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Narrative Finality

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Abstract

The cloturai device of narration as salvation represents the lack of finality in three novels. In De Beauvoir's *Tous les hommes sont mortels* an immortal character turns his story to account, but the novel makes a mockery of the historical sense by which men define themselves. In the closing pages of Butor's *La Modification*, the hero plans to write a book to save himself. Through the thrice-considered portrayal of the Paris-Rome relationship, the ending shows the reader how to bring about closure, but this collective critique written by readers will always be a future book. Simon's *La Bataille de Pharsale*, the most radical attempt to destroy finality, is an infinite text. No new text can be written. This extreme of perversion guarantees bliss *(jouissance)*. If the ending of De Beauvoir's novel transfers the burden of non-final world onto a new victim, Butor's non-finality lies in the deferral to a future writing, while Simon's writer is stuck in a writing loop, in which writing has become its own end and hence can have no end. The deconstructive and tragic form of contemporary novels proclaims the loss of belief in a finality inherent in the written text, to the profit of writing itself.

Keywords

cloturai device, narration, salvation, lack of finality, De Beauvoir, Tous les hommes sont morteles, self, identity, La Modification, Paris-Rome relationship, Butor, Simon, La Bataille de Pharsale, infinite text, infinity, jouissance, finality

NARRATIVE FINALITY

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«Writing,» Barthes claims in *The Pleasure of the Text,* «is the science of the various blisses of language»[1] and the proof that the text desires the reader. Constituting a curious sub-group in the typology of narrative clotural devices, certain novels incorporate that proof into the fabric of the text itself, their closing pages appealing to the reader's pleasure in the attempt to achieve an end. The present article focuses on three novels whose endings, like that of *A la Recherche du temps perdu,* address the question of narrative as salvation. Why recount a story? What is the finality of narration, and how does one save oneself by telling or writing?

Modern French novels deal with this philosophical issue in an extremely self-conscious form that points at itself as fiction, as if to expiate the sins of mimesis. That modern novelists reject the neatly closed-off worlds of created fictions is a familiar phenomenon. Gide devised intricate vortexes to confuse the limits of art and life in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs,* whose celebrated open ending nevertheless masks a decidedly traditional and demonstrably closed fiction. The self-consciousness of Sartre's *La Nausée* hinges on the relation of fiction to reality. As Kermode showed in his fine reading of the novel in *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1967), only a fiction that admits of its lying nature can bridge the gap or reduce the dissonance between contingent reality and paradigmatic form. Thus the still necessary illusion of closed world recognizes its own fallacy and avoids being fraudulent. John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* one of the most self-conscious of novels, had at least six different endings in early versions; its final form has three. We reject the first, a satire of the typical Victorian dénouement, precisely because it wraps things up

too neatly to be at all like the real world. («A planned world...is a dead world,» wrote Fowles in chapter 13.) The second ending is still quite paradigmatic and closed, the last, the true ending of the novel, unclosed and non-final. This closure conforms to a vision of the world as constituted by ongoing, mysterious choices, a world without comforting finality beyond the knowledge that life endures, for, as Fowles wrote, «There is no intervening god.»

To put it differently, the self-conscious novelist must still create a closed world (because a narrative world) that resembles the real world, which is thought of as containing a high degree of uncertainty, indeterminacy, variability, open-endedness; in sum, which lacks finality. Given this need to make fiction conform to the experience of contingency that we call «reality» (in order to seduce the reader), narrative must express a lack of finality in a final form. This is the inherent dilemma of literary discourse today.

The *nouveau roman,* with its surface denial of paradigms, closed forms, chronology and character, has offered innovative solutions to this artistic problem. We shall look at two such examples after considering a less well-read, pre-*nouveau roman* novel, Simone de Beauvoir's *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (1946), whose ending incorporates an implicit reference to its own narration and in which the representation of the lack of finality is achieved through an artifice of fantasy. For, in spite of the title, the protagonist Raymond Fosca is an immortal man born in 1279, who recounts his existence in the twentieth century to a self-centered and headstrong actress named Régine.

The irony of the title lies in the stark contrast between its cliché-like statement of the obvious—all men are mortal—and the second meaning it acquires when the accent is put on the word *men.* What the cliché does *not* say is that the immortal man is not a man. It is the juxtaposition of the human condition with the other-than-human that puts into play the question of finality—thus the realistic frame story encompassing the fantastic account of the immortal. Fosca's story can only be open-ended; Régine's can only end. Through Régine, Fosca hopes to realize a factitious but satisfactory finality in attaching himself to her mortal affections, while Régine thinks she will conquer finality by living in Fosca's immortal memory. The feeling of absurdity that accompanies the certitude of death brings about her unfocused anxieties—depicted by the vivid sense of being no more significant than a gnat or a blade of grass among millions. At the same time the existence of

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others appears to infringe on the minute territory of her fragile being. She seeks a «sign» to distinguish herself and is initially attracted to Fosca—before she knows he is immortal—because his penetrating glance makes her feel her own being. By the end of the novel, she will have undergone a subtle metamorphosis as a result of listening to Fosca narrate his uncommon existence.

For the absurdity of Régine's existence, defined by death and common to mortals, is subordinated to an even greater absurdity dramatized by the experience of Raymond Fosca. Through his courageous decision to take the elixir that ends his own mortality, Fosca had liberated himself from the limitations of a life that could go only toward death and conquered even that end without final meaning which is death. What Fosca did not understand until several centuries later was that his conquest was less a victory over death than over finality. By an ironic tourniquet revelatory of man's flawed vision, immortality abolishes finality.

Thus the artifice of immortality puts the status of the mortal into existential focus. The first consequence of this perspective is that without an end (in the philosophical sense), nothing whatsoever has meaning. Fosca is indifferent to everything. He has seen the great Rachel, but cannot tell if Régine is a better actress: «he shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know.' 'But you must know,' she said. 'Good acting, bad acting, I don't know what these words mean.'»[2] Without direction, sense is abolished: «Thus sense does not only mean what the words are willing to tell us, it is also a direction, that is to say, in the language of the philosophers, an intentionality and a finality.»[3] Everything resembles everything: «'Always the same story,' he said. 'It will never change. I'll have to drag it around with me forever.'»[4] Fosca hopes to create a beginning by falling in love with Régine, to save himself from this indifference: «'Save me from night and indifference,' he said. 'Make it so I'll love you and so you'll exist among all women. Then the world will recover its form.'»[5] It is a difficult illusion: «'It takes a lot of strength,' he said, 'a lot of pride or a lot of love, to believe that a man's actions have any importance and that life has precedence over death.'»[6] If one considers that in the practice of *engagement* strength and pride are a kind of oriented and motivated love, this statement both upholds and puts into doubt the possibility of an effective action. It is the recognition that this hope for salvation from the absence of finality is illusory that brings Fosca to recount his existence, for in narrating an unclosed

fiction he achieves a sense of finality on a higher level. In a very limited way, the act of communication creates a temporary justification for existence.

The second consequence, another version of the first, is that time is altered. Régine clings to her past («One should never refuse one's past»),[7] until her contact with Fosca shows her the past is dead, or has only a factitious existence: «'all of my past and this long love of myself *[is]* in these precious knickknacks. And they are nothing but flea market goods!' She threw the masks on the ground.... She stomped on them; she crushed all those lies.»[8] This furious action follows an attempt to create a moment of real time, an instant purged of chronology; Régine does something contrary to her apparent goal (stardom in the theater) and succeeds in creating «a minute, nothing but a minute.... If she destroyed the past and the future in an instant, she would be quite sure that this instant would exist.»[9] What she has done is to create a fiction, just as Annie in *La Nausée* tried to make «perfect moments» and Roquentin sighed for «adventures.» To be effective, the fiction in either of these novels cannot be one like Proust's eternally ringing *sonnette.* Régine had placed her hope in a past of this sort: «In Régine's heart, the past swelled up like a bouquet that comes to life again.... Such peace!...that's what eternity is: these tranquil houses, the sound of these bells ringing till the end of the world.»[10] The Proustian allusions could hardly be more specific. Such fictions depend on the time of History, and it is not in the least gratuitous that Fosca's narrative reads exactly like a typical historical novel, in spite of its unusual protagonist. The five long parts, more than four hundred action-packed pages rich in color and detail, are set in historically important epochs in which Fosca plays a key role: as advisor to Charles V and Philip II in sixteenth-century Spain; with Jacques Cartier exploring the Mississippi in search of the transcontinental passage; in Paris during the 1848 revolution, to give only a few examples. These accounts are only the bait in a trap; they tempt the reader to interpret man's finality through his acts. Portrayed as a human being in the fully historical sense of the term, yet not a man, Fosca makes a mockery of that historical sense by which man defines himself. No god intervenes to mark off a period. And Fosca's act of narration bleeds its unfinalistic soul onto Régine, so that with each segment of Fosca's story she progressively recognizes the illusory nature of that sense of time and past time, knowing that time is stopped only because

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Fosca is recounting his story: «he was right: as long as he was talking, as long as she listened to him talk, there were no questions to ask. She wished his story would never end.»[11] She has listened to the story of the absence of finality at her own risk, obliged to give of her own person to supply it, to create a kind of finality which we recognize as madness. Régine's original anxiety—her feeling of being only a blade of grass among millions—turns to nausea (p. 111) and develops at last into a visceral cry:

> She pressed her hands against her mouth. The feeling of anguish had crept down from her throat into her heart, into her stomach. She wanted to cry out.... She pressed her lips together. The cry rose from her stomach to her heart from her heart to her throat.... 'It is only the beginning,' she thought, and she remained still as if it would have been possible to deceive time, to prevent it from pursuing its course. But her hands stiffened against her contracted lips.
>
> It was when the steeple clock began to strike the hour that she let out the first scream.[12]

These are the last sentences of the novel.

In this serious and nearly successful attempt at creating an unclosed fictional world, the last sentence plays an important part. For the novel closes on a start: «the first scream» implies that others will follow; it is the beginning of something new, a clever refusal of closure. Yet it also marks an end. One recognizes in the final sentence, set off as a separate paragraph, a common ending device known as the «tag line,» which embraces in a single, epigrammatic, summarizing statement the total effect of the narrative. The device supplies end without closure and without resolution, for nothing is resolved by the end of Fosca's account. (Note that he may well come to the end of his *account,* but never to the end of his *story,* nor to the end of history.) Thus the final sentence points both backward and forward; it closes an old door and opens a new one onto uncharted space. The reader must decide what the «first scream» starts, and whether Régine will go on screaming till the end of her time.

Roquentin's trajectory in *La Nausée* takes him through the nausea to its neutralization through art as salvation. *La Nausée* recounts the eventual transcendent assimilation of contingency

through a Nietzschean act of will (or a Sartrian *faire* of the *pour soi),* akin to Fowles's protagonist's intellectual command of man as enduring. But Régine's trajectory leads to a point of complete capitulation to nausea, to the assumption of her contingency:

> She watched [Fosca] walk away, as if he could have taken with him the evil that had stripped her of her being;...he had disappeared, but she remained just as he had made her: a blade of grass, a gnat, an ant, a speck of foam.... She crushed her hands against her mouth, she lowered her head, she was vanquished; with horror, with terror, she accepted the metamorphosis.[13]

Tous les hommes sont mortels, with its deployment of the «feminist» side of nausea, corrects the error in the closure of *La Nausée.* Roquetin's timid hope of accepting himself in the past, or perhaps in a kind of future anterior, is another instance of bad faith. Indeed for Régine, there is no salvation, no hope, only insanity. The novel can only stop when the first cry begins.

Narration as salvation is also the clotural scheme of Butor's *La Modification* (1957). The idea of writing a book first comes to Léon Delmont toward the end of his train ride from Paris to Rome: «I should write a book.»[14] Having decided not to bring his mistress Cécile back to Paris, he must seek her forgiveness as well as that of his wife Henriette. (The modification of his initial plan is one of the meanings of the title, a modification operated by the trajectory of the train and of the book we read.) Roquentin hoped to save himself in the past; Delmont, by writing his book, will reap the benefits of that «future liberty beyond our grasp»: «It is the only way I can enjoy at least its reflection, so admirable, so poignant.»[15]

A skillful reader, Françoise Van Rossum-Guyon in *Critique du Roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), has located the novel's closure in the modification of its linguistic or grammatical structures. The train trip, with its projected destination reached precisely at the end of the novel, brings about a modification which Delmont needs in order to acquire the use of the first person pronoun, in order to speak in his own name. Like the pronoun change, the recourse to an exceptional past definite tense signals the definitive end of the love affair with Cécile, «the lie that was our love.»[16] The trajectory of the train effectively pre-orders the trajectory of the book, deter-

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mining a closure in which goal and end are achieved simultaneously, the trip fostering the subtle change to the preterit and the «I» which constitute the *end* (because they are final and definitive) and the *goal* (psychologically speaking the achievement of selfhood and an understanding of the mendacious nature of the love affair). As Jean Roudaut wrote, Delmont «constitutes himself as a subject when he discovers himself as a moment of History»[17] (Such was Fosca's early hope, too).

But precisely how will the «future and necessary book» (p. 236) reestablish lost order, constitute the subject, or bring closure? The cultural myths of Paris and Rome are central to Léon's experience, as readers have shown. «What Léon sought was a center, still capable of organizing the world,» writes Jacques Leenhardt. «But /he/ realizes that this center is a myth, that the world is no longer organized around it, that Rome has crumbled.»[18] Since the cities have failed to found an ultimate meaning or order, Delmont will write in order to «fill in the void which has been hollowed out, now that /he has/ no other liberty.»[19] As Leenhardt writes, «redemption by writing...is put forward as the ultimate solution after the failure of the recourse to the cultural myth.»[20] In that future book, the role of the two cities will be capital—if the pun can be allowed.[21] Yet too little critical attention has been paid to the three moments in the dénouement when Delmont ponders the mysterious relationship of Paris and Rome and reconsiders how to treat them in his book. The three passages show striking modifications that have not, to my knowledge, been analyzed in studies of the novel. In the first, Léon dreams of a total blending of both cities into one phantasmic whole:

> You say: one would have to show the part that Rome can play in the life of a man in Paris; one could imagine these two cities superposed one on the other, the one being subterranean with respect to the other, with communicating trap doors that only a few would know of without anyone of course managing to know them all, in such a way that to go from one place to another there might be certain shortcuts or unexpected detours, in such a way that the distance from one point to another, the trajectory from one point to another, would be modified according to the knowledge, the familiarity that one would have with that other city, in such a way that all localization would be double, the Roman space deforming

> more or less for each person the Parisian space, authorizing encounters or leading into traps.[22]

Geographic reality is totally lacking here; the map is one of dream and illusion, while in the second passage, illusion and reality coexist:

> Wouldn't it be better to preserve the distance between these two cities, all those train stations, all those landscapes that separate them? But in addition to the normal communications by which anyone could travel from one to the other whenever he wanted, there would be a certain number of points of contact, instantaneous passages which would open up at certain moments determined by laws that one would succeed in learning only little by little.
>
> Thus the main character, walking near the Parisian Pantheon one day, could, by turning the corner of a well-known house, suddenly find himself in an altogether different street from the one he expected, in a light quite different, with inscriptions in another language that he would recognize as being Italian.[23]

Finally, in the last passage, Delmont accepts the geographic truth of the two cities:

> Best of all, undoubtedly, would be to preserve the real geographic relations of these two cities
>
> and to attempt to bring to life again on the level of reading this crucial episode of your adventure, the movement which took place in your mind accompanying the displacement of your body from one train station to another through all the intermediate landscapes.[24]

The three stages in this treatment evolve from illusion to reality and progress toward a kind of mental recovery. It is a matter of abandoning the illusory beliefs and hopes invested in the cultural myths of the two cities in order to replace into a healthy and realistic order a world which had been perturbed, rent asunder, shredded to bits by the myth of Rome, finally recognized as impotent. Delmont's book will recount the truth: «this crucial episode of your adventure, the movement which took place in your mind,» a

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goal that is psychologically true. But exactly how this healing will be accomplished is indeed the crucial point, and it involves the reader in a precise way.

Corresponding to the three descriptions of the relations of the two cities, I see three types of activities: that of thought, of narrative structure, finally of reading. Clues in the lexemes of each passage invite the interpretations I give here.

In the first case, the two cities are *superposed* upon one another, reproducing a common image of the relation of the unconscious to the conscious, the former being *subterranean*. The «communicating trap doors» would be dreams, Freudian slips, jokes, in sum, all the vulgarly Freudian processes by which the unconscious manifests itself to the conscious. Yet only the initiated recognize them («that only a few would know of without anyone of course managing to know them all»). Even a thoroughly «analyzed» patient may not know all the routes to the unconscious; not everything is revealed. To get from one to the other there are «shortcuts» and «unexpected detours»—excellent literary expressions for condensation and displacement, respectively, central to the dreamwork. Distances from one point to the other would be «modified according to the knowledge, the familiarity that one would have with that other city»—it becoming perhaps clearer that of the two, Rome is the city of the unconscious while Paris is conscious, beladen with ego and super-ego. The more the unconscious is known through analysis, the quicker the passage from unconscious to conscious or vice versa. On the phantasmic map, «all localization would be double,» as in this simplified Freudianism all meaning, all gestures, all words of the patient have their double as reflections of the unconscious. The unconscious space—the Roman space—would define the Parisian space more for the neurotic, less for the normal person («the Roman space deforming more or less for each person the Parisian space»). The result, for the healthy, is «encounters» with the unconscious, providing knowledge to the conscious, which is the positive side of what for the neurotic would be danger, traps of another sort. This is the model of thought, with enough working parts in place to furnish a convincing picture of an apparatus devised to deal with a mental incarnation of the two cities and the problems they pose for Delmont. Naturally, it is not a sophisticated theoretical model, but instead a popular form easily accessible to an average person such as Léon Delmont.

The second passage rejects the purely mental recreation of the

two cities; its language encodes a model of the narrative form that Butor gave to *La Modification*. Thus the «normal communications» between the two cities—«the distance...all those train stations, all those landscapes that separate them»—are the subject of the train trip which constitutes the narrative present of the novel, a narrative sequence that Butor hints is relatively easy to extract from the novel («anyone could travel from one to the other whenever he wanted»). Of course in addition to this objective linearity, this traditional narrative line by which the story goes from an obvious beginning to an obvious end, «a certain number of points of contact» operate the passage from this present to various points in the past and imagined futures. These scene changers have been well established: the iron grill of the floor heater, the moon viewed from the corridor window, cities along the train route provide some of the narrative devices that constitute the points of contact between different narrative scenes. They are indeed «instantaneous passages,» without indication of the lapse of time or the change of time frame, which occur «at certain moments.» The reader must study the *laws* which *determine* the *opening* of the passages in order to understand the Butorian narrative; the laws should become progressively better known as they are studied («that one would succeed in learning only little by little»). Thus the main character's walk near the Pantheon is the metaphoric figure of the narrative course, where a crucial point in a section of narrative («the corner of a well-known house») would suddenly make it enter another, totally different from that which one would expect, and where the meaning or understanding («a light») of the second passage would be different and its code or narrative function different also («another language»). This is the structure of the narrative.

As for the third passage, the appeal here is to the reader («to attempt to bring to life again *on the level of reading*»). Thus the «real geographic relations» (also narrations, stories, reports, accounts) are those instituted by reading, which recreates the linear structure of the novel by identifying time and place, primary materials of any story. Critical reading, such as it is practiced in academic institutions, brings the story to life as the banal account of a modification («to bring to life again...this crucial episode of your adventure»), guiding future readers such as myself. We reestablish in lines as straight as those of the train track the «movement which took place in your mind,» not forgetting to make it evolve through all its intermediate changes («intermediate land-

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scapes»). Thus the critical reader, recreating unity out of the meandering of the tricky unconscious through the discovery of the laws of the new form, participates in reestablishing the «I,» helps the subject reconstitute himself, determines order, and operates closure. The «future and necessary book» that will bring salvation is the one written collectively by the critics, after their exit from the compartment of reading that is this novel («You leave the compartment» are the last words of the novel). Not only Léon Delmont, but Michel Butor himself needs this collective book in order to be «forgiven,» to fill in the void of the «historical fissure» (p. 223) (in the story of the book as well as in the History of the Book), to free him from the obligation to follow the straight track of French literature. Léon speaks for Butor: «I cannot hope to save myself alone. All the blood, all the sand of my days would be depleted in vain by this effort to consolidate myself.»[25] A new critical reading is necessary, to prepare «this future liberty» while proclaiming the right to follow only the tortuous line of dream or illusion, for «our love is not a pathway leading somewhere.»[26]

But criticism that obstinately seeks unity and coherence, thinking it knows where it is going, labors under a final illusion. It would be far better to preserve the tension between the linear on the one hand and the incoherent pathway of thought or the curving line of writing on the other. The closure that is important is not that of the story of certain characters, but that of the creative instance of fiction. Léon's future book might well be the reader's hallucinated text of *La Modification* itself. In its appeal to the ends devised by criticism, the creative instance recognizes that the finality of the banal story of a problematic love put back into the proper social order can no longer be a satisfying closure. Butor wants a critical closure that is always a future book, that does not reduce writing to a story, that recognizes the story of writing itself as the chief account undergoing modification. The future of writing is Butor's narrative finality.

The last words of Claude Simon's *La Bataille de Pharsale* (1969) describe a writing scene: «O. writes: Yellow and then black time of one blink of the eyelids and then yellow again.»[27] As in *La Modification,* the idea of writing occurs only at the end; yet unlike Butor's novel, there is no psychological or subject-determined reason for writing—no hoped-for salvation, no solution-seeking, no need to explain or justify. In fact, O. gives no reason what-

soever, which is hardly surprising since O. is not really a subject or character in the usual sense. Simon has been praised for doing away with the category of literary personage. O. does not stand for any «stable identity» in Jean Ricardou's phrase and should perhaps be taken as a zero (*Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui* [Paris: UGE, 1972], vol. I, pp. 16-17). O.'s singular function seems to be to write, and to the extent that the ending represents the beginning of the exercise of that function, we can say we have a closure marking the end of a period of non-writing and the start of writing.

Because of the well-known models in which the idea of writing occurs in the dénouement as a «way out,» the reader will readily ascribe a redemptive function to O.'s writing. Proust is named, alluded to, and quoted throughout the pages of Simon's text, while allusions to other *nouveaux romanciers* who portrayed the creative instance seeking a way out occur regularly. In addition, exegetes have pointed out (and Simon has confirmed) the productive function of signifying objects in his other works, as in *Histoire,* of which the famous post cards are the most fruitful. A line drawing from the author's *Orion aveugle* depicts the writer's desk covered with the products that produce the Simonian narrative. We are to interpret O.'s writing at the end as the beginning of an attempt to make a coherent story of disparate facts, memories, photos, post cards, objects, books, visions, etc., etc. As a clotural device, then, it has a familiar history, solidly anchored in new novelistic technique and resoundingly glorified by critical exegesis. Does this closure imply any finality?

The pleasure of Simon's text is not of easy access, although there is some structure. There are three parts of about equal length, each with a title and a roman numeral. «I. Achille immobile à grands pas» chaotically accumulates images, memories and experiences linked to at least two narrators (or two narrative perspectives, *je* and *il,* which might have been said to represent the same person if the category of literary personage had not been purged from this text). In part II, called «Lexique,» the unordered narrative elements of part I are rearranged with variants under seven headings: «Bataille, César, Conversation, Guerrier, Machine, Voyage, O.» They are in alphabetical order except for the last (which is different also for another reason we shall see in a moment). Part III, «Chronologie des Evénements,» reuses the ingredients put into order by the lexicon, with further variations and developments. Thus what occurs «en vrac,» piled into

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unrecognizable heaps in part I, is organized by one of the most familiar principles of order in part II, as if to supply the necessary terms for a chronology, a most fundamental element of narrative design. The movement toward increasing organization seems to define a goal of greater narrative sense; yet, as will be seen below, such a goal is never reached.

O's distinct position out of alphabetical order (unless of course O is read as Omega) sets it apart for special attention. O is first created on page 181 as an attempt at geometric organization of the scope of vision: «Let O equal the position occupied by the eye *[oeil]* of the observer (O.) *[*note the period following the observer's name*]* and from which runs an invisible straight line OO' which joins the eye to the object on which the glance is fixed.»[18] O. also differs from the rest of the lexicon because it institutes, if not a single perspective, at least the idea of perspective, a discursive ingredient of narrative and one that will presumably supply a unitary point of view in part III. The text behaves as if the notable lack of such perspective in part I were responsible for the need to begin anew with alphabetical and then chronological order. O. is many things besides *observateur,* but its role as *auteur* (or should I write «o-teur»?) is its last metamorphosis, and the most important.

«Yellow and then black time of one blink of the eyelids and then yellow again» are not only the last words of the novel, those that O. writes, but also the first clause of the first sentence. O. is effectively writing the novel the reader has just finished. That at least is one plausible (and historical—see Proust readings) interpretation one might give to O.'s writing. But this bears careful analysis: O. has already written the book that starts with this phrase; the ending is only the register of this act of writing, its last proof, with the whole of the text preceding it being a sort of preface to writing and the end of it being the moment when the actual writing begins. Thus there is neither origin (the book is always already written) nor end (if the book is only the preface to the book, there is no book). A persuasive model for this structure is that of the Moebius strip (Jean Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman* [Paris: Seuil, 1971], pp. 153-54). Yet it is not sufficient to appeal to this model in order to demonstrate the text's infiniteness; a philosophical paradox subtends the entire novel, and may indeed be central to the creation of the new novel in toto. The paradox of Zeno of Elea is inherent in the governing metaphor of the text: the flight of the pigeon described in the first paragraph and recapitulated by O.'s

writing.

Looking out at the yellow sun of late afternoon, the narrator sees a pigeon fly upward across the entire opening of his window, arising unperceived from an original nothingness before the start of the flight and arriving at another nothingness, also not seen. The time lapse is imperceptible: «black time of one blink of the eyelids,» the black trace of flight blocking the yellow of the sky for an abrupt instant. Like remembered events called forth by the metaphor of the pigeon («recall of [or from] darkness springing from bottom to top with a fulminating rapidity»),[19] the black of print will occupy a time in animated suspension, an instantaneous creation having no duration. Without beginning, without end, and without time, the flight of the pigeon and the trace of the text have no movement.

Part I announces its static motion founded on Zeno's paradox and Valéry's indignant outcry: «Achille immobile à grands pas.» Though Simon's text moves «à grands pas»—with sweeping scenes, giant steps, enormous leaps from here to there, and Simon is the first to affirm the inescapable linearity of the text *(Simon/Colloque de Cerisy* [Paris: UGE, 1975], p. 117)—it nevertheless remains philosophically immobile in that it never gets from anywhere to anywhere, especially in part I. As a narrative technique, the accumulation of scenes *en vrac* figures the moments of immobile motion, always only halfway to the goal, at half of the remaining distance to the goal. The text would seem to have only a half-life. Similarly, «Chronologie des Evénements» should have a movement from beginning to end, like the chronologies found at the start of school editions of Molière or Stendhal. Certain datable events (childhood memories, the trip to Pharsala, the 1940 débâcle among others) might be considered items of a chronology. But part III reveals its non-linearity better even than part I. The major thread of the narrative is a search for history—a story of the battle of Pharsala—which might have supplied the needed order and movement toward an end; but, like the battlefield itself, the narrator cannot find it; he might just as well invent an imagined historical reality:

> in any case things have never happened as one imagines them or if you prefer one never imagines things the way they happen in reality and even if you are there you can never see them as

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> oh stop
> they are So do what everyone does and decide that they are what you think you see or imagine them and decide that that is how they happened and then it will have really happened here.[30]

In accepting the principle that imagination is just as good as reality, O. assumes the writing function and writes a text without movement.

Other devices create motionless motion, especially the train trip which fills the entire «Voyage» section in «Lexique» and much of part III. The train is an incarnation in reverse of Zeno's paradox: immobility which moves. The compartment does not have motion, nor do the people in it, but the train does get from A to B, as repeated statements of itinerary emphasize. In two of the new novel's favorite techniques one finds another treatment of the paradox of motion without movement toward an end point: the animation into narrative account of paintings, bas-reliefs, and assorted other visual media, and its complementary opposite, the fixing into a static medium of a dynamic, movemented scene having a time frame. The first is a case of movement without end, without sense, without direction, the second of end without movement, of sense interrupted, cut off, stopped up, arrested. Both processes are very frequently used, and together are emblematic of the novel's non-finality.

Lacking movement, the text does nevertheless come to a closure metaphorically represented by the celebrated «bureau de l'écrivain,» described in the last several pages.[31] In this office, and on this writing table, lie the objects out of which O. might fashion his writing: *Petit Larousse,* package of Gauloises, matches, a 1000 lira note, a scallop shell, a post card, a box of paper clips. Objecting to Ricardou's description of the novel as «a cyclical production of increasing complexity,» Jean Alter argued for a teleological structure, a «straight movement» based on these objects as the key to the novel (*Nouveau Roman,* vol. 1, p. 60. Claude Bremond is quoted later during the 1971 Colloque de Cerisy that saw this debate: «The narrator who wishes to give order to the chronological succession of the events that he relates, who wishes to give a sense [or meaning], has no other resource than to tie them together in the unity of a conduct oriented toward an end,»[32]—the purpose being to show that the *nouveau roman* rejected such a

«conduct,» as indeed *La Bataille de Pharsale* does, and used other ordering principles, or things, to «give a sense.» In Alter's view, the objects serve this function of «a conduct oriented toward an end.» Ricardou on the other hand saw the objects not as the producers but the end-products of the narration.

A good reading must refuse to *trancher le débat.* For if the text is infinite, the so-called key in the last pages is both produced and producer: the objects produce the text by which they are themselves produced in a kind of perpetual *abyme.* O. is the organizer and the one who puts into order, but the only order he creates is that disorder which has just come to an end. He can write no other text. A principle of repetition rules, and the last words are only the last of the repetitions; the principle does not allow any new text to be written; no writing is possible without its double or multiple reflections. Repetition achieves stasis. Thus the end to which the text does arrive in its linearity—the scene of writing—is a further proof of the infinity of the text. Only in writing is this motion without movement possible, and that is why O. must write. There is finally no salvation in writing, except in the act itself, which will be repeated until the end of time. The ending of the novel tells the reader how to read—essentially, to reread; for without rereading there is no understanding. The reader must reread to keep the writer writing.

But what actually happens when the reader rereads *La Bataille de Pharsale,* knowing how its linearity ends? Barthes writes, «Of all readings, that of tragedy is the most perverse: I take pleasure in hearing myself tell a story *whose end I know....* Compared to a dramatic story, which is one whose outcome is unknown, there is here an effacement of pleasure and a progression of bliss» (*The Pleasure of the Text,* pp. 47-48).[33] *La Bataille de Pharsale* comes close to being a text of bliss, or *jouissance,* «outside any imaginable finality» (p. 52). With respect to the two other «non-final» texts studied here, reading it carries the perversion to an extreme, as the form of its closure shows, and thus approaches *jouissance:* «it is the extreme of perversion which defines it [bliss]: an extreme continually shifted, an empty, mobile, unpredictable extreme. This extreme guarantees bliss: an average perversion quickly loads itself up with a play of subordinate finalities» (p. 52).[34] The radical ending destroys finality. And like the innumerable instances of reading that occur in the novel's fabric, rereading *La Bataille de Pharsale* will be an obsessive act of seeking infinitely deferred meanings,

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looking for and not finding remembered passages, while the read text impinges on consciousness in the most irrational manner, surfacing unbidden at the crucial juncture of some unplanned itinerary.

Fosca's attempt to acquire a kind of factitious finality has a certain measure of success that can be seen in the effect of his act of narration on his audience. In a sense, he has contrived to transfer the burden of his non-final world onto Régine, who becomes the new victim of non-finality. That is perhaps the ultimate interpretation of the clotural device of the «premier cri»—it is not the final cry, not an end to anything, but the start of a new nausea-pervaded void. There is a kind of finality in historicizing after all, if it is turned to account; the account of history gives movement to the narration, if not the novel. Beauvoir's early example would approach *jouissance*—since the reader knows in advance that Fosca's story cannot end—were it not for its narration. The novel is loaded with subordinate finalities.

La Modification moves closer to an extreme of perversion. Butor's only possible salvation through art lies ahead, in the future book of the collective reader, who will establish the «real geographic relations» of fiction but at the same time allow the tortuous line of mental creation to flourish. The new critical reader will recognize the «void opening up, this fissure that widens and deepens more and more...this fissure into which little by little all the constructions you had made were being swallowed up»[35]—all the traditional, romantic fictions Delmont had invented about Rome and Cécile—as well as the only certain ending which is the arrival of the train in Rome: «your arrival in a few moments, solid landmark, only ground which might remain certain.»[36] Butor/Delmont is the «split subject, who simultaneously enjoys *[jouit]*, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall» *(The Pleasure of the Text,* p. 21)[37]—and whose book is a text of pleasure encumbered with a certain measure of finality.

In the repetitive ending of *La Bataille de Pharsale* I see a reprise of the «premier cri» of *Tous les hommes sont mortels,* which itself is a sort of «way out» for Simone de Beauvoir, because it follows a modern convention of ending with a new beginning, found especially in American and English literature (Joyce and Lawrence provide examples), and given the status of a model possessing a name: the threshold ending (in which a character

stands on the threshold of an uncertain but challenging future after weathering a crisis).[18] But there is an important difference: the beginning implied in the last line of Beauvoir's novel was the start of something different, the effect of Fosca's narration on Régine, whereas in Simon's novel O. cannot start anything new. He is permanently stuck in a writing loop. Writing has become its own end, and hence can have no end. More and more, the deconstructive and tragic form of contemporary novels proclaims the loss of belief in a finality inherent in the written text, to the profit of writing itself.

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 6. «L'écriture est ceci: la science des jouissances du langage.» *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 14.

All quotations appear in the text in my own translations, except as noted.

2. «Il haussa les épaules: —Je ne sais pas. —Mais vous devez savoir, dit-elle. —Jouer bien, jouer mal, je ne sais pas ce que signifient ces mots.» Simone de Beauvoir, *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (Paris: Gallimard [Folio], 1946), p. 100. I have consulted Leonard M. Friedman's translation, *All Men are Mortal* (Cleveland: World, 1955).

3. «Le sens ne signifie donc pas seulement ce que les mots veulent bien nous dire, il est aussi une direction, c'est-à-dire, dans le langage des philosophes, une intentionnalité et une finalité.» A. J. Greimas, *Du sens* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp. 15-16.

4. «Toujours la même histoire, dit-il. Elle ne changera jamais. Il faudra la traîner avec moi, sans fin» (p. 113).

5. «Sauvez-moi de la nuit et de l'indifférence, dit-il. Faites que je vous aime et que vous existiez entre toutes les femmes. Alors le monde retrouvera sa forme» (p. 58).

6. «Il faut beaucoup de force, dit-il, beaucoup d'orgueil ou beaucoup d'amour pour croire que les actes d'un homme ont de l'importance et que la vie l'emporte sur la mort» (p. 96).

7. «On ne doit jamais refuser son passé» (p. 35).

8. «Tout mon passé et ce long amour de moi-même dans ces précieux bibelots. Et ce ne sont rien que des objets de bazar! Elle jeta les masques sur le sol.... Elle les piétinait; elle écrasait tous les mensonges» (p. 107).

9. «une minute, rien qu'une minute.... Si elle détruisait en un instant le passé et

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l'avenir, elle serait bien sûr*[e]* que cet instant existait» (pp. 105 and 106).

10. «Dans le coeur de Régine, le passé se gonflait comme un bouquet qui reprend vie.... Quelle paix!...c'est cela l'éternité: ces maisons calmes, le bruit de ces cloches qui sonneront jusqu'à la fin du monde» (pp. 89-90).

11. «Il avait raison: tant qu'il parlait, tant qu'elle l'écoutait parler, aucune question ne se posait. Il aurait fallu que cette histoire ne s'achevât jamais» (p. 359).

12. «Elle appuya ses mains contre sa bouche. L'angoisse était descendue de sa gorge dans son coeur, dans son ventre. Elle avait envie de crier.... Elle serra les lèvres. Le cri montait du ventre au coeur, du coeur à la gorge.... 'Ce n'est que le commencement,' pensa-t-elle, et elle restait immobile comme s'il eût été possible de ruser avec le temps, de l'empêcher de poursuivre sa course. Mais ses mains se raidissaient contre ses lèvres contractées.

Ce fut quand l'heure commença de sonner au clocher qu'elle poussa le premier cri» (pp. 526-28).

13. «Elle le regardait s'éloigner, comme s'il avait pu emporter avec lui le maléfice qui l'avait dépouillée de son être; ...il avait disparu, mais elle demeurait telle qu'il l'avait faite: un brin d'herbe, un moucheron, une fourmi, un lambeau d'écume.... Elle écrasa ses mains contre sa bouche, elle inclina la tête, elle était vaincue; dans l'horreur, dans la terreur, elle acceptait la métamorphose» (p. 528).

14. «Il me faudrait écrire un livre.» Butor, *La Modification* (Paris: Minuit, 1957), p. 226.

15. «c'est la seule possibilité pour moi de jouir au moins de son reflet tellement admirable et poignant» (p. 229).

16. «le mensonge que fut cet amour» (p. 233).

17. «*[*Delmont*]* se constitue en sujet lorsqu'il se découvre comme un moment de l'Histoire.» Quoted in Van Rossum-Guyon, *Critique du Roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 172.

18. «Ce que cherchait Léon, c'est un centre, capable encore d'organiser le monde...mais Léon Delmont comprend que ce centre est un mythe, que le monde n'est plus organisé autour de lui, que Rome s'est écroulée....» Jacques Leenhardt, «L'enjeu politique de l'écriture chez Butor,» *Butor/Colloque de Cerisy* (Paris: UGE, 1974), p. 176.

19. «combler le vide qui s'est creusé, n'ayant plus d'autre liberté» (pp. 226-27).

20. «La rédemption par l'écriture...s'annonce ultime solution après l'échec du recours au mythe culturel» (Leenhardt, p. 179).

21. But it is perhaps innocently or inadvertently that Ludovic Janvier wrote in 1964: «le voyageur...s'achemine avec nous vers la découverte de quelque chose de capital»—which for Janvier, writing in what could be called a dark age of *nouveau roman* criticism, was precisely a kind of order. Janvier, *Une parole exigeante* (Paris: Minuit, 1964), p. 42.

22. «Vous dites: il faudrait montrer dans ce livre le rôle que peut jouer Rome dans

la vie d'un homme à Paris; on pourrait imaginer ces deux villes superposées l'une à l'autre, l'une souterraine par rapport à l'autre, avec des trappes de communication que certains seulement connaîtraient sans qu'aucun sans doute parvînt à les connaître toutes, de telle sorte que pour aller d'un lieu à un autre il pourrait y avoir certains raccourcis ou détours inattendus, de telle sorte que la distance d'un point à un autre, le trajet d'un point à un autre, serait modifié selon la connaissance, la familiarité que l'on aurait de cette autre ville, de telle sorte que toute localisation serait double, l'espace romain déformant plus ou moins pour chacun l'espace parisien, autorisant rencontres ou induisant en pièges» (pp. 231-32).

23. «Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux conserver entre ces deux villes leur distance, toutes ces gares, tous ces paysages qui les séparent? Mais en plus des communications normales par lesquelles chacun pourrait se rendre de l'une à l'autre quand il voudrait, il y aurait un certain nombre de points de contact, de passages instantanés qui s'ouvriraient à certains moments déterminés par des lois que l'on ne parviendrait à connaître que peu à peu.

Ainsi le personnage principal se promenant aux alentours du Panthéon parisien pourrait un jour, tournant à l'angle d'une maison bien connue, se trouver soudain dans une rue toute différente de celle à laquelle il s'attendait, dans une lumière tout autre, avec des inscriptions dans une autre langue qu'il reconnaîtrait comme de l'italien» (pp. 233-34).

24. «Le mieux, sans doute, serait de conserver à ces deux villes leurs relations géographiques réelles

et de tenter de faire revivre sur le mode de la lecture cet épisode crucial de votre aventure, le mouvement qui s'est produit dans votre esprit accompagnant le déplacement de votre corps d'une gare à l'autre à travers tous les paysages intermédiaires» (p. 236).

25. «Je ne puis espérer me sauver seul. Tout le sang, tout le sable de mes jours s'épuiserait en vain dans cet effort pour me consolider» (p. 229).

26. «notre amour n'est pas un chemin menant quelque part» (p. 227).

27. «O. écrit: Jaune et puis noir temps d'un battement de paupières et puis jaune de nouveau.» Claude Simon, *La Bataille de Pharsale* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), p. 271.

28. «Soit alors O la position occupée par l'oeil de l'observateur (O.) et d'où part une droite invisible OO' rejoignant l'oeil à l'objet sur lequel est fixé le regard» (p. 181).

29. «rappel des ténèbres jaillissant de bas en haut à une foudroyante rapidité» (p. 9).

30. «de toute façon les choses ne se sont jamais passées comme on l'imagine ou si tu préfères on n'imagine jamais les choses comme elles se passent en réalité et même si tu y assistes tu ne peux jamais les voir comme

oh arrête

elles sont Alors fais comme tout le monde et décide qu'elles sont ce que tu crois voir

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ou imagine-les et décide que c'est comme ça que ça s'est passé et alors ça sera réellement passé ici» (pp. 88-89).

31. Michel Mansuy describes the «bureau de l'écrivain» as a kind of sanctuary in which the writer/hermit «écrit pour écrire» (*Nouveau Roman,* vol. 1, p. 81).

32. «le narrateur qui veut ordonner la succession chronologique des événements qu'il relate, leur donner un sens, n'a d'autre ressource que de les lier dans l'unité d'une conduite orientée vers une fin (*Nouveau Roman,* vol. 1, p. 223).

33. «De toutes les lectures, c'est la lecture tragique qui est la plus perverse: je prends plaisir à m'entendre raconter une histoire *[in hearing a story told to me,* and not *in hearing myself tell a story* as the translator has it*] dont je connais la fin*.... Par rapport à l'histoire dramatique, qui est celle dont on ignore l'issue, il y a effacement du plaisir et progression de la jouissance» (Barthes, *Plaisir,* pp. 76-77).

34. «c'est l'extrême de la perversion qui la définit: extrême toujours déplacé, extrême vide, mobile, imprévisible. Cet extrême garantit la jouissance: une perversion moyenne s'encombre très vite d'un jeu de finalités subalternes» (Barthes, *Plaisir,* p. 83).

35. «vide s'ouvrant, cette faille de plus en plus large et profonde...cette faille où s'engloutissaient peu à peu toutes les constructions que vous aviez faites» (p. 235).

36. «votre arrivée dans quelques instants, solide bord, seul sol qui demeurât certain» (p. 235).

37. «sujet clivé, qui jouit à la fois, à travers le texte, de la consistance de son *moi* et de sa chute» (Barthes, *Plaisir,* p. 36).

38. Paper presented by Phillip Herring at the 1979 MLA Convention. The difference is that the character here is perhaps not «moving in the right direction,» as Herring has it.