Simon makes use of homophones:

La mère marche alors jusqu'au lapin, s'accroupit, et le redresse. Une large trouée dans la mer de nuages permet de voir de nouveau la terre.

(43)

Besides the transfer made possible in the coincidence mère/mer, the fact that the water is described as 'stagnante' a few lines later suggests that from s'accroupit has come the synonym for croupie. When the sick man telephones in the attempt to reach his lover, a child's voice is heard:

A l'autre bout du fil la voix claire et joyeuse de l'enfant répète Allô? Allô? Au-dessus du plateau de nuages on peut voir la lune dans le ciel vide, comme une pastille blanche pas tout à fait ronde.

(53)

Clearly the sound of the word Allô has brought to mind the term halo, then producing the similarity of shape with the moon, and the auditive and visual stimuli combine to allow a further transition. The telephone call also provides this

'echo': 'Dans un vide lointain la sonnerie d'appel retentit à intervalles réguliers' (p.51), which prefigures a moment in the aeroplane:

Il se rend compte que quelqu'un lui parle, comme une voix au téléphone, lointaine, arrivant à travers des épaisseurs d'espace.

(82)

Sound also brings together the old lady and the telephone:

Cela fait, elle se redresse comme un peu plus tôt, à la façon de ces automates aux mouvements décomposés, entrecoupés de pauses pendant lesquelles il semble que l'on peut entendre le grésillement du mécanisme avant qu'il enclenche un autre rouage.

(117)

Obviously connected with the illustration Téléphone mural automatique (p.80), this image reappears in the description of the sound made by a telephone:

Il suffit d'introduire une pièce dans une fente, de décrocher le combiné et de tourner plusieurs fois du doigt le cadran circulaire pour entendre un grésillement qu'interrompt bientôt une sonnerie régulière.

(132)

The elements of 'automation' and of sound, in addition to the fact that the French say 'composer un numéro', provide a link between these apparently unconnected descriptions. The visual takes over from the auditive when, after the last passage quoted, a sleeping woman is touched by her partner, who 'introduces' his finger into her sexual organ, earlier described as a fente. Indeed, the picture of the telephone is no less productive than the others, since it too displays a tuyau, the familiar colour black, the apparatus is said to have a body, the coils of the cable are like those of a snake, and the title of the illustration also points to other 'murals'. Not one of the elements is to be taken in isolation from the others, and the text operates in a permanently inventive closed circuit.

Perhaps the most striking sensorial link in the book is in fact the visual one of serpentine coils.¹⁴ This stems

¹⁴ See also Sylvère Lotringer, 'Une révolution romanesque', pp.34Off, where a study of the image in Les Corps Conducteurs is made which goes beyond the purely pictorial intentions to which Simon has referred.

from the Orion canvas:

Escaladant la colline que l'on aperçoit dans le lointain, tout au fond du tableau et déjà touchée par les rayons du soleil levant, le chemin que suit Orion resurgit en une mince ligne claire qui s'élève en serpentant.

(144)

The image has been included at regular intervals. It may refer to the shaky lines of writing on a wall:

les légères sinuosités du trajet suivi par la peinture lorsqu'elle a glissé sur la surface granitée et rugueuse de la pierre . . .

(30)

These are a reprise of the line of paint representing the trajet of the blind giant in the canvas. It may also refer to the rivers seen in photographs taken from the air:

Les rivières ont des tracés méandreaux, convulsifs, se tordant en replis jaunes.

(32)

From the beginning of the text the term is exploited as the common feature in describing intestines (p.34), snakes, of course (p.36), constellations (p.53), and, in particular, remarkable shapes created by a chain of mountains seen from the air:

Surgissant tout à coup des nuages, l'arête enneigée d'une montagne s'élève au-dessous de l'avion, d'une incroyable minceur, aiguë, avec ses vertigineux dévers de glace étincelant dans le soleil, presque verticaux, inviolés, et son échine de rochers déchiquetés. Elle ondule et se tord comme la nageoire dorsale d'un congère ou d'une murène émergeant un instant, luisante, dans des remous d'écume.

(53-4)

Echoed in the terms boa and boa constricteur, this image is dominant in Orion Aveugle. The passages relating to the view from an aeroplane are curiously reminiscent of Saint-Exupéry's 'discovery' of new angles of vision thanks to the liberating power of aviation, about which Sartre wrote some very interesting lines:

Saint-Exupéry nous a ouvert le chemin, il a montré que l'avion, pour le pilote, est un organe de perception; une chaîne de montagnes à 600 kilomètres-heure et dans la perspective nouvelle du survol,

c'est un noeud de serpents: elles se tassent, noircissent, poussent leurs têtes dures et calcinées contre le ciel, cherchent à nuire, à cogner.¹⁵

Unlike Saint-Exupéry, however, Simon is not concerned to use this new global vision as a means to communicate messages of fraternity to his fellow-men, even though there is a minor theme of separation running through his text. In Terre des Hommes, Saint-Exupéry uses an image which also crops up in Simon:

Il faut bien tenter de se rejoindre. Il faut bien essayer de communiquer avec quelques-uns de ces feux qui brûlent de loin en loin dans la campagne.¹⁶

In Orion Aveugle there is a close parallel for this:

Dans la nuit, d'avion, on peut voir de loin en loin à la surface de la terre obscure d'inquiétantes lueurs.

(139)

Although there is this minor theme of separation, it is not a development of Saint-Exupéry's fraternal anxiety, but an effective introduction to the use of the term constellation in Orion Aveugle itself.

Another of the properties of Poussin's canvas is that it portrays a giant whose name is also that of a constellation. This is the stimulus for a number of references to étoiles and to constellations:

L'article Serpent commence à la page précédente au-dessous de Serpens (nom latin de la constellation du Serpent).

(44)

Le Serpent est une constellation équatoriale dont le tracé est dessiné par de belles étoiles distribuées sur une large étendue du ciel.

(53)

Before the constellation reappears, the term étoile is used to evoke the pain spreading over the sick man's body (p.81).

¹⁵ Qu'est-ce que la littérature? (Paris, 1965 edition), pp.286-7.

¹⁶ Terre des Hommes (Paris, 1939), p.10.

The constellation can also synthesize other elements from the text:

La constellation équatoriale du Serpent se divise en deux zones séparées par une partie de la constellation d'Ophiucus: la Tête du Serpent (Serpentis Caput) et la Queue du Serpent (Serpentis Cauda). Les points noirs de différente grosseur figurant les étoiles sont reliés par de courtes lignes, également noires, dessinant sur le fond bleu des lignes brisées comme des morceaux de chaînes d'arpenteur, formant des triangles, des trapèzes, des polygones pourvus d'antennes ou de queues. (91-4)

The sexual theme is directly connected to folk-lore concerning the constellations:

Dans deux groupes d'étoiles rapprochées dessinant deux triangles de grandeur à peu près égale où l'on peut lire schématiquement un visage, certains peuples de l'Antiquité croyaient pouvoir situer les positions successives occupées par la tête de la femme lorsque dans un spasme elle la rejette en arrière, se cambrant, abandonnant le gland qu'elle pressait entre ses lèvres, sa main toutefois toujours crispée sur la verge tendue. (98-9)

A 'reading' of the stars is an apt indication that the reader is also working his way through a kind of constellation when he reads Orion Aveugle. The lights of a town are also a constellation representative of humanity, with which the theme of time is associated:

Réglée par un mouvement d'horlogerie, chacune d'entre elles s'éteint et se rallume alternativement à des intervalles dont rien ne dérange la régularité. Eblouissant les yeux de leurs myriades scintillantes, elles reforment avec l'implacable application des mécaniques des suites de combinaisons variées mais limitées dont le retour régulier semble ponctuer l'implacable écoulement du temps. (138)

These lights are the symbols of a certain subjugation to the power of commercial advertising, but more than anything they are also one example of the way in which Simon builds his text as a constellation of words, designed to take the various elements out of the sequence of external time and into artistic synthesis.

Just as, in La Bataille de Pharsale, Simon gave direct hints about the composition of his novel as a mobile turning

around a number of fixed points, so in Orion Aveugle there are several references to ensembles and combinaisons which must be taken as paradigms of the book's construction, though this is never stated openly in the text. Some of these are directly related to the theme of constellation; the stars in the astrological mural are joined by geometrical lines, and the group of people in a New York street is described in similar fashion:

Les passants ou les groupes qui la composent marchant en directions opposées, se croisent, s'infiltrent les uns dans les autres de sorte que, de loin, les divers mouvements se neutralisant, elle offre l'aspect d'un amalgame de petites taches aux dominantes pastel, l'oeil ne pouvant suivre aucune d'entre elles en particulier, leur masse paraissant stagner, constituer un élément statique dans l'ensemble géométrique des constructions.

(63-4)

Just as constellations are brought to life or dispersed by darkness and light, so these crowds appear and disappear:

Le grouillement des petites particules multicolores qui ne progresse ni dans un sens ni dans l'autre et reste d'une densité toujours égale est oblitéré et démasqué tour à tour, à la cadence régulière des feux, par le flot des voitures où dominent les carrosseries jaunes des taxis. Au contraire de ces mouvements de foule concertés (processions, cortèges, manifestations politiques), on ne peut y percevoir aucune direction privilégiée, aucune vocation dominante. Quoiqu'il soit sans cesse renouvelé en ses composantes, on n'y discerne non plus aucun changement. Il semble que les mêmes particules se cognent, se faufilent, réapparaissent, recomposent inlassablement un autre ensemble à la fois différent et en tous points pareil au précédent et où, pas plus que dans une poignée de gravier, il n'est possible de déceler ni structure ni ordre.

(64)

It seems clear that this is intended as an indication of the construction of the book, and that Simon is being fairly ironic in claiming that there is no semblance of order, when in fact the text is a rigorously controlled if not traditional series of images.

Elsewhere the medical theme also gives rise to a model of construction:

De la cavité à l'ouverture en forme de guitare le docteur retire l'un après l'autre les organes . . . Ils s'emboîtent

les uns dans les autres par un ingénieux système d'ergots qui permet de les détacher — ou de les replacer — sur une simple traction ou pression.

(122)

The component elements of Orion Aveugle slip with equal facility in and out of the descriptive text, depending upon the line of resemblances which the writer chooses to pursue:

Dans les quatre panneaux de la porte à tambour qui continue à tourner à vide, les reflets des lumières glissent horizontalement, entraînés de droite à gauche, chaque fois repris et relancés par le battant suivant, se superposant aux taches lumineuses fixes (fenêtres, vitrines) ou mouvantes (phares d'autos) suspendues dans la nuit.

(129-132)

This will be reiterated in the final lines of the book. The geometrical constructions, moving but unchanging dynamic forms, and these superimposed images liable to constant dispersal and renewal, all are indications of the patterns created in the text itself in which they appear. In order to appreciate the intention behind these 'clues', it is necessary to examine the references to language itself in Orion Aveugle, and to the timeless sphere of reference achieved by such an intensely pictorial work.

On two occasions language is spoken of in familiarly derisive terms. Firstly, the sick man walking through the city sees a monstrous board covered in fragments of posters, another familiar Simonian motif:

Primitivement rouges, bleues ou vertes, les lettres sont à présent d'un rose fané, vert olive ou bleu-gris sur le fond lui-même gris. Aucun mot n'est lisible en entier. Il n'en subsiste que quelques fragments énigmatiques, parfois impossibles à compléter, permettant d'autres fois une ou plusieurs interprétations (ou reconstitutions) comme, par exemple, ABOR (LABOR, ou ABORTo, ou ABORcer?), SOCIA (SOCIALismo, aSOCIAción?) et CAN (CANdidato, CANibal, CANKer?).

(60)

Recalling the collected fragments in Canyon, this is also a reminder of the defeat of language, which leads directly into the literary/political debate where language, taken as a means of communication or of moral betterment, is again ironized as it was so bitinglly in La Bataille de Pharsale:

Néanmoins, par les quelques fragments qu'il en retient, il apparaît que, pour l'essentiel, le discours consiste en considérations ou en déclarations d'ordre social et politique où les substantifs à la résonance un peu fanée, comme les couleurs des affiches, par l'emploi et le temps, tels que Liberté, Révolution, Solidarité ou Unité reviennent fréquemment.

(61)

As the descriptions of this debate continue, it is clear that there is a total absence of communication amongst the senators, the old and intransigent being confronted by the young and no less firmly entrenched. As far as Simon is concerned, politics and literature do not belong together, and the presence of a debate such as this underlines the difference between his idea of a discours littéraire and theirs; the irony is reinforced when the foreigner cannot really understand what is being said, and retires to the toilets (p.76).

The positive side of language, apart from the aspects already discussed, is demonstrated in the appearance of names in the text. These may be inspired by the sight of the mountains:

les roches en dents de scie semblables aux vertèbres de quelque monstre, quelque furieux et gigantesque saurien au nom fabuleux de titan, de société minière ou de constellation (Aconcagua, Anaconda, Andromeda).

(54)

Here the similarity from word to word is sharply underlined. This is especially the case when the names on the board of advertisements are transcribed:

Les noms ont des consonances variées, méditerranéennes, anglo-saxonnes, ou d'Europe centrale: MINELLI & FALK, BRONSTEIN, MAC ALLISTER, SANCHEZ LA TORRE, S. STEPHANOPOULOS, HUTCHINSON, O'HIGGINS, WURTZ, ALVAREZ & SILVA, KOLAKOVSKI, etc.

(55)

The international flavour of all these names is a reminder that the city, like the country in which it is situated, is a vast constellation of people from all corners of the globe. The names themselves are a demonstration of the synthetic potential of language.

Similarly, the voice of an air stewardess cries out a list of very evocative names:

la voix criarde, obstinée et discordante égrène des noms de villes aux consonances bigarrées, comme des noms d'oiseaux, de fleurs, de monstres, d'animaux exotiques, de saints ou de perroquets: Caracas, Cúcuta, Barranquilla, Bogotá, Quito, Guayaquil, San Juan, Iquitos, Manaus, Leticia.

(85)

The power of words is to bring together in the one context these widely separated areas in space: this is only an extreme example of Simon's view of language. This is underlined by the presence of the aeroplane, which may be designed to show the 'superiority' of the artist looking down on the world, but which is more positively a means of transport, a link between otherwise unconnected areas:

De l'une de ses mains levée à la hauteur de son épaule elle présente un modèle réduit de Boeing en métal chromé. Au-dessus d'elle on peut lire en lettres rouges INTERNATIONAL ROUTE MAP et, plus bas, en lettres noires: NORTH-CENTRAL-SOUTH AMERICA. THE CARIBBEAN AND EUROPE.

(84)

The aeroplane's ability to link one continent with another is a parallel for the synthesizing power of language; the text too is a 'modèle réduit' in its own right. In addition, the map is one more example of an illustration which links up with the others in displaying lines, serpentine curves, and geometrical shapes, as well as providing actual words which appear in the text: a young American woman wearing a bermuda must be intended to recall the name of a Caribbean island.

Finally, then, Orion Aveugle is to be considered as an elaborate exercise in suspended animation, an attempt to achieve that timelessness which is one of the properties of pictorial art:

This particular conception of the novel can best be appreciated through a rapprochement with painting because it attempts to escape time in order to achieve a spatial representation of the mind. As in painting, it requires a great artist to select the material, arrange, blend, and link the varied components so masterfully. Visual, auditive, emotional associations or pure word assonances are used in a fade-dissolve technique to transport us from one theme to the other, and back and forth.¹⁷

¹⁷ Claud DuVerlie, 'Claude Simon: Les Corps Conducteurs', Books Abroad, 46, No.2 (Spring 1972), pp.262-3.

The constant present, and the sheer ductility and variety of words, are the principal elements in Simon's effort to create this timelessness, but there is a series of descriptions of art works which also offers the key to his research and to its limitations.

Several times, the notion of suspended animation is evoked. The most obvious example is the aeroplane, which is 'suspendu sans avancer' (p.52, p.79); there is also the sick man who progresses almost imperceptibly toward his hotel; the old lady crossing the hotel lobby; and all of them are reminders of Poussin's painting. Like them, Orion the blind giant does not seem to go anywhere; he is only a static mass of colour on a plane surface, or, as a passage near the end of the book suggests, a representation with nothing real or mobile about him:

Quoique les règles de la perspective soient apparemment observées pour suggérer au spectateur la sensation de profondeur, le peintre s'est contradictoirement attaché à multiplier les artifices qui ont pour résultat de détruire cet effet de façon que le géant se trouve partie intégrante du magma de terre, de feuillages, d'eau et de ciel qui l'entoure. Orion ne s'avance pas debout sur un chemin, son corps dans un axe vertical au plan de celui-ci, comme par exemple une pièce d'un jeu d'échecs debout sur une case de l'échiquier, entourée d'air et de vide de tous côtés. Il apparaît, au contraire, comme une figure de bas-relief, collé au décor qui est censé l'encadrer ou lui servir de fond . . . De ce fait le paysage perd toute dimension perpendiculaire à la toile. Au contraire il se bossèle, se creuse, projette en avant certains de ses éléments non pas selon leur proximité ou leur éloignement rationnel, mais selon les seuls besoins de cette rhétorique.

(127-8)

This could almost as easily be a description of the text itself, whose composition and strange alignment of elements can be accounted for when the principles here applied to the surface of a spatial art work are transferred to an artistic form normally or traditionally imprisoned in linear time and in the necessity of presenting 'real' characters and a sense of 'real' life.

Just as there is irony against the communicative or exemplary values of a certain kind of literature, so too

certain 'expressive' paintings are referred to in a spirit of derision. But at least the artistic representations do share the feature of suspended animation; the figures in paintings are 'immobilisés dans des attitudes de vitesse et de violence' (p.86); a photograph shows a line of dancing-girls 'immobilisée en rupture d'équilibre' (p.110). But the Orion figure is spoken of in terms of an ideal which does not appear elsewhere:

Autour de la tête d'Orion (et non pas derrière) ils enroulent leurs lourdes volutes avec lesquelles se confondent les plis flottants de la tunique du serviteur perché sur ses épaules, désignant de son doigt au visage aveugle un but idéal, fait seulement, comme le doigt lui-même, les paupières closes, les épaules bosselées et les empreintes des pieds monumentaux dans la poussière du chemin, d'une mince pellicule de couleur. (129)

Simon's ideal is to write a novel which will refer only to its own language, and not to anything outside the acknowledged and stimulating sources of the text. This elimination of the expressive content has caused some adverse critical reaction to Simon's most recent work:

Il me semble qu'il y a régression de Claude Simon depuis Histoire. Le tremblement lyrique et faulknérien qui s'épanouissait dans La Route des Flandres et qui électrisait encore, parfois, Histoire n'est plus que cendres mortes, fatigue du regard, avec cette éternelle minutie qui se pastiche elle-même. Le temps n'est plus composante du livre, il en est la pesanteur monotone, la grisaille, la répétition lassante. Les quelques images d'accouplements renforcent cette impression de se mouvoir dans un livre de la lassitude, du trucage, d'illusions perdues quant à la littérature.¹⁸

But this fails to take account of the fact that Simon has long since abandoned any illusions he might have harboured about the possibility of using literature as a means of communication or as some kind of expressive instrument, as at least one critic has seen:

¹⁸ Jacques-Pierre Amette, 'Claude Simon: Les Corps Conducteurs', Nouvelle Revue Française, No.224 (août 1971), pp.100-1.

Même s'il n'écrit que pour rapprocher un rouge d'un noir, varier les tons du vert, opposer la brique à la pierre et la pénombre à la lumière, transformer le fixe en mouvant, rendre à l'artifice ce qui semblait vivant, un pathétique, un tragique, se dégagent de sa vertigineuse composition: ils nous forcent à coexister en elle, avec elle, et c'est le propre du grand art.¹⁹

Orion Aveugle and subsequent works represent the culmination of a long development toward a rigorous application of the dictum 'art for art's sake'.

The passage of time does, however, affect the book. At the end, the sick man whose negotiation of busy streets is a metaphor for the exploration of verbal 'cross-roads', by the novelist, is exhausted by the seemingly unending nature of his journey:

il lui semble ~~se~~traîner sur place, englué dans une espèce de pâte tiède et visqueuse dont il ne parvient pas à se détacher.

(126)

Similarly, the giant figure of Orion cannot hope to reach the dawning light because of his nature as a painted surface, and, reverting to the constellation theme, because the dawn is, paradoxically, the moment of his disappearance:

Il semble cependant que le géant ne doive jamais parvenir jusque-là, puisque à mesure que le soleil s'élève dans le ciel les étoiles pâlisent, s'effacent, et la gigantesque silhouette immobile à grands pas s'estompe peu à peu, disparaît dans le ciel pâle.

(144-6)

The life of the constellation is daily ended and renewed; as the words of Simon's preface demonstrate, the work of the artist as Orion is never finished, only interrupted:

Aussi ne peut-il avoir d'autre terme que l'épuisement du voyageur explorant ce paysage inépuisable. A ce moment se sera peut-être fait ce que j'appelle un roman (puisque, comme tous les romans, c'est une fiction mettant en scène des personnages entraînés dans une

¹⁹ Jacqueline Piatier, 'Le nouveau roman de Claude Simon: Triptyque', Le Monde, 25 janvier 1973, pp.17-18.

action), roman qui cependant ne racontera pas l'histoire exemplaire de quelque héros ou héroïne, mais cette toute autre histoire qu'est l'aventure singulière du narrateur qui ne cesse de chercher, découvrant à tâtons le monde dans et par l'écriture.

(15)

Such is Simon's theory of the novel that there can be little likelihood of his exhausting some preconceived fictional material. As he suggests, both in Orion Aveugle and 'La fiction mot à mot', there is no end to the possible arrangements produced by his practice of verbal bricolage, or, as Roland Barthes says:

Si le désir d'écrire n'est que la constellation de quelques figures obstinées, il n'est laissé à l'écrivain qu'une activité de variation et de combinaison: il n'y a jamais de créateurs, rien que des combinateurs.²⁰

Following the theoretical essay, the text of Orion Aveugle — the work of art as inventive microcosm — is an inexhaustibly dynamic illustration of the principles set out there, and an admirably rigorous and sustained manipulation of words forming a pictorial constellation which is a very serious work of art.

²⁰ Essais Critiques (Paris, 1964), Préface, p.14.

Claude Simon: The artist as Orion

Conclusion

Maintenant je sais qu'il n'y a pas d'autre inspiration que de se mettre devant sa feuille de papier et d'écrire.

Claude Simon

Some fifteen years have passed since a special number of Esprit¹ consecrated the nouveau roman as the fashionable literary chapel in France, although it is now giving way to the nouveau nouveau roman of Sollers, Thibaudeau, and the Tel Quel group. In all that time, three novelists — Butor, Robbe-Grillet, and Sarraute — have practically monopolized critical discussion of the new novel, both in France and abroad; Simon has only rarely commanded the interest which his dedication and artistry deserve. For more than thirty years, constantly seeking new forms for the novel, he has pursued his own policy of permanent revolution. If Le Tricheur were placed alongside Simon's most recent work, Triptyque (1973), it would be difficult for the unsuspecting reader to appreciate that both are from the same pen. Simon, however, takes change and constant evolution as a matter of course:

D'abord, et de toute façon, parce que, comme me le faisait un jour remarquer Maurice Merleau-Ponty, le Claude Simon travaillant (travaillant son langage) n'est pas celui de la vie quotidienne, mais ce personnage que nous suscitons par notre labeur et qui se retire de nous dès que nous nous levons de notre table. Et puis, s'il est aussi bien évident que je ne suis plus le même homme qui a publié il y a cinq, dix ou vingt ans des romans sous la signature de Claude Simon (les cellules, les tissus qui me composent se sont renouvelés, certains sont définitivement morts), l'inévitable transformation se poursuit aussi pendant le temps passé à écrire chaque livre (le travail fourni contribuant même à l'accélérer). Et cela est si vrai qu'après avoir écrit les dernières pages je suis souvent amené à réécrire les premières produites par quelqu'un que je ne suis déjà plus.²

¹ 'Le nouveau roman', Esprit, juillet-août 1958.

² 'Réponses à quelques questions écrites de Ludovic Janvier', pp.15-16.

In all, Simon has published eleven novels, in addition to the souvenirs set down in La Corde Raide, and the texts written for Orion Aveugle and Femmes; this impressive body of work marks him out as the most consistently productive writer of the original group.

In the course of this career, Simon has progressed from the self-conscious but unconvincing modernism of Le Tricheur to the total self-assurance of a novel such as Les Corps Conducteurs. The titles of his books are in themselves a fair indication of his development. Le Tricheur, La Corde Raide, and Gulliver: all suggest the heavily expressive thematic content of those books; with Le Sacre du Printemps there comes a slight change of emphasis, confirmed in Le Vent and L'Herbe, toward a celebration of natural phenomena as the objects of intense, frequently lyrical, description, used as symbols of the human condition or as metaphors for the work of time. Simultaneously, the style of his writing changes radically, in accordance with the novelist's vision of the past. In 1960 a quartet of novels is begun, drawing heavily on the writer's personal background, and balancing two views of history, public and private, while communicating the desperate attempt to circumvent the shortcomings of memory and perception. But Histoire and, in particular, La Bataille de Pharsale, present a further change of direction. Turning away from the anxious reconstruction of remembered experience, and the distortions wrought when imagination takes over from memory, Simon is then working toward a new evaluation of language as the source of a purely artistic stasis and synthesis.

With Orion Aveugle and Les Corps Conducteurs this growing emphasis on art for art's sake is reinforced, and language enjoys a privileged place as the creative labyrinth capable of bringing together the accumulated but dispersed experience of one man's world:

Prolongeant une prise de conscience quasiment
plastique, ce qui se précise de livre en livre,
c'est de l'écriture la juste appréciation des pou-
voirs spécifiques qui en feront désormais le moteur

(c'est-à-dire origine du mouvement, c'est-à-dire moment de la progression) et, finalement, la substance même du livre.³

As the title of Simon's latest novel suggests, recalling the subtitle of Le Vent in particular, Triptyque is an art work first and foremost, where Simon's primary concern is to investigate and illustrate that potential; it seems that he incorporates references to elements from his earlier novels only in order to underline that these no longer enjoy any greater importance than the book's other component parts.

This evolution is reflected in Simon's gradual liberation from the shackles of literary influence. Although this is always a difficult question, there can be little doubt that the 'lost generation' of Americans had a great deal to do with the conception and the themes of Simon's early writings. With Le Vent Simon provides evidence of his debt to Dostoievski, and to Faulkner; his admiration of the latter is made clearer still in both L'Herbe and the novel of the Flanders campaign. But if Histoire is Joycean in its underlying themes and its sensitivity to language, and if Simon remains faithful to the spirit of Proust, these aspects are secondary to the novel's essential nature as a literary artisan's exploration of language:

Je ne vois pas de conscience en dehors du langage. ⁴
 Dans la mesure où j'écris, j'accède à la conscience.

By the time he writes La Bataille de Pharsale, Simon is confident enough to undertake artful pastiche, and to indulge in irony about the novel, while stressing the pre-eminence of the literary creation above all other considerations.

In the preface to Orion Aveugle Simon himself explains the attitudes which now govern his work. From being the traditionally presumptuous user of language he has now become, in a

³ Marcel Séguier, 'Le langage à la casse', Entretiens, No.31 (1972), pp.81-95 (p.93).

⁴ Quoted in Thérèse de Saint-Phalle, 'Claude Simon, franc-tireur de la révolution romanesque', Figaro Littéraire, 6 avril 1967, p.7.

sense, the willing slave of words; unable to purvey exemplary truths, the artist as Orion seeks only to enjoy the process of discovering the landscape of language:

Et, pour ce qui me concerne, si je compare ce 'ferment' qu'étaient mes 'intentions premières' avec ce qui, finalement, grâce à cet ensemble de contraintes, s'est produit au cours de mon travail, je suis de plus en plus à même de constater à quel point ce produit élaboré mot à mot va finalement bien au-delà de mes intentions. Si l'on me demandait pourquoi j'écris, je pourrais répondre que c'est pour voir se produire chaque fois ce curieux miracle.⁵

If, in Orion Aveugle, there are discernible themes and attitudes, Simon is nonetheless true to his own convictions about the richness of sensorial experience. His superiority as an artist lies in his ability to create with language a memorable assemblage of that experience. While texts such as Orion Aveugle or Les Corps Conducteurs may not touch the 'secret spring of responsive emotions' as often as does a novel like La Route des Flandres, it should not be thought that Simon, in the more austere pages of his latest works, has lapsed into the dullness of a Strigelius, patiently thumbing the pages of his dictionary in search of inspiration.⁶ A remark by Joseph Frank seems to sum up Simon's attitude as an artist:

We are asked only to accept the work of art as an autonomous structure giving us an individual vision of reality; and the question of the relation of this vision to an extra-artistic 'objective' world has ceased to have any fundamental importance.⁷

Is Simon's anxiety to allow language its full creative freedom within a disciplined structure not also the mark of a desire to give back to prose its profound poetic value?

Perhaps the most engaging feature of Simon's art has been his own constant and modest surprise at the complexity and the

⁵ 'La fiction mot à mot', p.97.

⁶ Jules Romains, Les Créateurs (Les Hommes de bonne volonté, t.XII, Paris, Flammarion, 1936), ch.xiv, 'Strigelius applique sa méthode', pp.133-47.

⁷ The Widening Gyre, p.28.

richness of his achievement; this surely is indicative of the radical nature of his search, and of its vital importance to him. As has already been seen, Simon is fond of quoting a remark addressed to him by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, shortly before the philosopher's death in 1961:

L'écrivain qui est dans la vie courante un homme comme tout le monde, suscite en travaillant un autre homme, supérieur à lui-même, et qui disparaît dès qu'il quitte sa table.⁸

A man capable of transcribing a vision so powerful as Simon's, however, can lay claim to a more permanent superiority than this, as Proust himself proclaimed, albeit with a slightly different emphasis:

Que les conditions extérieures de la production littéraire aient changé au cours du dernier siècle, que le métier d'homme de lettres soit devenu chose plus absorbante et exclusive, c'est possible. Mais les lois intérieures, mentales, de cette production n'ont pas pu changer. Un écrivain, qui aurait par moments du génie pour pouvoir mener le reste du temps une vie agréable de dilettantisme mondain et lettré, est une conception aussi fausse et naïve que celle d'un saint, ayant la vie morale la plus élevée pour pouvoir mener au paradis une vie de plaisirs vulgaires.⁹

Simon's modesty is the direct result of his willing submission to language. The artist as Orion is bent not only on discovering the superb complexity of the world around him, but also on revealing, to himself first and foremost, the depths of his own productive potential. The result of his search is that essentially inexplicable process of crystallization through which his experience is transformed, transcending the ordinary to create the work of art.

⁸ See for example Thérèse de Saint-Phalle, 'Claude Simon, franc-tireur de la révolution romanesque'.

⁹ Contre Sainte-Beuve (Paris, 15^e édition, 1954), pp.225-6.

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