

Literature, Mythology, Orphism: “Language as God” in the French *Nouveau Roman*

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Abstract

European literature of the late twentieth century usually appears as belonging to an atheistic, agnostic, materialistic worldview. In post-World War II France, major literary trends created new ways of thinking and writing that seemingly precluded all metaphysical concerns. The present study focuses on a particular French literary movement called *Le Nouveau Roman* (“The New Novel”). A posterioricritical approach nevertheless shows that novels generated by these authors cannot escape the principles of the eternal return and remain deeply rooted in mythology, particularly in mythological ways of thinking. Directly or indirectly, they reactivate the Orphic myth, and more particularly Orphism as a literary tradition in which language becomes the ultimate, the absolute. With other writers from *Le Nouveau Roman*, Claude Simon (1913-2005), the 1985 Nobel Prize winner, is a typical example of this type of writing and of the aesthetic evolution of a novelist. Simon’s fiction had an enormous impact on contemporary intelligentsia, although it is still considered to be rather hermetic, quite extreme in its deconstruction of the traditional novel. Such a reading of mythical dimensions in *Le Nouveau Roman* is indebted to Mircea Eliade and Gilbert Durand’s studies of myths and the “imaginary,” as well as the analysis of the Orphic myth by Elizabeth Sewell.

Keywords: French New Novel; Claude Simon; structuralism; semiotics; return of mythology; Orphism.

1. Introduction

European literature of the late twentieth century usually appears as belonging to an atheistic, agnostic, and materialistic worldview. Yet, mythological elements that we find in these literary works, with archetypes, symbols, explicit or implicit recourse to ancient traditions and belief systems, are an indelible mark of what many myth scholars identify as the eternal return: of patterns in human psyche linked to creativity that inevitably brings to light the connections with our (mythical) past.

In post-World War II France, major literary trends created new ways of thinking and writing that seemingly precluded all metaphysical concerns. The present study concentrates on a particular French literary movement called *Le Nouveau Roman* (The

New Novel). Inasmuch as this literary movement stems from this same anti-metaphysical attitude, a posterioricritical approach shows that novels generated by the “New Novelists” remain deeply rooted in mythology, particularly in mythological ways of thinking. I link these mainly to Orphic myth, and Orphism as a particular literary tradition, wherein language becomes the ultimate, in other words, the absolute.

As a typical example of this type of writing and of the aesthetic evolution of a novelist, I refer to the 1985 Nobel Prize winner, Claude Simon (1913-2005). With other writers from *Le Nouveau Roman*, in which Simon was particularly prominent in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, his fiction had an enormous impact on contemporary intelligentsia, although it is still considered to be a rather hermetic literary orientation, quite extreme in its deconstruction of the traditional types of writing, especially the novel.

In the early fifties, *Le Nouveau Roman* was generated by the necessity to counter mainstream plot-oriented writing, and particularly philosophical prose such as that of Sartre, in which language, “la parole,” was completely subordinated to a development of particular ideas and to their defense.

The notoriety of *Le Nouveau Roman* was built partly through the cohesion of seven or eight writers united around their publisher, Jérôme Lindon, at *Les Éditions de Minuit*: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Claude Simon, Robert Pinget, Claude Ollier, Samuel Beckett, and Nathalie Sarraute, as well as Jean Ricardou, who joined the group in the sixties. The activities of the group were warmly welcomed by one of the founders of modern semiology, Roland Barthes, a long-time central critical authority in France.

In his early writings, Barthes defends the new “phenomenological literature” of these writers, promoting the “gaze” of an “objective” narrator. In Robbe-Grillet’s novels, for example, the narrator, a major focal point in traditional novels, has almost disappeared. Furthermore, theories devised mainly from inside the movement by Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, and subsequently Ricardou progressively introduced a new approach to New Novels—an approach that was extremely narratological in nature, as it omitted all psychology or indicators of the writers’ attitudes. Plot, characters, linear development of the story, metaphysical questioning: these were the main targets in *Le Nouveau Roman*’s process of deconstructing the novel.

From the first so-called phenomenological phase, *Le Nouveau Roman* evolved into a profoundly structuralist prose, where all possible extra-textual references were reduced to what Ricardou called “la bataille de la phrase” (“the battle of the phrase”) (1971, 119) in his reading of Claude Simon’s *The Battle at Pharsalus (La bataille de Pharsale, 1969)*. In the seventies, French semiotics had an impact on the perception of what might be read in *Le Nouveau Roman*: emphasis upon structure gave way to allowing some “meaning”; that is to say, a multiplicity of meanings might be sought in place of a unique, nearly theological “sense.” An awareness of novels’ intertextuality became one of the main orientations in researching these texts.

As an example of how a writer from *Le Nouveau Roman* reacted to the highly intellectual and abstract debates around the fate of contemporary fiction, Claude Simon

followed somewhat reluctantly the limiting structuralist impositions of theoreticians among the novelists from inside the movement. Finally, Simon declared his disapproval of Ricardou's readings of his own novels, especially in the mid-eighties. Simon always referred to himself as "Monsieur Jourdain of the Nouveau Roman" (a reference to Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*), meaning that he was—theoretically—the least educated writer among the group. On receiving the Nobel Prize, in 1985, Simon nevertheless refused categorically that his prose still be interpreted by a strictly structuralist-semiotic grid such as strongly promoted by Ricardou.

Regardless of the many approaches to Simon's novels, a particular feature of his writing did not catch his contemporary readers' eyes, probably because of its own imposing "mythology," with a system of values and codes of reading inside this literary movement. No matter how much these writers were efficient in re-organizing the traditional novel, they could not eradicate the one feature that underlines all literary texts, if they are to be called "literature": the words. Furthermore, no matter how much any metaphysical readings of *Le Nouveau Roman* were discouraged, a particular mythology was at the core of this literary movement: the myth of yet another avant-garde capable of drastically transforming the novel and announcing major changes for the future. In this and other contexts, mythology and myth can be defined as a solid belief system that directs actions and ways of being for all those who adhere to it.

It is quite obvious that this "funding mythology" inside *Le Nouveau Roman* could not be perceived as a "mythology," since that would have meant the end of the endeavors of the group, in the sense that understanding their own way of thinking could have shattered their intellectual constructs. Also, with Barthes's rejection of myths in his *Mythologies* (1957), New Novelists did not think of themselves as constructing a new belief system or mythology. Inside this (unconscious) funding mythology, Simon himself, apparently without a particular intention or awareness of it, called upon the major myths from the Greek and Roman tradition to create his own novels. This fiction can be very generally described as a continuation of the stream-of-consciousness way of writing, but also as a special tribute to a highly developed analogical type of thinking.

Simon's novels generally adhere to a number of major geometrical patterns that guide the construction of the narrative and abound in comparisons and similes. There is hardly an element of this prose that does not open gateways to new perceptions, new crossroads, and new venues in understanding, through a number of connectors: "as if" ("comme si"), "similar to," "such as"; these elements that introduce comparisons are common in all of his novels. A human character is "like" a painting or a sculpture; a description of a concrete historic event is "similar to" a mythical tale from Greece. A contemporary situation can be blown up to gigantic proportions: the cold during the 1940 mobilization period, in Northern France, is linked to the prehistoric ice age. In this regard, Simon's prose, much like that of other modern writers (such as Marcel Proust, and certainly Virginia Woolf), meanders through never-ending sentences (one of the longest covers twenty pages in print), paragraphs that become chapters where images

build upon each other, sometimes completely detaching the narrative from its initial reference. However, Simon's rigorously constructed novels express the writer's deepest commitment to the "god" that inhabits language.

In his facsimile hand-written introduction to *Orionaveugle*,¹ Simon develops his thoughts of how an intrinsic logic, a sort of an absolute, inherent to language, guides his writing and leads him from one dimension to many others, from one sensation or association to an explosion of analogies as wide as the universe. In this regard, Simon's writing inscribes itself in the tradition of all those *poetai*, the "doers through art," who were the followers of the man-as-powerful-as-the-gods, Orpheus, as I will show later.

2. Literature and Mythical Criticism

The sixties in France witnessed an outburst of several different schools of criticism, all more or less influenced by different versions of structuralism. The search for underlying *structures* in literary and social phenomena may have been a secular correlate to what C. G. Jung developed much earlier in his theory of archetypes (Durand 1969 [1999, English translation]).

In France, the prevalent Cartesian tradition always had a counterpart in a school system where Greek and Latin were still emphasized, and where Mediterranean mythology was part of nearly everyone's upbringing. Influenced by Jung, but also by his contemporary Gaston Bachelard, particularly in his *Poetics of Space* (1957 [1964, English translation]), with his typology of elements (earth, fire, et al.), Gilbert Durand joined different French "criticisms" in the sixties with his two critical tools, *mythocritique* and *mythanalyse*. The first deals with myths in a particular context, analyzing their functioning and their interconnectedness from a more or less "immanent" point of view. The second places myths within historical contexts, and observes dominant "energies" in a particular century as identified by one dominant myth. Durand's major shift from the structuralist thought of his day was his perception of structures: he proposed that instead of being empty, they contained *mythical* material. In his *Figures mythiques et visages de l'œuvre*, Durand thus established a strong link between symbols and myths (1979, 87-88).

Durand's theories coincided with the move of French structuralism during the sixties toward a more *semiotic* perception of the material. His theories came to corroborate the positions of the Soviet author who subsequently gained a major place in Western thought, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose philosophy was only introduced to France in the sixties by Tzvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva. Todorov, in his own evolution of semiotics, particularly in *Theories of the Symbol* (1977 [1982, English translation]), made reference to Bakhtin's term "symbolology"—the necessity, for a literary critic, to assess the symbolic dimensions of a text. In his own criticism, Durand included symbols in his system of mythical analysis, yet ignored thinkers like Bakhtin whose works were only becoming available in French.

Durand considered myths to be "modules of history," or "the ultimate referent by which history may be understood" (1979, 29; 31; my translation). In his opinion,

there is “no discontinuity between the meaningful scenarios of ancient mythologies and the modern construction of cultural discourses” (1979, 11). Furthermore, in Durand’s *mythanalyse*, no epoch can escape a mythical patterning. Hence Hermes, the carrier of communication, exemplifies how important a mythological gaze can be for our times. In the system of thinking that honors symbols, all mythical representations, all mythical models, all symbolic dimensions receive identical treatment. Hermes, closely linked to Orpheus, is at the core of dialogue; as we return to mythical figures to identify contemporary trends in literature and culture, the association of such ideas with Bakhtin’s theory appears quite plausible, considering that it is entirely based upon “dialogical principle” (Todorov 1981). In the same spirit, Michel Serres, in *Hermès I* (1969), insists on the importance of Hermes as a communicator for the twentieth century. Yet, French literary “criticisms,” mostly based on linguistic theories such as structuralism and semiotics, could only partially answer questions pertaining to symbols. In the sixties, French intellectuals in search of a larger perspective on myths were interested in the works of Mircea Eliade, who wrote in French and was very present in Parisian circles. In his own way, Eliade participated in the creation of contemporary mythical criticism.

My reading of mythical dimensions in *Le Nouveau Roman* is very much indebted to the position defended by Eliade in *Myth and Reality* (1963b). He suggests that myth is not to be considered as something unreal, a fable, a position inherited mostly from the Romans. With a progressive rise of rational thinking in Rome, with its climax in nineteenth century (French) positivism, myth started to be perceived as a lie. Neither could Christianity perceive itself as a mythology: hence the refusal of myths by Christians (1963b, 162-64).

In Durand’s mind, myth is the point where we encounter gods and mysteries, whereas for Eliade, myth appears to be the irruption of sacredness in our world. The totality of the world, the Cosmos, can thus be established (1963b, 13 and 18) within a holistic perception and acceptance of the world. To some extent, this way of thinking echoes Lévi-Strauss’s attitude in *Structural Anthropology* (1958) towards myth as the ultimate element of unification, in terms of similar paradigms encountered in a series of different cultures.

Eliade finds himself at the end of a two-thousand-year period that developed a particular attitude toward myths. Our era inherited a mythology that lost its sacredness: a partial process of this loss of connections with the divine afflicted the Greeks, and then played itself out in Roman times. The reason for such disillusionment with mythology comes from the Greeks who found Olympus to be immoral, promoting disharmony and injustice, and could no longer be accepted as truth (1963b, 152-53). Eliade, together with other researchers, does not find it necessary to examine the historical justifications for the transformations in the perception of myths at the beginning of our era. Nevertheless, the loss of sacred nature and function of myths did not abolish the presence of mythology in the collective thought because “Greek religion and mythology, radically secularized and demythicized, survived in European

culture, for the very reason that they had been expressed by literary and artistic masterpieces” (1963b,160).It is possible to imagine with Eliade that from a certain period in Greece, Western cultures have lost their connection with the spiritual realm. This loss is perhaps suggested by Orphic myth, through the poet’s incapacity to bring back to this world a living Eurydice.

Based on authors like Godel, Vernant, Juden, Paulys, and others, we can perhaps imagine that the process of desacralization of myths, which led to our loss of connections with the divine, began around the time of Pythagoras. A mystic and a mathematician, Pythagoras kept the balance between different realms of being. According to Brian Juden (1971), Pythagorasis also believed to have established his philosophy as a continuation of Orphism. As bold as it sounds, we may assume that within Pythagoras’s teachings, the *poetai* became mathematicians. With our extremely mathematical, abstract thinking, we might have reached a point that takes us back to Pythagoras: our interest in structures, geometry, mathematics, may well help us reconnect with myths and (following the principle of the eternal return) reassign them a new meaning in arts and particularly in literature.

Le Nouveau Roman, with geometrical forms at the core of the novels, may be perceived as an expression of a Pythagorean stance—between mathematical and symbolic thinking. The emphasis on structures in the sixties and sometimes in the seventies naturally led to myths, especially in the novels by Claude Simon. In this regard, we may consider the novels written by *Le Nouveau Roman* group as an important element in our cultural evolution, and not as a dead-end, hermetic, narcissistic, elitist literary movement.

3. From Language to Myths

Although the New Novelists considered themselves to be materialistic and completely non-religious, their group displays an attitude that is very strongly “religious,” with a single “dogma” imposed upon writers, as well as upon potential readers, especially in terms of Jean Ricardou’s writing. In the eighties, the rejection, by the New Novelists, of Ricardou’s critical impositions limited to formal principles was just as radical as was its acceptance in the sixties. Its dismantling of Ricardou’s authority resembles the breaking away from a form of religion or cult. From the point of view of “religious studies,” a number of social and intellectual associations in contemporary secular society may be linked to some sort of religious behavior, because of the cohesion and the feeling of belonging that they create (Ménard 1999). This would account for the basic human need for transcendence, for belonging to a group that finds meaning in expressions of collective interest (Maffesoli 1991 [1996, English translation]).The New Novelists chose *language* as this particular ground for connecting with each other and for connecting with their readers.

While considering themselves as “scriptors”(a term used to undermine their “role” in the writing process), these authors “humbly” subdued their will and offered their services to language as the ultimate, the unquestionable, the absolute principle guiding all their endeavors. The laws inscribed in language, namely, the formal principles

and structures, were to be revealed through the writing process. The non-anthropomorphic approach to literature (Robbe-Grillet 1963 [1965, English translation]) thus placed words at the center of the writing process (instead of an omniscient creator). As Simon stated in *Orion aveugle*, semantic fields that surround each and every word create possibilities for clusters of meaning, which stimulate writers to explore further analogical connections, with language as a living organism with no particular center.

From this initial utopian belief that the “scriptor” was completely letting the words “do their work,” staying on the outskirts of the process, *Le Nouveau Roman* evolved through different phases toward a much more “interactive” space where the writers eventually regained the title of “authors” and perceived themselves as mediators and active facilitators for form and word interactions to be materialized in a literary text (Ricardou 1978). Starting with Robbe-Grillet, the theoretician of the first, “objective” phase of *Le Nouveau Roman*, as opposed to Ricardou, the defender of the second, formalist approach, the last phase during the eighties was no longer considered as marked by structuralism. Most of the writers acknowledged in different public appearances that autobiography strongly influenced their impersonal, the so-called non-emotional writing (Allemand 1992). But the initial utopia of this strong connection with language as the ultimate principle has not been completely revoked or denied by New Novelists, as they continued to write in the eighties and the nineties.

Particularly as seen in Simon’s writings, we notice that concentrating on language led New Novelists to discover various *geometrical* structures under seemingly arbitrary analogical connections between words. In the late seventies, New Novelists started to perceive these structures as meaningful, as carriers of symbols. Finally, more than ten years later, forms like triangles, circles, and spirals, appeared to some critics as archetypes (Allemand 1993). Such understanding of the role of geometrical structures in novels, by critics rather than by writers, brought to light numerous mythical references that were inscribed in this fiction from the very beginning of *Le Nouveau Roman*, with a number of major Greek myths as metaphors for human condition. Durand published his major work on the anthropological nature of symbolic and mythological thinking as early as 1969. However, mythical analyses of *Le Nouveau Roman* movement remain scarce. One of the examples is Jean-Claude Vareille’s 1989 book on Pinget’s, Robbe-Grillet’s, and Simon’s “imaginary”—“imaginaire,” a term coined by Durand, which includes myths, symbols, and basically all products of human imagination.

4. Orphism and The Nouveau Roman

In his major novel from the early period of the New Novel, *La route des Flandres* (1960), in English translation *The Flanders Road* (1985), Claude Simon brings together war situations from different times, in conjunction with love affairs that often have a tragic outcome. The way he constructs his narrative is to use an element of the “plot” as a metaphor for how different themes and sequences are formally combined in the text. In a clear “*mise en abyme*,” horse races are described as held on a racecourse shaped as a lying figure 8: subsequently, a central scene of the novel is built so as to

reflect this figure, in its form. The narrative moves back and forth from a description of an ambush in the Second World War to jockeys competing with each other for a more mundane prestige. During the sixties, when interviewed about his novel, Simon refused categorically any symbolic explanation of his text (see Ricardou and Van Rossum Guyon 1972), and also any establishment of references to history, to his own war experiences, and to the documents he used. He insisted that the novel was a universe of its own and that we needed to explore the connections between different narratives to find out how they interacted inside the novel.

When I met Simon in 1993 at a conference in his honor, at the University of Queen's, in Kingston, Ontario, he continued to refuse any mention of myths and symbols in this particular text (and consequently in all of his novels). However, many of his themes are "generated" (in Ricardou's terminology) by a series of mythical intertextual references to which Simon frankly admits his debt. Among them we find, for the Second World War soldiers, Dürer's *Four Riders of the Apocalypse*, the fourth in the cycle of fifteen wood-carvings, *The Apocalypse* (1498). For a researcher who is open to symbolic connections, Simon's *Flanders Road* offers ample opportunities for investigations in this direction, especially because of the image of apocalypse being reinforced with the one of flood: the universe such as described by Simon perishes either through water or fire, regenerates itself, and perishes again, in this continuous movement suggested by the figure 8, again in a clear sense of the "eternal return."

In his novel *Triptyque* (1973), translated in English as *Triptych* (1976), Simon distributes three major narratives, with a fourth that reflects them all, in such a manner that they create continuous structures of triangles with circumscribed circles. He constantly curtails the "plot," in order to submit it to vertical set of analogies that create a (literary) pyramid. One of the narratives—Simon calls them "series"—is set in a particular "modality" that appears closest to "reality" as we would find it in a more traditional novel. This "sequence" then "holds" an element of the second narrative, which appears in a "modality" further away from reality, as a film. Inside this film, for example, we find an element of the third narrative, in yet another "modality," a book, a poster, a picture (a modality that is further away from an illusion of real life). After Simon has aligned these three narratives, he turns them upside down, by changing the "modalities" for each of the narratives. At times, he brings in the "circle," the fourth narrative that serves as a mirror and "embraces" all previous developments.

During my first encounter with this novel, shortly after its publication in the seventies, I was mesmerized by this structural play. The analysis of structures was at that time a very legitimate and highly encouraged critical task, warmly received by Simon. The symbolic dimension of my interpretation that he gladly accepted was the conjunction of Eros and Thanatos, since all three narratives in the novel link death and eroticism. If I were to expand on this novel today, I would insist on such elements as fragmentation of the narrative, together with the couple of Eros and Thanatos, to build a more Jungian type of interpretation of the text.

At the time Simon's novels were published, particularly those that were more structurally oriented, they represented great novelty and challenge for readers who

were still trying to recreate linearity, unity of plot, and unity of characters. This “non-fictional,” “non-linear,” prose was promoted by the whole group of the New Novelists. It used geometry, mathematical ways of exploring language. One might argue that writers of all times used structures and some mathematical combinations in constructing their literature. However, here, the mathematical thinking was a priority before any attention to the plot, and it may be seen as the New Novelists’ major contribution to our understanding of literature.

As I have suggested earlier, the New Novelists, by concentrating upon geometrical forms, meant to deconstruct the traditional novel such as it was inherited from the nineteenth century. But they equally enabled—or rather forced—readers and critics to focus upon these structures that became more and more significant and carried more particular meanings. A major shift in my understanding of Simon’s prose happened when I worked on another of Simon’s novels. With the publication of his fourteenth text, *Les géorgiques* (1981), titled *Georgics* (1988) in English translation, Simon established a strong intertextual link with Vergil’s eponymous masterpiece. There is a strong structural component to the novel, built in five chapters, still in the style of analogical sequences. Among many typical analogical developments in the novel, the description of an airplane in the sky (related to the 1940 French defeat on the Northern front) awakens the theme of a bird, which immediately leads to a mention of the painter Uccello. The logic behind this sequence of images is that Uccello, Simon’s favorite painter, together with other Renaissance innovators in art, was the one who developed perspective. In this same fashion, the novel continues with hints to perspective used for military purposes as well as for agriculture. This is where Simon builds upon Vergil’s intent, in *Georgics*, to have Roman fields brought back to growth, after they have been devastated by the troops. Again in the sense of eternal return(s) of compatible literary and mythical data, this example shows one of the many intertextual links and similarities not only with Vergil, but also with authors such as Monteverdi and Gluck, who used the first *Georgics* for the librettos of their operas based on Orphic myth. In his novel, Simon makes a number of references to both composers.

As I was trying to dissect innumerable connections and organize them into a meaningful system, it became obvious that I could no longer use exclusively the synchronic and “immanent” textual approach from my previous research. It also appeared that I could no longer abide by Simon’s declarations surrounding his novels. In his practice, Simon has always proven the contrary of his own intentions, those of listening only to what language would dictate to him. It was the presence of Orpheus in *Georgics*, as an operatic character mainly from Gluck’s *Orfeo*, that propelled me toward the analysis of myths and symbols. As I have already pointed out, anthropologist Gilbert Durand emerged from the structuralist and post-structuralist French intellectual movements and gave content to “the structures,” something none of the structuralists had produced previously. Myth, at the core of each and every structure, according to Durand, is to be understood as the core belief system and the grounding principle of our lives.

At the core of Simon's novel *Georgics*, I saw Orpheus as a major structural factor, the one that helps create multiple intertextual and interdisciplinary links inside the text. Among many mythical elements of the novel, Orpheus remained the most important, appearing as a connector between mathematical and symbolic thinking. Furthermore, this myth seemed to possess both the magnetic, centripetal, and the centrifugal power of opening the literary space and time, especially compared to *Triptyque*, which presents a model of a literary universe contained in a strict geometrical form.

My reading of *Georgics* in the light of this particular myth initiated my own mythical journey between cultures, different forms of arts, rituals, and spiritualities. Elizabeth Sewell and her essay *The Orphic Voice* (1960) offered a key for the understanding of why, in Simon's novel, there is a textual and intertextual web created with a fixed number of elements. In her essay, Sewell insists that references to Orpheus and more widely of Orphism as a system, in a literary text, always appear through an interdisciplinary interaction of five "Orphic languages": the ritual and the dance, plastic arts with colors and forms, music and rhythm, mathematics, and the literary discourse, the Word, that combines them all. In Simon's *Georgics*, mathematics—geometrical forms, numbers, and also military skills, in artillery—lead to rituals: war is perceived as a major ritual, as is opera. These in turn conduct us to the visual arts: Simon constantly "paints" with words and alludes to a series of painters and also architects, from Piero della Francesca to Palladio, Ver Meer, Poussin, Cézanne and other impressionists, and up to cubism and Picasso. From the visual arts, Simon takes us to music, with Gluck's opera *Orfeo* embedded in one of the narrative "series," with many references not just to Monteverdi, but also to more contemporary composers such as Boulez. Orphic myth in Simon's *Georgics* accounts for constant quotes from many writers, from antiquity to our times, with Proust being one of Simon's favorite authors. Orphism as a way of thinking, as suggested by Sewell's *The Orphic Voice*, and as I have attempted to demonstrate so far, explains not only the connection between myths and mathematical structures, but also the interdisciplinary analogies that are a predominant feature of these literary texts.

Sewell declares that all writing is myth, and in poetry and literature, the central mythical figure remains that of Orpheus: "The myth provides, in its narrative, a method by which to pursue the inquiry" (Sewell 1960,5). And again:

The myth turns back upon itself because it is the question that figures its own reply [. . .]. Orpheus is statement, question and method, at one and the same time. [. . .] we are to think of myth and poetry, under the figure of Orpheus, as an instrument of knowledge and research. (Sewell 1960,4)

It is remarkable that the process of self-reflecting (and thus self-mirroring), which for Sewell represents the basic dimension of myths and of Orphism in particular, is at the core of the techniques adopted by *Le Nouveau Roman* in general as well as by Simon. In *The Mirror in the Text*, his study of these procedures, Lucien Dällenbach defines "*mise en abyme*" as constant mirroring, perpetual speculations, and the intricate

interaction of formal and narrative elements (1977 [1989, English translation]). As Sewell puts it: “For Orpheus is poetry thinking about itself” (Sewell 1960,47); and again: “In the Orpheus story, myth is looking at itself. This is the reflection of myth in its own mirror” (Sewell 1960,41).

Writing poetry or, for that matter, any form of literature, according to Sewell, necessarily takes us back to Orpheus: “If you cannot think in mathematics, you have to think in words; but with words comes Orpheus, the poetic and metaphoric power of language operating on the mind” (Sewell 1960,9). In this sense, language in itself appears as Orphic. Science and poetry, analysis and synthesis, mathematics and Word, all together make a universe in itself, with all parts striving in the same direction:

Science cannot be set against poetry because they are structurally similar activities. Analyses cannot be set [. . .] against synthesis because each is the precondition of the other’s working. Mathematics cannot be set against words because each is an instrument of myth in the mind. (Sewell 1960, 12-13)

In *Le Nouveau Roman*, the predominance of structural concerns governing the narrative (or plot), as demonstrated in Simon’s novels, clearly focuses upon language as such, and upon the science to combine the words so as to create new resonances. This literary movement appears as one of the first, in French literary history, to create a theory, a self-reflection, that comes along with the novels. In this regard, as Elizabeth Sewell reminds us, the Orphic myth suggests a particular type of cognition, of self-reflection:

It promises to give Orpheus a special significance: for myth as living thought and the very type of thought in action, and for all those rather reflexive or self-reflecting forms; for the human organism as an indivisible whole trying to understand itself and its universe [. . .] reflecting on the whole span of life in which thinking man appears as the last enigmatic development. (Sewell 1960,41)

Quite clearly, Elizabeth Sewell opens a whole new perspective for our readings of contemporary fiction in general, offering a number of arguments for a reversal of our perception of the French Nouveau Roman. One may stipulate that her vision of Orphism is too broad and too inclusive, placing all types of writing—and thus all thinking—in a mythical context. It is true that in the past, all literary texts, by the very nature of metaphors and metonymies, explored one form or another of symbols, archetypes, or myths. As a group, New Novelists were among those writers who developed a number of features that belong to mythological thinking, such as analogies, and the conjunction of opposites, together with many mythological images. Meanwhile, especially in the sixties, they fiercely rejected all that would present them as being part of a tradition. However, when they explored new venues for their novels, they remained inside the framework of what they inherited from their predecessors. With a more postmodern awareness, New Novelists progressively accepted to be a part of a large spiral of connections with the past, with the necessary reactivation of older models or paradigms.

It is possible that the much promoted scientific, linguistic approach to literature may have progressively created the grounds for a new position within the New Novel, with the reconsideration of the mythical elements that have been present in this prose since the beginning of this literary movement.

A postmodern and somehow a post-deconstructionist understanding of the New Novelists certainly takes us from a general view of them as destroyers of literary traditions, to the idea that mythical figures in these novels are a very powerful tool for a reconstruction and a continuity: of the tradition-always-to-be-reconsidered, that might skillfully include the dimensions that have empowered humanity throughout history. Much remains to be said in this field, and many more novels remain to be read from this perspective, before we can consider that mythology is a prevalent feature of contemporary prose in general.

Studies in contemporary feminist theory and prose show that mythical figures, such as those borrowed from the past and rewritten in a contemporary context, help us shape social, psychological, and spiritual identity of the subjects involved. Time will tell if contemporary literature, by consciously reusing myths, is playing a role in “resacralizing” our experience of life and of the world. In this regard, *Le Nouveau Roman*, as one of the examples of eternal (and inevitable) return, in this case of the mythical models from the past, deserves to be explored more fully from these new perspectives in philosophy, in history of ideas, and in literary criticism.

Notes

1. Blind Orion, 1970; its title is a clear intertextual reference to Nicolas Poussin’s mythological painting from 1658, titled *Paysage avec Orion aveugle cherchant le soleil*, rendered in English as *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun*. The cyclical nature of earth’s revolution around the sun, with Orion’s repeated quest for light, is in itself a marker of the eternal return of deeply rooted human preoccupations such as transcribed or rendered through myths.

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