

# The New French Novel: Philosophy and Poetry

By Laurent LeSage, *professor of French literature at Pennsylvania State University.*

MICHEL BUTOR explains that he became a novelist in order to indulge his two passions, philosophy and poetry; to a great extent this might be the confession of all the young French novelists of today, who use fiction as a means of philosophical investigation or of lyrical expression. The widely discussed "nouveau roman" is generally described as a revolution in novelistic technique and its proponents as writers more concerned with matters of form than with anything else. But behind technique there is philosophy of art and of life, and the "new novelists" are not so much art-for-art's-sakers as grave and thoughtful young writers seeking art forms that will not betray their thought or stifle their hearts. As such, they follow, more than is generally noted, in the footsteps of their elders—the great French philosopher-novelists and poet-novelists of the twentieth century. Their technical borrowings from abroad must not make us forget what they owe to Proust, Gide, Cocteau, Breton, Malraux, who were the authors they studied in their youth, or to Camus and Sartre, who were their immediate masters. Indeed it was probably Sartre who first directed their attention to English-language writers, whose literary techniques he recommended on patently philosophical grounds.

It was on philosophical grounds that Sartre, in a notorious attack on François Mauriac in 1939, denounced the literary practice of presenting characters by forthright analysis. When Alain Robbe-Grillet launched the "nouveau roman" in the mid-1950s with a renewed attack on "psychological analysis" and the "sacrosanct Balzac tradition," he was merely taking up where Sartre had left off and aiming, like his master before him, at the philosophy underlying a literary technique. The new writers are vowed to finish once and for all with such fundamentals of classic French philosophy as the concept of a human nature as such, the intrinsic personality, the intelligibility of the universe—in fact with the whole humanistic tradition, which has been increasingly under fire during the course of the century. Their arguments,

we may note, though conducted in the name of philosophical verity, serve always the cause of poetic liberty as well.

Nothing is more futile, the new writers declare, than the time-honored ambition of French novelists to expose the real nature of a person underneath appearances. A person has no real nature but is just an ever-changing, ever-fluid stream of sentiments and instincts common to all. All the devices used to "create characters" should accordingly be scrapped: the vital statistics, the full-length portraits, the significant trait, etc. Even names can be omitted and speeches unidentified. The only use a Nathalie Sarraute finds for the old paraphernalia to define a person in the world is a derisive one—to show that individualized man is a fake or a puppet. One cannot say in France today what Walter Besant prissily said in England in the Eighties: "It is, fortunately, not possible in this country for any man to defile and defame humanity and still be called an artist." A being created neither in the image of God nor after an ideal pattern, mortal man as viewed by the new novelists is characteristically a sorry, anonymous creature who stumbles through life after mirages. The order, the plan, the meaning that he seeks is never grasped because it does not exist in the universe. If man cries out and no one answers, Robbe-Grillet tells us, he is wrong in assuming that someone refuses to answer. He should simply conclude that no one is there.

WITHOUT norms, identities, or fixed values, the new novelists can only record the activities of their consciousness—describe the world as it is illuminated by consciousness, and consciousness itself in its act of perceiving and trying to understand. Robbe-Grillet, Butor, and Claude Simon do precisely this and make of their heroes nothing more than a roving eye and a reacting brain. Author and reader are one with the hero, never outside or above him, never seeing or knowing more than he can. A fixed "post of observation," interior monologue, and stream-of-consciousness description prevent either one from assuming a privileged position. No more in the novel than in the universe is there a place for a transcendent being.

If the heart of fiction is still the story,

it is so with the new novel in a very special sense, for the assumption of a universe devoid of retribution or compensation, in which events have no reality other than a subjective one, rules out meaningfully organized episode. Plot is reduced to a vague allegory of man's everlasting search to understand and his eventual frustration. Typically it follows the narrative lines of a quest, parodying the Grail legend (Jean Cayrol, Kateb Yacine), the Odyssey (Marguerite Duras, Claude Ollier), or the detective story (Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Simon). The adventure simply creates itself as the deambulatory hero moves along his uncharted course (nothing preconceived in the novel or foreordained in the universe) and stops without resolution at a point arbitrarily set by the author. Butor's Jacques Revel never succeeds in solving the mystery of Bleston, Robert Pinget's M. Levert never gets the letter written to his son, Yacine's Nedjma fades away in a mythological past. To give their works structural reinforcement the new French novelists have had to rely heavily upon formal pattern.

Robbe-Grillet and Butor provide a rigid frame for their works by means of strict temporal limitation: "Passing Time," by Butor (translated by Jean Stewart, Simon & Schuster, \$3.95), encompasses exactly one year, the period a young French clerk is assigned to an English firm in the town called Bleston. But within the arbitrary time limits we find everything but straight chronological progression in the novels of these authors. In "Passing Time" it is broken by methodically juxtaposing two moments of the year: Revel starts in May to write the account of his stay begun in September, so that with every day there is blended the evocation of an earlier one. If objective time is rigorously contained, subjective time roves at will in these novels of a consciousness at work. Recollections, returned images take it far beyond the boundaries of calendar and clock. It is obvious that other than for reasons of pattern, objective time—like any other manifestation of an orderly universe—is there only to be flouted. Pinget and Simon also impose a temporal limitation, but the vagaries of the remembering mind all but obliterate it. The title character in "Monsieur Levert" (trans-

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## Seven Authors Of the Nouveau Roman

**KATEB YACINE:** Although he writes in French, Kateb Yacine is regarded as the voice of the "new Algeria." He comes of a long line of literary men; his first name, Kateb, is the Arabic word for "writer." Yacine was born in 1929 near Constantine; his life has reflected the postwar turbulence of his country. At the age of sixteen, while a student at the Collège de Sétif, he was arrested following the May 1945 demonstration, and was interned for several months, after which he was released for lack of grounds for prosecution. The following year his first book, a collection of poems, was published. For the next few years Yacine was a reporter for the *Alger Républicain*, covering Saudi Arabia, the Egyptian Sudan, and Soviet Central Asia; he also worked as a stevedore in Algiers, and in France as an agricultural laborer, bricklayer, and electrician. In 1952 a group of friends provided help that enabled him to devote all his time to the works he was then engaged on, one of which was "Nedjma," and the other "La Cadavre Encerclé," published in *Esprit* in 1955. Yacine spends a great deal of time traveling, and usually finds it expedient to remain strictly incognito. Photographs of him are hard to come by.



**CLAUDE SIMON** waited almost twenty years before deciding to write "The Flanders Road," a novel set in World War II, for fear of "false images that would misrepresent my subject to the reader, but more importantly of false images I myself might have acquired or retained. . . ." Simon himself served in the cavalry during the war, was taken prisoner, and escaped. His first novel appeared in 1946.



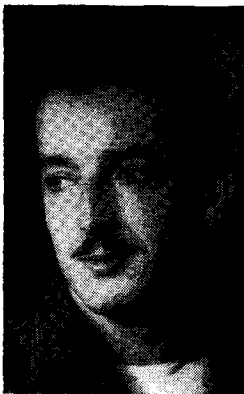
**MARCEL BUTOR**, author of "Passing Time," recently spent a year in America, where he taught at Middlebury and Bryn Mawr. He is one of the leaders of the revolutionary young writers experimenting with the "New Novel"; in 1957 he won the Prix-Renaudot, which in France implies large sales as well as literary merit. One other of his books, "A Change of Heart," has been published in the United States.



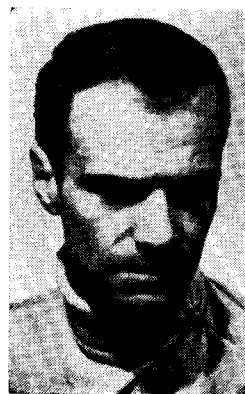
**ARRABAL**, who uses only his surname on the covers of his books, was born in Melilla, Spain, in 1932; though he now lives in Paris and writes in French, he considers himself an exile rather than an emigré, and hopes that one day he will be able to return to his native country. Meanwhile his experimental writing has established him as a member of the French avant-garde. Besides the novel "Baal Babylon," he has written several plays.



**ANTOINE BLONDIN:** "A Monkey in Winter," currently being made into a film with Jean Gabin and Daniel Gelin in the leading roles, is Antoine Blondin's fourth novel, and was awarded the Prix Interallié for 1959. It is the first of his books to appear in English. Blondin was born in 1922, and grew up in Paris, where he now lives. He writes a weekly column for *Equipe* and is a regular contributor to *Paris-Presse* and *Elle*.



**JACQUES SERGUINE:** In making his own pseudonymous self the narrator and chief character of "Special People," the young Frenchman writing under the nom de plume of "Jacques Serguine" has followed a device that was effectively used by Colette, among others. His book was published in France as "Les Fils des Rois" ("The Sons of Kings"). Still in his twenties, the author has recently finished a second novel.



**ROBERT PINGET:** A dramatic adaptation of Robert Pinget's "Monsieur Levert," made by the author himself and entitled "Dead Letter," was recently performed in Paris on the same program with Samuel Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape." In 1960, Pinget, who has published several other novels in France, received a Ford Foundation grant under which he visited for six months in the United States. He is a native Parisian.  
—RUTH BROWN.

lated by Richard Howard, Grove, \$1.95, paperback) is writing to his son about the burial of the shoemaker's daughter on the previous Thursday. But not only does today intrude in the account of Thursday, but days long past as well. As in "**The Flanders Road**," by Claude Simon (translated by Richard Howard, Braziller, \$4), scenes and conversations break off, give way to others, resume—without any regard to chronology or any warning to the reader, who loses track and eventually abandons all notion of sequence. Which is exactly what the new novelists want to happen.

The limitation of external time is normally accompanied by limitation of space—a single town, a building, even just a verandah. Add the limitation of action—a slim adventure or situation narrated from a single point of view—and we have something like the three unities of the classic French theatre to give the new novel a simple basic architecture. But the complicated inner organization with the constant alternation and repetition of scenes or narrative fragments suggests borrowings from other arts such as painting and music. In themselves the tableaux of a Butor or a Simon constitute structural elements—the Bleston cathedral, symbol of hostility and possible crime; Reixach's death scene, recapitulation of Simon's erotic theme and his concern with decadent families. One feels, in addition, that the novels in their entirety may have been conceived as huge single paintings with design and color arrangement worked out on the principle of filling a canvas, or as a musical composition, in view of the inherent quality of movement in fiction. It is easy to regard episodes like that of the shoemaker's daughter in "**Monsieur Levert**" as a theme with variations; all recurring elements in these novels, in fact, are like motifs in a musical scheme. On the other hand, in Yacine's "**Nedjma**" (translated by Richard Howard, Braziller, \$4), a novel without beginning or end, the chapters are more like planets moving around an empty center, just as the characters move in their orbits around the motionless heroine. But from wherever the pattern is borrowed, it is used to destroy chronology, causality, and all the props of the common-sense universe.

Style and syntax must also be regarded in the light of the new novelists' repudiations. To replace ordinary discourse with its orderly sentences and neat paragraphs, each author has sought an expression faithful to his own inner vision of things—precise, cold notations with Robbe-Grillet, endless and minute compilations with Butor, squirming masses of words with Sarraute, tangles of images with Simon, and a potpourri

of rhapsodical tirades, movie captions, and confidences with Yacine. In forsaking the conventional language of narration for that of the mind stream with its rhythms and its welter of imagery, the new novelists have left prose for poetry, precisely for that sort of poetry defined by the Surrealists as the only one worthy of the name. Poets already by their emphasis on man's primal reactions to the universe, by preferring formal patterns to storytelling, the new novelists obtain full poetic status by a style unequivocally in the service of self-expression and evocation. As poets, then, as well as philosophers, they continue the dominant trend in the French novel. They have borrowed devices from foreign writers—from Joyce, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf—and have accomplished a revolution in technique. But only to accomplish a far deeper and more significant revolution long under way at home. In spite of noisy abjurations—in which the authors themselves have their part—the "new novel" remains a French novel.

IT should not be thought, moreover, that only the "nouveau roman" continues the trend of poetry and philosophy in the French novel. Of the sheaf of seven new translations I have before me, three do not "officially" belong. But the three authors qualify as poets, and their narrative devices, often in line with those of the avant-garde, bespeak a common philosophical intention. Antoine Blondin's "**A Monkey in Winter**" (translated by Robert Baldick,

Putnam, \$3.50), prize-winner and best-seller in France, charms by its winsome writing reminiscent of Jean Giraudoux as much as by its account of a drunken spree unparalleled in recent fiction. The man who joins the innkeeper on a bender is another of the outsider-heroes, revolting, like the innkeeper, against established values and seeking to make some sense of life and the universe. Their story ends, as we have learned to expect, without resolution. "**Special People**," by Jacques Serguine (translated by Richard Howard, Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, \$3.95), is also a novel of debauch—the gilded youth of today trying to find meaning in life through the physical. Its young author presents the eternal myth of youth in the contemporary mode—no sustained narrative but four frescoes in which events and conversations alternate with apostrophes to the sun, the sea, and the beauty of women.

"**Baal Babylon**," by Arrabal (translated by Richard Howard, Grove, \$1.75, paperback), takes its pattern likewise from the visual arts, but rather than tableaux, we find here tiny mosaic pieces that fit together to create a picture of childhood and youth, flashes of memory that evoke a boy's encounters with hate, bigotry, and sin. In all these novels, new with or without quotation marks, we see the world as refracted through a consciousness—a world of terror and mystery, but also of such awesome beauty that young authors cannot help but describe it adoringly even in their despair.

## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

"WITH THIS RING . . ."

Here come the brides, all from fictional titles selected by Helene Nitzsche of Maquoketa, Iowa, who asks you to assign the correct veiled ladies to the correct authors. Banns are published on page 44.

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|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Margaret H. Freyberg | ( ) "The Bride"                |
| 2. Francis Brett Young  | ( ) "The Sea Bride"            |
| 3. Ben Ames Williams    | ( ) "The Fair Bride"           |
| 4. Edward F. Murphy     | ( ) "Bride of Glory"           |
| 5. Sir Walter Scott     | ( ) "Cargo of Brides"          |
| 6. Edward Streeter      | ( ) "The Tragic Bride"         |
| 7. Hartzell Spence      | ( ) "Bride of Fortune"         |
| 8. Harnett T. Kane      | ( ) "The Quaker Bride"         |
| 9. Walter O'Meara       | ( ) "The Spanish Bride"        |
| 10. Bruce Marshall      | ( ) "Bride of the River"       |
| 11. Janet Whitney       | ( ) "Father of the Bride"      |
| 12. Samuel Ornitz       | ( ) "Bride of the Sabbath"     |
| 13. Laura Harris        | ( ) "Bride for New Orleans"    |
| 14. Helen Rucker        | ( ) "Bride of the Conqueror"   |
| 15. Bradda Field        | ( ) "The Bride of Lammermoor"  |
| 16. H. J. Kaplan        | ( ) "The Spirit and the Bride" |