Reading Robbe-Grillet by Fred Skolnik

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Cover image from Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet (Jealousy) & (In the Labyrinth), Black Cat Books by Grove Press, 1965

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Fred Skolnik
Alain Robbe-Grillet came to the attention of fiction readers in the 1950s with a series of extraordinary novels whose declared aim was to take the modern break with the traditional narrative a step further and help create a "new realism." The line of development with which he associated himself included Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett. Other representatives of the New French Novel included Marguerite Duras and Nathalie Sarraute (Tropismes, Portrait d’un inconnu). Robbe-Grillet's own novels appeared in regular succession during the Fifties: Les Gommes (The Erasers) in 1953, Le Voyeur in 1955, La Jalousie in 1957 and Dans le labyrinthe in 1959; then the screenplay for L'année dernière à Marienbad in 1961 and the theoretical essays of Pour une nouveau roman in 1963.

The novels made a very strong impression on me – they were unique and certainly intriguing – but at the same time they provoked in me a measure of resistance, for I found in them echoes of my great bugbears, namely, positivism, logical empiricism and behaviorism. They seemed to be objectifying the subject, reducing him to a passive receptacle of impressions and even emotions, though Robbe-Grillet would insist that this was not what he was doing at all.

What he was doing he outlined in the essays, which were a response to his critics, of whom there were many. What his critics complained about was that his novels had no characters, no story, no psychology, no milieu, no passion (and when they did it was only because he had inadvertently slipped back into traditional modes of narration). What Robbe-Grillet said in response was that the traditional novel based on character and story was no longer relevant. The 19th century novel of character, represented by the hero, had suited the age of the individual, the age of the aristocrat, which had been replaced by an age of anonymity, by the alienation of the democratic 20th century, represented by characters like Joseph K. and Meursault. Likewise, while the aristocratic view of the world was responsible for the novel of character, it was the bourgeoisie that was responsible for the novel as story, a story that conformed to their view of an ordered, decipherable universe in which one thing follows from another naturally and logically and in which there is a beginning, a middle and an end.

Robbe-Grillet demurred both in terms of how we should perceive the world and in terms of how the world should be represented in literature. A novel, he wrote, should no longer be a contrivance setting out "to illustrate a truth known in advance" but something that invents itself and in the process finds its own meaning. A novel, then, exists in and for itself, as an objet d’art if you will, without reference to the outside world, without reference to the time and place of the outside world but only to the interior time and space of the imagination. It is not something other than itself. It does not represent a reality outside itself. It explores itself. It expresses or represents nothing but itself. It does not seek to chronicle or inform. It constitutes its own reality.

Consequently, whereas the traditional novel as represented by Balzac, who becomes the villain of the piece, wished to create the illusion that its imagined characters were actual people living in the real world, Robbe-Grillet eschewed entirely the illusion of reality, representing his characters as what they actually were, namely, figments of the imagination. As such, they are not meant to be seen as facsimiles of real people acting in a world identical
to our own, as though inserted into it and walking the same streets as we do. They are meant to be seen as imaginary figures invented in the mind of a narrator or author and part of a reality to which nothing outside itself corresponds. Thus they are not bound by external reality. Neither are they bound by the time of the world or by the linear narratives that are superimposed on conventional works of literature. Narratives are now to represent the way the elements out of which the author or narrator constructs the work of art present themselves. At first glance they may even be seen as abstractions coming very close to cubist art, or even to deconstruction (Roland Barthes was an admirer). The cubist or deconstructive element would consist in taking apart the linear narrative and then reassembling it by repositioning its constituent parts without reference to external time and place. But Robbe-Grillet corrects this impression. He is not scrambling a pre-existing narrative to make it indecipherable. He is recording it as it invents itself in his imagination, exploring all the possibilities inherent in the material at hand.

A further complaint of critics deriving from what Robbe-Grillet perceives as a misunderstanding of his work is that he is a novelist of surfaces aiming at pure objectivity, and hence his descriptive technique which coldly seeks to establish the precise geometric qualities and relations of objects – planes, angles, distances, shadows. But Robbe-Grillet insists that his novels are totally subjective, for it is always an individual, a subject, who sees, feels, imagines, whose passions condition the objects of his attention, "a man like you and me." Only God can be objective, the God who is the omniscient, omnipresent author of Balzac’s novels, seeing the outside and the inside of everything, "knowing the present, the past and the future of every enterprise," and furthermore giving everything a meaning, a signification.

For Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, just as the world itself has no transcendent meaning, objects, too, signify nothing. They are simply there, in themselves. They are no longer the furnishings of the bourgeois world, expropriated by good citizens in order to define themselves, personified, anthropomorphized, becoming majestic mountains, noble trees, melancholy landscapes. Their existence resides solely in their "concrete, solid, material presence," without reference to human beings and beyond which there is nothing.

Instead of this universe of "signification" (psychological, social, functional), we must try, then, to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their presence that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over any explanatory theory that tries to enclose them in a system of references, whether emotional, sociological, Freudian or metaphysical.

It is not by chance that Robbe-Grillet’s first published novel, The Erasers, is in effect a detective novel (and hence perhaps the most accessible). The classic detective examines a crime scene. He gathers evidence and tries to construct a logical theory of the crime. However, "witnesses contradict each other, the suspect offers several alibis, new evidence appears or has not been taken into account …" In the end the detective must come back, again and again, "to the recorded evidence: the exact position of a piece of furniture, the shape and frequency of a fingerprint, the word scribbled in a message. We have the mounting sense that nothing else is true … [and] since it is chiefly in its presence that the world’s reality resides, our task is now to create a literature which takes that presence into account."
And here is the simple story of *The Erasers*: Daniel Dupont, a professor of law connected with the government, is shot in his study by an assassin sent by an anarchist group, making him the ninth victim in nine consecutive days, all shot between the hours of 7 and 8 in the evening. The assassin, however, botches the job and only wounds him in the arm, but the minister in charge decides to announce his death to get him out of harm's way, with the collusion of the doctor who treated him. Special Agent Wallas now arrives from the capital to investigate, believing Dupont is dead. After many twists and turns he finds himself in Dupont's study waiting for the assassin to reappear, but it is Dupont who returns, with a drawn gun, to retrieve some papers before being spirited away to the countryside. Wallas fires first and kills him, believing he is the assassin. Thus, like Oedipus vowing to find the murderer of Laius (his father), Wallas himself turns out to be the murderer he is looking for.

The Oedipus motif is introduced almost immediately and is referred to throughout the novel in the most undisguised ways. A drunk comes into the café where Wallas has taken a room and recites a riddle: "What is the animal that in the morning ..." and we recognize it as the riddle of the Sphinx answered by Oedipus. But there is much more: the clinic in the "rue de Corinthe" where the wounded Dupont is taken; curtains in a ground floor window decorated with a motif of shepherds finding an abandoned child "or something of the kind"; a statuette of a blind man with a child in Dupont's study (Teiresias); a bronze Greek sculpture of two horses drawing a chariot with a few figures in it at the Place de la Préfecture, where the police station is located; a dummy in the window of a stationery shop standing in front of an easel where the ruins of Thebes are depicted. It is here that Wallas tries to find a certain kind of eraser that he saw at a friend's house a few months back, one with the manufacturer's name rubbed out except for the letters di. The owner of the shop turns out to be the "attractive" young divorced wife of Dupont. Furthermore, in the window display, the dummy artist painting the ruins of Thebes is looking out not at a view of Thebes but at a blown-up photograph of Dupont's house at 2 rue des Arpenteurs. And finally, Wallas recalls visiting the town and perhaps that same street with his mother when he was a child, looking for some relative as he understood it, but realizes that it was his father she was looking for, who we can only surmise is Dupont himself.

The café where Wallas is staying is a few houses down from the Dupont house, at 10 rue des Arpenteurs. Dupont's house is on the corner, facing the Boulevard Circulaire and the canal that bisects it, which will serve as a hub and reference point as Wallas himself moves in circles through the neighborhood with its labyrinthine streets to conduct his investigation, in effect pursuing himself as though chasing his own tail. Thus circularity is the second formal motif of the novel. The circle is closed. It follows its own logic, going round and round, also without reference to the outside world. "Is it a particular arrangement of the streets in this city," Wallas wonders, "that obliges him always to be asking his way, so that at each reply he finds himself led into new detours?"

The characters nonetheless have names, are concrete beings, operate in recognizable time and space, and the "story" is easy enough to follow, though things are a little jumbled. It takes a while to get your bearings as Robbe-Grillet moves back and forth in time and scenes dissolve into each other, often from one sentence to the next without any indication of transition. Someone in a greenish coat and shapeless felt hat comes around to the café at 10 Arpenteurs looking for a boarder, that is, for Wallas, but he has already left. A customer tells the manager that Albert Dupont down the street has been murdered. The manager says that this is impossible, and besides, Dupont's name is Daniel. And then the drunk comes in with his
riddle (clearly a Teiresias figure, remembered from *Oedipus Rex* as saying: "You are the slayer whom you seek" [line 362]), and then Garinati is introduced, waiting by the canal. It is he who asked the café manager about the boarder. He is also identified as the assassin, employed by a certain Bona.

Other than being trapped in the template of the author's imagination, the characters cannot therefore be said to be unlike traditional characters in traditional novels. They have a past (Wallas in the city as a child), they have feelings (the police commissioner's resentment that Wallas is taking over the case), and they think or try to think logically about the events in which they are involved, weighing various possibilities: Laurent (the police commissioner) and Wallas are trying to solve a crime. Garinati, the assassin, is trying to figure out how Dupont ended up dead after receiving only a superficial wound. None of the characters, however, has a "psychology." They exist in the single dimension of the novel, playing out the oedipal drama. They may even be said to be like the one-dimensional characters in popular novels, existing solely to serve the requirements of the plot.

Nor does *The Erasers* have a theme. It has a form. It is not about anything. Unlike Sophocles’ play, it does not wish to say anything about fate, nor does it wish to say anything about identity, as some might think. The Oedipus story is chosen because it offers a formal motif that can be used as the conceptual framework of the novel.

*The Erasers*, then, really is about nothing. It takes the oedipal motif and stretches it across a story of crime and detection, working through the material at hand to reach an inevitable result. Nothing can be learned about life or the world from the novel. It does not wish to inform, instruct or explain. It unfolds in accordance with its own logic and revolves around its own reference points. It does not have a life outside itself. It is not tethered to the real world. The characters do not exist outside the pages of the novel, making it what may even be called a formal exercise, or art for art's sake.

The action of the novel commences at 6 a.m. on a Tuesday morning in late October. The assassination attempt had occurred the night before. Dupont's housekeeper had run to the café to call Dr. Juard after the shooting because their own phone was out of order. That was what led the café manager to believe that Dupont was alive. At Juard's clinic the faked death is arranged under the minister's instructions and Dupont asks his friend Marchat to retrieve some papers from his study before he leaves the city. Dupont's divorced wife is told that he has died. The police commissioner closes the file and is told that the body has been shipped to the capital and that central services is taking over the case.

Wallas had arrived late Monday night, taking the room at the café, and is out in the streets early the next morning to begin his investigation. We pick him up at the canal as the novel jumps back and forth in time amidst the shifting scenes. Oddly, Wallas's watch had stopped the evening before, at precisely 7:30, the hour Dupont was shot. Wallas reaches the police station at the Place de la Préfecture and buys an eraser before interviewing Commissioner Laurent, who discovers that a bullet is missing from Wallas's revolver. The commissioner also has an eraser on his desk.

Wallas arrives at the crime scene to interview Mme. Smite, the housekeeper. She gives him Dupont's gun from the bedroom drawer, which is the same model as his own and also has a bullet missing. Garinati, in the meanwhile, attempts to pick up Wallas's trail. Wallas then interviews Mme. Bax across the street on the third floor. He asks her if she might not have
seen a prowler in the vicinity the day before; she tells him about a man in a raincoat with a rip in the shoulder and a gray felt hat doing something at Dupont's front gate, then a drunk coming out of a café and shouting at the man in the raincoat. Wallas, now in the café, sees the drunk. The drunk mistakes Wallas for the man in the raincoat he saw the previous night, whom he had then followed to the post office.

Wallas buys another eraser on rue de Victor-Hugo. In the show window of the stationery shop he sees the dummy artist standing in front of the easel painting the ruins of Thebes and behind it the blown-up photograph of Dupont's house at 2 rue des Arpenteurs. He buys a postcard of the photo. He remembers the trip to the city with his mother.

Wallas enter the post office on rue Jonas ostensibly to question employees about the man (and the drunk) that Mme. Bax saw at the Dupont gate at 5 p.m. and who then entered the post office between 5:30 and 6 according to the drunk who thinks it was Wallas. In the post office Wallas is also mistaken for the man in the raincoat and given a letter addressed to him. He takes it to Laurent believing it is addressed to the murderer, an André WS (the WS of course suggesting Wallas himself), by a J.B. (Bona?) and speaking of a meeting and a job to be done and the defection of a certain G. (Garinati?). There is an illegible word in the letter 7-8 letters long which could be éclipse or ellipse (Oedipus again?).

Wallas now enters a shop to get directions to the rue de Corinthe. He also asks for an eraser. (It isn't clear if this is his first visit to the shop on rue Victor-Hugo or the one to the shop where he bought the first eraser.) Now the ruins of Thebes again, the photo with the painter, the saleswoman who might be Dupont's wife, and then, in the next chapter, Wallas again in the shop, now interviewing the wife. A customer in a long greenish coat and dirty hat comes in and buys an eraser and the same postcard that Wallas had bought earlier showing Dupont's house on rue de Arpenteurs. Wallas sees the man outside and pursues him.

Back at the police station, Wallas reads a detailed police report that reveals another suspect: a young man who occasionally visited Dupont and turns out to be his illegitimate son. Now there is a new hypothesis of the son coming to his father's house accompanied by a thug who kills him.

Commissioner Laurent receives a postcard in a woman's handwriting showing a little house on the corner of a long street and a wide avenue, "probably at the edge of a canal," with a message about a meeting at 7:30. Wallas shows him the identical postcard he had bought in the stationery shop. Then Wallas is visiting the city and canal with his mother as a child to find his father, and is in another shop looking for an eraser.

Wallas goes to the Dupont house, thinking of the postcard and the 7:30 meeting, to act as bait on the off-chance that the assassin will show up there. It is 7 p.m. He stations himself behind the chair at Dupont's desk to wait for the murderer.

Dupont is preparing his flight from the clinic but first wants to go himself to retrieve his papers as his friend Marchat has fled, fearing that he is next on the list. He enters the study where Wallas is waiting. Wallas fires at him, thinking he is the assassin. Dupont is killed. Wallas notes that his watch is running again. (It is as though time had been frozen until the materials of the novel played themselves out outside the time of the world and the murder was actually committed.)
Wallas returns to his room in the café at 6 a.m. (Wednesday). Garinati again arrives looking for him. Wallas prepares to return to the capital. The story of Laurent's real death appears in the newspapers.

*The Erasers* is mystifying precisely because we are looking for a meaning. Robbe-Grillet insists that his novels have no meaning. Here and there, he even seems to be epitomizing his own technique, as when he describes Dupont's house as seen from Mme. Bax's third-floor window across the street:

> From the street level one cannot appreciate so fully the harmony of the proportions, the rigor – the necessity, one might say – of the whole structure, whose simplicity is scarcely disturbed – or on the contrary, accentuated – by the complicated grillework of the balconies.

Or when he describes the oscillations in the drawbridge on the canal when it is lowered:

> the oscillations – growing fainter and fainter but whose cessation it was difficult to be certain of – consequently approximated – by a series of successive prolongation and regressions on either side of a quite illusory fixity – a phenomenon completed, nevertheless, some time before.

But how is it possible for a novel to have no meaning? Perhaps it would be best to use the analogy of the inkblot. When a bottle of ink is spilled on a bare surface, the pattern that is formed depends on the quantity of ink, the shape and size of the rim of the bottle, the height from which it is poured, etc. What the inkblot means is a matter of personal interpretation. In and of itself the inkblot means nothing. The creator of the inkblot, the person spilling the ink, who only chooses the bottle, and perhaps the color of the ink, has no meaning in mind.

It is natural for us to want to know the meaning of things. This is how our brains are constructed, for our survival, to read signs and decipher their meanings. This evolutionary response carries over into circumstances where our lives are not at risk. We stare at an abstract painting and want to know what it means, what the artist is trying to say. Robbe-Grillet tells us, with reference to his own novels, that they mean nothing and say nothing. The *Erasers* is about "a turn of events," as one of the post office clerks says, thinking Wallas is the murderer, "where the guilty man himself takes charge of the investigation," or where a detective seeking a murderer turns out to be the murderer himself in a narrative that links itself to the story of Oedipus. That is all there is. Robbe-Grillet will not object if the reader finds certain meanings in the novel but assures us that they will not be his meanings. They will be what the reader reads into the novel, and if he thinks that the novel is about fate, that is fine, but that is not what Robbe-Grillet had in mind and the reader will find no clues in the novel to lead him to believe that this was Robbe-Grillet's intention. What Robbe-Grillet had in mind was a narrative about someone looking for a murderer who turns out to be himself, like Oedipus, and nothing more. The writing of the novel involves the working out of this idea.
We are not told, then, why Wallas is looking for a certain kind of eraser beyond the fact that he saw one like it at a friend's house. For the reader, however, it must mean something; otherwise why would it be there? But for Robbe-Grillet it is just another formal element, an object that has no meaning outside itself, only reinforcing the oedipal motif. At the same time, he will not object if readers speculate about its meaning, as long as they understand that it will not be his meaning, for he has none. Or rather, its meaning has no reference point outside the framework of the novel. The reader is welcome to bring to the novel whatever he wishes to, and in this way will become part of the process of bringing it to life. Robbe-Grillet has no such pretenses. We can say, if we like, that the erasers have something to do with erasing one's fate, which would make them a transcendent or referential symbol. Or is it that the narrative "erases" – overrides – the Oedipus story, leaving just traces of it, or that the narrative itself must be erased to get at the Oedipus story beneath it? But the erasers themselves, again, can have no signification outside the novel. They cannot stand for anything other than themselves, just as the novel cannot stand for anything other than itself, like the sick Europe of *The Magic Mountain* or the Nazi scourge of *The Plague*, for example.

If *The Erasers* can be seen as a formal exercise, *The Voyeur*, in contrast, is a penetrating study of the mind of a psychopath – not in the conventional psychological sense but in the strictly phenomenological sense, that is, not in the etiological sense but in terms of how things are arranged in consciousness, both topographically and associatively. Mathias, a watch salesman, returns to the island where he was born – a three-hour steamship crossing from the mainland – and at a certain point, it is possible to understand, tortures, rapes and murders a 13-year-old girl. What Robbe-Grillet demonstrates is how the idea occurs to him, how the impulse is constructed. All the elements that go into producing the act establish themselves in his mind within a relatively short period of time. Even before he departs in the morning, taking a shortcut to the pier, he thinks he hears a woman moaning and sees the silhouette of a man in a window with a hand raised over an unmade bed, and on a table in the room a blue pack of cigarettes. On the boat, just as it is docking, he finds a piece of hemp cord a yard or two in length, reminding him of his childhood string collection. A girl of seven or eight stares at him. He spots a wad of blue paper like a cigarette pack floating in the water. He notices a mark like a figure eight in the embankment of the pier and then another a yard away, both with a "reddish excrescence," that look like rust-corroded pivots where iron rings might have been attached as moorings. A sea gull overhead reminds him of a gull at his childhood home perched on a fencepost that he had tried to draw. The little girl on deck is observed leaning against a pillar with her hands behind her back. These are the data of consciousness that will feed the impulse behind the real (or imagined) murder.

Mathias now makes elaborate calculations to determine the island's population (2,000), how long he can spend with each potential customer until the steamship returns to the mainland in the afternoon (4 minutes), and what his profit will be (5,000 crowns), determining that he must sell a watch in 1 of 4 households (he has 89 after selling one on shore). We are now in Mathias's overheated mind and shall remain there during the entire novel, witnessing the thoughts, images, memories, perceptions that occur there and are recorded without comment or elaboration. Robbe-Grillet is in effect describing the contents and associations in Mathias's mind in the same way that he describes a drawbridge on a canal. These are mixed together in a purely subjective domain that is outside the time of the world (suggested by the watches), just as time stands still for Wallas in *The Erasers*. 
Now Mathias imagines how he will go about selling his watches. Before leaving, he had talked to a sailor on the mainland who has a sister with three daughters, the youngest somewhat wild, living in the last house as you leave town on the road to the lighthouse on the other side of the island, so he imagines knocking on her door, which he imagines to have two knots like rings visible in the wood and he also imagines the woman looking out at the landscape of his own childhood home. Then he is in the town itself, seeing a movie poster where a huge man is strangling a young girl in a long nightgown while holding her wrists behind her back with a bed in the background and a broken doll on the ground. His suitcase too has a pattern of tiny dolls in the lining. Now he rents a bike, but before receiving it he stops in at a café where he sees the owner, a big man, intimidating a "timorous" barmaid with the nape of her neck exposed. His name is Robin. Mathias says he knew a Jean Robin on the island 30 years ago. That was the big man's cousin. "He's dead," he says, and allows Mathias to go upstairs to show his wife his watches. She is not there but he finds an empty bedroom with a painting of a little girl in a nightgown kneeling before a bed to recite her prayers in a room "just like the room in which it hung" and the unmade bed showing signs of a struggle and a blue pack of cigarettes on the night table.

Then Mathias stops in at a general store, seeing the truncated torso of a mannequin in a brassiere and garter belt leaning against a shelf, the smooth golden skin of her shoulders, the nape of the neck, and buys a bag of gumdrops. He imagines the "timorous" barmaid sitting on the edge of the unmade bed in the room upstairs in the café, or perhaps in the painting there. He takes out an old newspaper clipping from his wallet, about the "horrible" murder of a girl. Again he imagines the girl on a bed, and this time a giant of a man forcing her to kneel at his feet with his hand pressing down on her neck. Then he picks up the bicycle, buying a pack of cigarettes and noticing the movie poster again. It is 11:15.

His first stop is at the Leduc house at the edge of town. He introduces himself as an acquaintance of the brother. He sees a photograph of a girl who he takes to be "Violet," but realizes that it isn't, though it looks like her, as Violet had been leaning against a tree with her legs slightly apart and her hands behind her back, "her posture an ambiguous mixture of surrender and constraint." The girl in the photo turns out to be the youngest of the woman's three daughters, the troublesome 13-year-old Jacqueline, about whom she immediately starts complaining while Mathias thinks of Violet with her arms bound but hears the woman say that Jacqueline is tending sheep at the moment at the edge of the cliff, in the opposite direction from the Marek farm if you turn off the road to the lighthouse. He determines to visit the Marek farm, as he knew the family, turning left at the crossroads whereas if he turned right, toward the southwest coast of the island, he would find "young Violet tending sheep at the edge of the cliff." And then he is on his way.

Violet, who must be a girl connected with his childhood, is now thoroughly confused in his mind with Jacqueline. At the crossroads he sees a dead frog flattened on the ground and then runs into Grandmother Marek coming up from the direction of the big village near the lighthouse at the southern end of the island and seems to be working out an alibi in his mind about why he is there. But then he learns from Grandmother Marek that no one is home and quickly elaborates a story in his mind about having gone directly to the farm and finding no one there. Then he is at the village at Black Rocks near the lighthouse and enters a café where he learns that the Leduc girl is missing and that one of her sisters has been there looking for her and mentioned the watch salesman so Mathias wonders if she had seen him at the cliff. The time is now 1:07. Mathias had recognized Violet immediately, in the disguise she had worn in the photograph. A gray sweater was lying next to her on the ground.
Then, in the café, a fisherman/sailor recognizes him and prevails on him to come back to his cottage with him, located near the beach, and Violet with her arms and legs held against the quay by four iron rings and Mathias thinking the name Jean Robin is chalked on the fisherman's door. Inside, a young woman serves them a meal and the fisherman has a few choice words to say about Jacqueline, saying she "deserves the whip," and warning his woman not to have anything to do with her, and now Violet and Jacqueline confused again in Mathias's mind and he gives the fisherman's woman a watch and returns to the village at Black Rocks and then, on his rounds again, he sells a few more watches but on the way back to the town and quay the bike breaks down and he misses the boat back to the mainland.

Now there is a new movie poster in town, and again Robbe-Grillet seems to be epitomizing his own technique when he describes it:

The new advertisement represented a landscape.
At least Mathias thought he could make out a moor dotted with clumps of bushes in its interlacing lines, but something else must have been superimposed: here and there certain outlines or patches of color appeared which did not seem to be part of the original design....

Attempting once again to decipher the network of curves and angles, Mathias now recognized nothing at all – it was impossible to decide whether there were two different images superimposed, or just one, or three, or even more....

the more he examined it, the more vague, shifting and incomprehensible it seemed.

He also discovers that three cigarettes are missing from the pack he bought, the gumdrop bag is open and the length of cord he had found is missing from his pocket.

Mathias again hears that the Leduc girl has disappeared, then has visions of Violet/Jacqueline, then rents a room in a private house (the next boat is on Friday) and remembers his childhood home.

Jacqueline's body is found the next morning, thought to have fallen off the cliff.

Now Mathias remembers the three half-smoked cigarettes left in the grass on the cliff and returns to find them. He imagines Jacqueline with her shift in her mouth to keep her from screaming, then becomes aware of the fisherman's woman watching him. The woman believes that it is her man who killed Jacqueline. She returns the watch he gave her, saying her man would be jealous and kill her as he killed Jacqueline and shows him a half-smoked cigarette that she had found as if it is the man's, whom she calls Pierre, so Mathias is able to understand that he is not Jean Robin after all. It turns out that Pierre's woman had been with Jacqueline on the cliff until 11 o'clock the previous day. Mathias now finds the second cigarette. Afterwards he walks to the Marek farm and overhears the father, Robert, accusing his son, Julian, of murdering Jacqueline, and on the wall "the picture on the calendar representing a little girl, blindfolded, playing blind-man's bluff." Mathias makes it known that he had visited the house the day before, at noon, when no one was home. Julian confirms the lie, saying he had been in the shed and had seen Mathias. Mathias realizes that this creates an alibi for the boy too though he cannot acknowledge that he saw him in the shed as his view
was blocked but thinks it was possible. Now Mathias examines a number of other possibilities to explain why the boy lied for him, since the boy's alibi is unnecessary as he obviously hadn't murdered the girl.

Mathias now reviews the chronology he had established in his mind from the time he started out on the bike at 11:10 or 11:15, reaching the crossroads at 11:35-11:40 and running into Mme. Marek an hour later (12:20 at the earliest), thus leaving 40-50 minutes unaccounted for, which would be covered by the supposed trip to the farm and some time spent repairing the gearshift of his bike. Mathias now returns to the cliff, finding Jacqueline's sweater hanging from a rock, and climbs down to get it, throwing it into the sea. Then Julian Marek appears and sees what he has done. He shows Mathias a gumdrop wrapper that he had found in the grass. He also extracts a half-smoked cigarette and a thick cord from his pocket. Then Julian is gone.

Mathias returns to his room in town. In the night, Wednesday night, he dreams of Violet, childhood, the sea gull. Thursday morning he burns the old newspaper clipping about the murder of the young girl. He returns to the café where the "timorous" barmaid waited on tables. She stretches out her arm.

    Her hand is small, the wrist almost too delicate, the cord had cut into both wrists, making deep red lines.... He had been forced to tie her ankles too – not together ... but separately, each one attached to the ground, about a yard apart.... [using] two of the metal pegs [to which the sheep had been tethered] – pointed stakes with a loop at the top.

On Friday afternoon Mathias leaves the island.

Robbe-Grillet gives us the pieces of a puzzle but does not assemble it for us. The novel generates its own motifs and images, that is, yields associations that are recorded without comment. One such group of associations, the major one in The Voyeur, revolves around the Violet/Jacqueline complex and the images of female submission that crystallize in Mathias's mind as he observes his surroundings, starting with the iron rings imagined in the embankment of the pier. We understand that Violet is connected to his childhood. Had he observed her kneeling beside her bed in her nightgown or in some other posture suggesting submission? We wonder if the old newspaper clipping about a murdered girl that Mathias carries in his wallet refers to Violet and whether Mathias himself murdered her, or perhaps someone else did, or it may be that the newspaper clipping refers to some other girl that Mathias or someone else murdered. We do not know. Robbe-Grillet does not tell us. We also do not know how and why Mathias has turned out to be what he is. It is probable that Robbe-Grillet does not know either. In fact, by definition (his own), he cannot know anything about Mathias beyond what is recorded in the novel, as Mathias does not exist outside its pages.

Nonetheless, our inclination may be to say that Robbe-Grillet is concealing information from us like any popular novelist or writer of thrillers, for surely Mathias knows what he has done, now and in the past, and surely this knowledge presents itself to him in very explicit ways, though we ourselves cannot always distinguish between what Mathias is imagining and what he is experiencing, for Robbe-Grillet locates memory, imagination and perception in the same undifferentiated plane of consciousness. However, it is also conceivable that Mathias himself
cannot make the distinction, which would be typical of the psychotic mind. Nonetheless, few readers will doubt that it is Mathias who murdered Jacqueline, though we cannot discount entirely the possibility that Mathias is imagining the murder, that the fall from the cliff really was an accident and no one murdered her, or that someone else murdered her – Pierre or Julian, for example – but then again the murder is not meant to represent a real act in the real world by a character who is meant to represent a real person. Robbe-Grillet has elaborated a series of reference points and works his way through them to create a work of art that refers to nothing outside itself. Along the way it creates a phenomenological portrait of a deranged mind. One may even point to an expressionistic element in the portrait. Mathias does, in a sense, appropriate objects but not in the bourgeois sense of possessing them. He imbues them with his own consciousness, distorts them in the way that Van Gogh distorts his wheatfield with crows or the parsonage at Neunen. This is what all of us do, in fact, so that some may find the stream of consciousness rushing through the mind of Mathias even more compelling than the monologue of Molly Bloom.

To follow the movement of the characters in The Erasers and The Voyeur, one has to draw a map whose contours are not always clear from the narrative. In the third novel, Jealousy, where there is virtually no movement, Robbe-Grillet himself supplies the map. This is a very detailed diagram of the tropical banana plantation where the action of the novel takes place, including a floor plan of the main house with its furnishings and the veranda that surrounds it on three sides. It is mostly here, on the veranda, as well as in the dining room of the house, that A., the mistress of the plantation, and Franck, who owns the neighboring plantation, get together for drinks and occasional meals whose sequence is also not always clear, moving back and forth and running together in time while always referring to a few central motifs. Like The Voyeur, Jealousy is a phenomenological study – this time of an emotion.

What Robbe-Grillet neglects to tell us is that A. has a husband, who is always present but never mentioned explicitly, except in the legend to the diagram, where the fourth chair on the veranda is labeled la chaise du mari (the husband's chair), though not in the English translation, where it is not identified at all, no doubt to keep from giving too much away. It is in fact through the husband's eyes that we see the action of the novel unfold. One may thus be inclined to say then that, like The Erasers and The Voyeur, Jealousy hinges on a revelation, you could even say a trick, withholding a vital piece of information, though at a certain point the reader will understand that the husband is there observing his wife as her imagined affair with Franck progresses. The "jealousy" (jalousie) of the title thus has a double meaning, referring also to the blinds with their wooden slats through which the husband spies on his wife.

Now the shadow of the column – the column which supports the southwest corner of the roof – divides the corresponding corner of the veranda into two equal parts.... So at this moment the shadow of the outer edge of the roof coincides exactly with the right angle formed by the terrace and the two vertical surfaces of the corner of the house.

So the novel begins in the famous objective style of Robbe-Grillet, the novelist of "surfaces." Everything will be noted in just this way, without comment, and as in The Erasers and The Voyeur, where the time of the world is represented by watches – the watches that Mathias sells and the watch worn by Wallas that stops at the moment of the assassination attempt –
here we have the sundial created by the southwest column of the veranda to indicate the time of the world. Apropos of the chronology of Jealousy, Robbe-Grillet himself remarked in For a New Novel that

it was absurd to suppose … there existed a clear and unambiguous order of events, one which was not that of the sentences of the book, as if I had diverted myself by mixing up a pre-established calendar the way one shuffles a pack of cards. The narrative was on the contrary made in such a way that any attempt to reconstruct an external chronology would lead, sooner or later, to a series of contradictions … precisely because there existed for me no possible order outside of that of the book, [being] a story which had no other reality than that of the narrative, an occurrence which functioned nowhere else except in the mind of the invisible narrator, in other words of the writer, and of the reader.

And this is indeed the case. As carefully as one reads, a precise chronology eludes one and it is often impossible to place a particular scene of the novel at a particular point in its general time frame. At the center of this frame is the night A. and Franck spend together in town after Franck's car breaks down on a shopping trip. On either side of this central point are the preceding week, when they plan the trip, and the days or perhaps even weeks following it, all mixed together, as they might very well be mixed together in the mind of a jealous husband as now one image and now another force themselves into his consciousness. When we finally realize that what is being objectively described is what the husband perceives and imagines we should be able to appreciate that Robbe-Grillet has again demonstrated how the data of consciousness present themselves in the human mind.

Franck arrives for dinner without his wife, Christiane, who is at home with a sick child. Franck and A. are on the veranda. Then dinner. Franck's wife had been with them when they all had lunch earlier. Three places are set now but it is not clear that there is a third party at the table until the talk turns to car problems and A. "stays out of the conversation."

A. and Franck talk about a novel that A. is reading.

Stain on the dining room wall where a centipede had been crushed a week before.

On veranda again.

Franck announcing he must get back to his wife and child.

Counting banana trees, row by row (a notorious passage: "The second patch is twenty-three trees deep" but as it is trapezoidal, "the row on the right has no more than thirteen banana trees instead of twenty-three" and in the middle row twenty-two as in the third row but the fourth has twenty-one like the fifth and so on until all the trees are counted)

Sun low in east. A. in bedroom, saying "Hello" playfully. Has showered, wearing lipstick, hair combed. A. at work table, mending stockings or polishing nails. Franck on veranda.

Three chairs, three drinks. A. mentioning that there is no ice.
Office view of veranda with top of A.'s head visible through lower wooden slats of blind.

Dining room. Talk about malaria and quinine, Christiane’s and boy’s health, African novel. Squashed centipede stain.

Centipede squashed by Franck.

A. combing hair.

Three places set in dining room.

A. starts eating without Franck, who hasn't arrived yet. Three roasted birds brought in; Franck's uneaten. The attentive reader may have by now understood that the third figure in the mélange is indeed the husband.

A. getting out of Franck’s big blue sedan. A. then sitting with Franck; then dawn and A. not up yet.

Talk about trip to town with Franck. Talk about novel they have both now finished reading (apparently about adultery).

Now talk about car breaking down on their trip, so it is now after the trip. Franck has just brought A. back after they spent the night in a hotel and must run to see Christiane, who must be worried.

Dining room table set for one (obviously husband),

A.’s place will have to be added.

Now, moving back in time, the table is set for three and they are talking about the trip to town they are going to take together the following week.

Now at lunch (clearly with husband) after getting back from town.

Now at lunch with Franck when centipede is squashed on wall.

Then on veranda talking about when they will take the trip they discussed the evening before.

A. listens to the song of a Negro driver. "If the themes [in the song] sometimes blur, they only recur somewhat later, all the more clearly, virtually identical. Yet these repetitions, these tiny variations, halts, regressions, can give rise to modifications – though barely perceptible – eventually moving quite far from the point of departure."

Franck on veranda. A. getting three drinks. This is when she makes the remark (described earlier) about needing ice cubes. A. and Franck on veranda after return from trip. View is apparently husband’s from the office, taking in A. and Franck and farther on the men repairing the termite-infested bridge.

Scene shifts to dining room when centipede was squashed a week earlier. Now A. is getting out of Franck's car with packages. Now A. is brought home by Franck after a visit to
Christiane, who has been at home for a few days because of her poor health as well as the child's. Robbe-Grillet now seems to be helping us establish a conventional chronology, looking maybe like this:

- Lunch with Franck and Christiane
- Dinner with Franck alone
- Trip to town discussed for following week
- Next morning on veranda planning trip
- Centipede killed at lunch?
- Visit to Christiane
- Trip to town

A. hears driver's song.

Husband clearly spying on A. through jalousies, moving around the house as she does.

A. to town with Franck. Left 6:30 a.m., expected back around midnight; eight-hour drive. The centipede again.

A. mending stocking, polishing nails.

A reading book on veranda toward evening (meaning she has not finished it yet).

Night before trip to town.

Franck arrives 6:30 a.m.

Now 6:30 in evening.

Squashed centipede. Speculation about A.'s delayed return.

Centipede growing to the size of a plate in the husband's mind. Vision of centipede crushed against wall, fallen to floor and crushed there too. Faint crackling of mandibles recalling sound of A. combing hair. Franck coming back to bed after killing centipede.

Franck driving. Vision of Franck crashing into a tree, car bursting into flames. Fire crackles like centipede.

Motion of A.'s arm combing hair in cycle describing curve and always coming back to point of departure.

(The crushed centipede – we remember Frank Machin crushing the spider in *This Sporting Life* – can be seen in two senses: as what Franck has done to the husband and as what the husband would like to do to Franck. In both senses the centipede becomes a subjective symbol or objective correlative around which the husband's jealousy flares up. In the husband's imagination it is linked to Franck's car crashing into the tree and exploding and then the brush fire crackling like the centipede's mandibles, and then to the sound of A. brushing her long hair, a sexual image tied to his jealousy.)
Morning. A. not back.

A. saying "Good morning" in playful tone.

A. and Franck with drinks on veranda. Talking about trip to town next week. Mention of novel A. is reading about a negligent husband.

Driver singing: "The sounds, despite apparent repetitions, do not seem related by any musical law. There is no tune really, no rhythm. It is as though the man were content to utter unconnected fragments as an accompaniment to his work."

Franck at lunch without Christiane, who had been there the day before. Then on veranda sometime after trip to town.

Franck leaves; just passing by.

Now A. with novel Franck had lent her.


Plans for trip to town at dinner.

A. getting out of Franck's blue sedan, brought back by Franck after visit to Christiane.

Talk about novel. Talk about a truck of Franck's with engine trouble.

Now A. is leaning on the balustrade.

Now it is 6:30.

"Now the dark night and the deafening racket of the crickets again engulf the garden and the veranda, all around the house."

What Robbe-Grillet presents, simply put, are again the thoughts, images and perceptions presented to a subject as the data of his own consciousness and serving to produce an emotion. The emotion itself is not described as such and the question then becomes whether Robbe-Grillet is writing as a behaviorist or an innovative artist. In traditional literature, emotions, or what a character is feeling, are described in various ways, sometimes very directly and intimately through the medium of poetic or inflated language, sometimes in understated prose that is manipulated in its rhythms and choice of words to produce the desired effect. I imagine that Robbe-Grillet counts on the reader's understanding of what jealousy feels like, counts then on the reader to give life to the novel. What he offers is its anatomy, represented with characteristic technical brilliance and complexity. We see how a mind under the influence of the emotion called jealousy operates, how data are assimilated and arranged in consciousness.

It is easy to see how emotion is generated by perception. A man may become jealous when he observes his wife in certain circumstances. These circumstances – her hand taking the hand
of another man, a certain tone of voice when she speaks to him, intimate laughter, shared
secrets, a glance, a look on the face – are all objectively recorded and interpreted in the brain
or mind in a characteristic way to produce in a man the condition called jealousy, just as
objective circumstances – heat, lack of water – will produce in a plant the condition called
wilting.

On the clinical level there is certainly considerable value in Robbe-Grillet's presentation.
Data are recorded in consciousness in precisely the way that Robbe-Grillet represents them in
Jealousy, and the combination or interaction of these data on a given subjective ground may
produce an emotion. But an emotion, it must be said, is not an image or a strip of film or
something printed out by a machine. It belongs to a subject. It has no existence apart from the
subject who experiences it, and therefore the let us say unique being of the subject or
individual is the seat of these emotions. An emotion cannot be considered independently of
the individual who experiences it. Robbe-Grillet does not deny this, for it is always a subject
that sees, feels, etc., and yet his individuals always lack an emotional center, the familiar "I"
that knows that these feelings are uniquely his own. To identify this 'I' as such would indeed
mean to become a traditional novelist, and this is a dilemma, for to characterize the subjective
sense of an individual one must step behind his field of vision and represent emotion not by
objective signs or by its causes but by its self-conscious effects, and this Robbe-Grillet
refuses to do.

In his next novel, In the Labyrinth, Robbe-Grillet returned to the strictly formal mode of the
first, but unlike The Erasers, where we cannot feel anything for the characters, who are
completely depersonalized, In the Labyrinth is ultimately moving in an almost inexplicable
way as it goes about telling its story of a soldier trying to deliver a package for a fallen
comrade.

The soldier is of course not a conventional fictional character. He steps out of a 19th century
engraving in the narrator's study that Robbe-Grillet miraculously brings to life – a tavern
scene under which someone had written "The Defeat of Reichenfels" and depicting among
the patrons three soldiers and a child sitting on the floor holding on to what looks like a
shoebox. The first image of the novel after establishing the "I" who narrates it is of rain
outside, then sun. The narrator is in a room where the dust on a polished table reveals the
outlines of various objects that had lain there and there is a fly on the upper rim of a
lampshade casting a distorted shadow on the ceiling that resembles the filament of the electric
bulb.

Out of these and diverse other elements in the narrator's mind, a figure is conjured up, a
soldier carrying a package like a shoebox. Then the tavern scene comes to life and the soldier
and the child in the engraving are transposed to a snowy street and a plausible narrative
thread emerges (though itself having no reality). The (French? Belgian?) army is in retreat
after the (fictional) Battle of Reichenfels. The (German?) enemy in pursuit is approaching the
city. Now we are in the 19th century (the world of the engraving), apparently in the Franco-
Prussian war; now we are apparently in World War II: motorcycles, machineguns,
telephones, electric lights. A soldier in the retreat has a box filled with mementoes belonging
to his dead comrade and attempts to deliver it at a prearranged meeting place but fails to find
his contact. The soldier himself is wounded by the enemy and dies. The doctor who treated
him takes the box to his apartment and opens it in the room where an engraving of a tavern
scene hangs on the wall showing three soldiers and a boy holding a box in the crowded room.
The novel again illustrates the idea of the novel as a medium that looks to invent itself out of its own materials. What is at hand is a picture on the wall, a 19th century tavern scene where the narrator finds the soldier and the boy, and then the image of the soldier walking in the snow in both a modern and a historical setting. That is all. This is what the narrator will build the novel from, even inventing himself in the process. To the extent that the novel is moving, it is the reader who makes it so, tying the soldier's quest to something both tragic and eternal in the human condition.

The last of Robbe-Grillet's novels that I read in the 1960s was La Maison de rendez-vous (1965). This is a sex-driven fantasy inspired by the narrow slit skirts worn by the elegant Eurasian women of Hong Kong. The "I" of the novel is another narrator creating a narrative from materials that embrace a number of possibilities, for in the world of pure imagination, all possibilities have equal weight and status and there is no "official" reality.

The cast of characters includes Lady Ava, catering to an elite clientele of pleasure seekers at her Blue Villa in Victoria, Hong Kong; her protégée Lauren, who has spurned her Dutch fiancé, Georges Marchat, who is found shot dead in his car; Sir Ralph Johnson, known as "the American" though he is British, who is in love with Lauren and trying to put together a large sum of money to get her to go away with him; and Edouard Manneret, an elderly drug dealer and white-slave trader, who is also reported dead. Time is scrambled, scenes dissolve into each other, works of art again come to life and it is impossible to know what is real and what is imagined.

Here, too, a certain premise crystallizes, which is not necessarily true, namely, that the narrator/author is at a party in some European city, hosted by an aging woman named Eve or Eva Bergmann who likes to tell stories about the Far East, as does one of the guests, a fat, red-faced man. From what he hears the narrator perhaps begins to imagine a narrative, weighing various possibilities and fed by the sexual images that inflame his senses and are familiar to us from The Voyeur: the nape of a woman's bent neck, iron manacles, iron rings set in stone, a length of cord, the glowing tip of a cigar, mannequins, a theater poster, and as in all his novels, it is almost impossible to work out a definite sequence of events. There is none, in fact, nor do the characters exist in any concrete sense, as may also be said of his Marienbad screenplay. In the latter case, the existence of the characters lasts only as long as the film, or, as Robbe-Grillet put it: "There is no reality outside the images we see."

Robbe-Grillet's thinking had many antecedents. I have mentioned phenomenology, and this is the phenomenology of Husserl, as mediated by Sartre. A phenomenon is an object as it appears to an observer. In the old Kantian scheme this was distinguished from the unknowable thing-in-itself, the object as it exists independently of its perception or conceptualization. In the Sartrean sense, the subject is a passive vessel whose senses are assailed by the objects of the world. From here it is tempting to tie Robbe-Grillet to Heidegger as well and to the philosophy of existentialism, and insofar as this pertains to the idea of a Godless and essentially meaningless universe in which things are simply there, the connection is clear, but whereas the existentialists seek to create meaning and value out of human experience itself, Robbe-Grillet refuses to take this step, concerning himself only with the creation of art, though he insists that true existential anxiety is at the heart of Jealousy — "the anxiety which Heidegger believes man must experience as the price of his spiritual freedom," as he told the Paris Review.
Robbe-Grillet’s objective style, which is the product of his philosophical outlook, also had many antecedents. He mentions Kafka. The universe in which both Joseph K. and K. the surveyor seek a meaning presents itself, like the universe of Camus, as absurd in the very fact of its existence, and Kafka underscores this absurdity by documenting it matter-of-factly, with a straight face, so to speak, that is, by pretending to take it seriously – though with a clearly felt undercurrent of irony – and thereby exposing its absurdity in the way that you might get someone to make a fool of himself by letting him run off at the mouth and reveal himself for what he is. But whereas Kafka is engaged in an active quest for meaning, and therefore the style also resonates with a sense of bewilderment and even pain (“Where was the Judge whom he had never seen?”), Robbe-Grillet seeks nothing. He simply records what is.

In the purely imaginative works (The Erasers, In the Labyrinth, La Maison de Rendez-Vous), Robbe-Grillet engages in what can only be called formal exercises, art for art’s sake, and has explained himself fully as to what he intended and what he did not intend to do. In the "psychological" works (The Voyeur, Jealousy), which embrace the same imaginative elements as the others, Robbe-Grillet offers an almost scientific demonstration of how human consciousness interacts with the world, that is, how it receives data from the world and how this data arrange themselves in the mind. This is of great value, as far as the science goes. However, the absence of an active subject in these novels, a subject who actively feels rather than merely records, will leave many readers dissatisfied. It is true that the selection and filtering of what is recorded implies a subject that feels, has a definite nature, a unique self, a past and even a conventional psychology, but all of these are hidden, as is the terrible freedom that stares us in the face in a universe stripped of meaning where human beings are thrown back on themselves to sink or swim as creators of value. Both this freedom and the self that experiences it are implied in Robbe-Grillet’s novels but never lived. What we are left with is indeed an objectified subject, and however much the traditional novel has failed to represent this subject authentically, for life is certainly not a story, the direction that Robbe-Grillet took, when all is said and done, cannot be said to give us a more profound understanding of the world and of ourselves. Others will have to leap across the void and carry the torch to create what Robbe-Grillet called "tomorrow's world."
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