

# The Age of Suspicion

*Essays on the Novel by*

**Nathalie Sarraute**

*author of Martereau and The Planetarium*

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Translated by Maria Jolas

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authentic impression" had been found to have any number of depths; and they extended one beneath the other, *ad infinitum*.

The deep uncovered by Proust's analyses had already proved to be nothing but a surface. A surface too, the one that the interior monologue, basis of so many legitimate hopes, had succeeded in identifying. And the immense progress achieved by psychoanalysis, which stopped at nothing, passing through several depths at one time, had shown the inefficacy of classic introspection, and inspired doubts as to the ultimate value of all methods of research.

*Homo absurdus*, therefore, was Noah's dove, the messenger of deliverance.

Now, at last, it was permissible to leave behind without remorse all sterile endeavor, all wearisome floundering, all nerve-racking splitting of hairs; modern man, having become a soulless body tossed about by hostile forces, was nothing, when all was said and done, but what he appeared to be on the surface. The inexpressive torpor, the immobility that a quick glance could observe in his face when he let himself go, hid no interior reactions. The "tumult like unto silence" that adherents of "the



psychological" had thought they saw in his soul was nothing, after all, but silence.

His consciousness was composed of nothing but a superficial network of "conventional opinions taken over just as they were from the group to which he belonged," and these very commonplaces hid "a profound nothingness," an almost total "absence from self." The so-called "heart of hearts," the "ineffable intimacy with oneself," had been nothing but a delusion and a snare. "The psychological," which had been the source of such great disappointment and sorrow, did not exist.

This soothing conclusion brought with it the delightful sense of restored vigor and optimism that usually accompanies liquidations and renunciations.

Now it was possible to gather one's forces and, forgetting past misadventures, start over again, "on new bases." On every side, more accessible, pleasanter prospects seemed to be opening up. The very promising art of the cinema would allow the novel which, as a result of so many fruitless efforts, had reassumed a touching, juvenile modesty, to benefit by its entirely new techniques. By virtue of a benef-

could open up for the writer, once he was rid of the unfortunate nearsightedness that had forced him to examine each object at close range, and kept him from seeing further than the end of his own nose.

Lastly, those who, despite all these assurances and promises, still had certain scruples, and continued to lend an anxious ear, to be convinced that behind that dead silence there subsisted no echo of the former tumult, could feel fully reassured.

Contrary to the formless, soft matter that yields and disintegrates under the scalpel of analysis, this fragment of the universe within whose boundaries the new novel prudently remained confined, formed a hard, compact whole that was absolutely indivisible. Its very hardness and opacity preserved its interior complexity and density and conferred upon it a force of penetration that allowed it to attain not to the superficial, arid regions of the reader's intellect, but to those infinitely fertile, "listless and defenseless regions of the sentient soul." It provoked a mysterious, salutary shock, a sort of emotional commotion that made it possible to apprehend all at once, and as in a flash, an entire

object with all its nuances, its possible complexities, and even—if, by chance, these existed—its unfathomable depths. There was therefore nothing to lose and, apparently, everything to be gained.

When Albert Camus' *The Stranger* appeared, it was permissible to believe with good reason that it would fulfill all hopes. Like all works of real value it came at the appointed time; it responded to our expectations; it crystallized all our suspended stray impulses. From now on, we need envy no one. We too had our *homo absurdus*. And he enjoyed the undeniable advantage over even Dos Passos' and Steinbeck's heroes of being depicted not at a distance and from the outside, as they were, but from within, through the classical process of introspection, so dear to adherents of "the psychological": we could ascertain his inner nothingness at close range and, as it were, from a front box. In fact, as Maurice Blanchot wrote,<sup>1</sup> "This Stranger's relation to himself is as though someone else were observing and speaking of him . . . He is entirely on the outside, and all the more himself in that he seems to think less, feel less, be less intimate with

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Faux Pas*, pp. 257 and 259.



his self. The very image of human reality when it is stripped of all psychological conventions, when we try to grasp it by a description made solely from the outside, deprived of all false, subjective explanations . . ." And Claude Edmonde Magny wrote<sup>1</sup>: "Camus wants to let us see the inner nothingness of his hero and, through it, our own nothingness . . . Meursault is man stripped of all the ready-made garments with which society clothes the normal void of his being: his conscience . . . The sentiments and psychological reactions he tries to find in himself (sadness as his mother lies dying, love for Maria, remorse at the murder of the Arab) he does not find: indeed, all he finds is a view that is absolutely similar to the view that others may have of his behavior."

And the fact is that during this scene of his mother's funeral, although he does occasionally discover within himself a few of the sentiments that classical analysis, albeit with a certain timorous fluster, succeeded in uncovering; a few of the fugitive thoughts, "shadowy and shy," that it detected (among so many others) "gliding by

<sup>1</sup> Cl. Edmonde Magny, "Roman américain et Cinéma," *Poésie* 45, No. 24, p. 69.

with the furtive speed of fish"—such as the pleasure he derives from a lovely morning in the country, the disappointment he feels at the thought of the outing this funeral has made him miss, or the memory of what he usually does at this time of morning—on the contrary, everything that in any way concerns his mother, and not only ordinary sorrow (without surprising us too much, he might have experienced a sense of deliverance and satisfaction, like one of Virginia Woolf's heroines), but all sentiment or thought whatsoever, appears to have been completely abolished, as though by a magic wand. In this well-scrubbed, well-adorned conscience, there is not the slightest scrap of memory that ties back to childhood impressions, not the palest shadow of those ready-made sentiments that the very persons who think they are best protected against conventional emotions and literary reminiscences, feel slip through them.

This state of anesthesia appears to be so profound that we are reminded of the patients described by Dr. Janet, who suffer from what he has called "feelings of emptiness," and who keep saying: "All my feelings have disappeared . . . My head is empty . . . My heart is empty . . . people



ple and things are a matter of equal indifference to me . . . I can go through all the motions, but, in doing so, I feel neither joy nor sorrow . . . Nothing tempts me, nothing disgusts me . . . I am a living statue; whatever happens to me, it is impossible for me to have a sensation or a sentiment about anything . . ."

Despite these similarities of language, however, there is nothing in common between Albert Camus' character and Dr. Janet's patients. Meursault who, in certain things, appears to be so insensitive, so simple-minded and as though in a daze, in certain others, gives evidence of refinement of taste and exquisite delicacy. The very style in which he expresses himself makes him, rather than the rival of Steinbeck's bellowing hero, the heir to the *Princess of Cleve* and *Adolph*. As the Abbé Brémont would say, he is "all strewn with winter roses." This Stranger has the vigorous acuity of line, the rich palette of a great painter: "Without a smile she inclined her long, bony face . . ." "I was a bit lost between the blue and white sky and the monotony of these colors, the sticky black of the fresh tar, the dull black of people's clothes, the enamel black of the car" . . . He notes with the tenderness of a

poet the delicate play of light and shadow and the varying tints of the sky. He recalls the "brimming sun that made the landscape quiver," "an odor of night and flowers." He hears a "moan that became slowly audible like a flower born of silence." Unerring taste guides the choice of his epithets. He speaks of "a drowsy headland," "a dark breath."

But there are things that are still more disturbing. If we are to judge by the details that hold his attention—such as the episode of the maniac or, above all, the one about old Salamano, who hates and martyizes his dog and, at the same time, loves it with deep, moving tenderness—he is not averse to skirting about the edges of the abyss, with prudence, of course, and circumspection. Despite the "ingenuousness" and "unconsciousness" with which he discloses, to quote Maurice Blanchot, that "man's real, constant mood is: I do not think, I have nothing to think about," he is much more aware than we imagine. As witness, such a remark as this, that he lets drop: "All healthy human beings (have) more or less wished for the death of those they loved," which shows that, on occasion, and doubtless oftener than most, he has made rather



deep incursions into forbidden, dangerous zones.

The feeling of malaise that we are unable to shake off all through the book probably comes from these very apparent contradictions, and only at the end when, incapable of containing himself any longer, Camus' hero feels that "something . . . has burst inside (him)" and "he pours out . . . all the depths of (his) heart," do we feel, with him, a sense of release: ". . . I appeared to have empty hands. But I was sure of myself, sure of everything . . . sure of my life and of this death that was going to come . . . I had been right, I was still right, I was always right . . . What did the death of others mean to me, or a mother's love; what was the meaning of the lives we choose, the fates we elect, since one single fate had elected me and, with me, billions of privileged people . . . Everybody was privileged . . . There were nothing but privileged people . . . One day the others too would be condemned."

Now we have it. Finally! What we had timidly surmised is suddenly confirmed. This young employee, who is so simple and rough-hewn, in whom we were asked to recognize the new, long-awaited man, was, in reality, diametrically op-

"psychological," which he had tried so carefully to root out, but which came up again everywhere like weeds, that he owes his salvation.

But however relieved we may feel, when we have closed the book, we cannot help harboring a certain resentment against the author: we begrudge him the fact of having led us too long astray. His behavior toward his character reminds us a bit too much of certain mothers who persist in dressing their buxom and already adult daughters in skirts that are too short. In this unequal struggle, the "psychological," like nature, came out on top.

But perhaps, on the contrary, Camus was trying to demonstrate a wager on the impossibility, in our climes, of doing without psychology. If this was his purpose, he more than succeeded.

But, people will say, what about Kafka? Who would maintain that his *homo absurdus* was nothing but a mirage? There is no willfulness in his attitude, no concern for didactics, no prejudice. He doesn't need to go in for impossible labors of weeding: on the bare lands to which he leads us, no blade of grass can grow.

Yet nothing is more arbitrary than to compare him, as is often done today, with the writer who

was, if not his teacher, at least his precursor, as he was for nearly all the European writers in our time, whether they realize it or not.

Across the immense territories opened up by Dostoevski, Kafka drew a path, a single, long, narrow path; he advanced in a single direction, and followed it to the end. To be assured of this, we must rise above our reluctance, turn backward a moment and plunge into the very thick of the tumult. In the presence of a numerous gathering, the elder Karamazov enters the highly respected Father Zossima's cell and introduces himself: "You see before you a buffoon, a real buffoon! That's how I present myself . . . an old habit, alas!" and he starts to writhe, makes faces, a sort of St. Vitus dance dislocates all his movements, he assumes ludicrous poses, describes with savage, bitter lucidity how he has put himself in humiliating situations, using, in speaking, those humble and, at the same time, aggressive diminutives, those little saccharine, corrosive words that so many of Dostoevski's characters affect; he lies brazenly, and when caught in the act, falls on his feet again . . . he can never be taken off his guard, he knows himself: "I knew it, imagine, and do you know, I even sensed it as



or ill at ease, make yourself quite at home . . . And above all (for he too is examining closely, without a shadow of indignation or loathing, this turgid matter that is boiling up and overflowing), and above all, don't be so ashamed of yourself, because it only comes from that."—"Quite at home, really? that is to say, perfectly natural? Oh, that's too much, far too much, I myself would not go that far." He makes an obscene schoolboy joke and immediately grows serious again: the Staretz has understood him, he contorts himself like that to conform to the idea they have of him, to outbid them, "because it seems to me, when I approach people . . . that everybody takes me for a buffoon. So I say to myself: why not act the buffoon, then . . . because all of you, to the very last one, you are lower than I am, and that's why I am a buffoon . . . it is out of shame, Father, out of shame . . ." A moment later, he falls on his knees, and "it is hard, even then, to know whether he is joking or deeply moved: 'Master, what must I do to gain eternal life?' The Staretz comes a little nearer: 'Above all, do not lie to yourself . . . he who lies to himself . . . is the first to be offended . . . he knows that no one has offended him . . . and yet he is

All of these strange contortions—and we should reproach ourselves for pointing this out, if there were not still those today who, like Paul Léautaud, allow themselves to speak seriously of “that lunatic Dostoievski”—all of these disordered leapings and grimacings, are the absolutely precise, outward manifestation, reproduced without indulgence or desire to please, the way the magnetic needle of a galvanometer gives amplified tracings of the minutest variations of a current, of those subtle, barely perceptible, fleeting, contradictory, evanescent movements, faint tremblings, ghosts of timid appeals and recoilings, pale shadows that flit by, whose unceasing play constitutes the invisible woof of all human relationships and the very substance of our lives.

Of course the methods that Dostoievski used to reproduce these subjacent movements were primitive ones. If he had lived in our time, the more delicate instruments of investigation at the disposal of modern techniques would no doubt have permitted him to seize these movements at their source, thus avoiding all these incredible gesticulations. But by using our techniques, he might also have lost more than he gained. They would have inclined him toward greater realism



and finer minutiae, but he would have lost his originality and ingenuous boldness of line; he would have sacrificed something of his poetic force of evocation, as well as of his tragic power.

And it should be said immediately that what is revealed by these starts and sudden changes, these pirouettings, premonitions and confessions, has absolutely no relation to the disappointing, abstract exposure of motives to which our methods of analysis are accused of leading today. These subjacent movements, this incessant swirl, similar to the movement of atoms, that all of these grimaces bring to light, are themselves nothing else but action, and they only differ by their delicacy, their complexity and their "underground" nature—to use one of Dostoievski's favorite words—from the larger, close-up actions we are shown in a Dos Passos novel, or in a film.

We find these same movements again in different degrees of intensity, and with infinite variations, in all of Dostoievski's characters: in the hero of *Notes from Underground*, in Hippolite or Lebedieff, in Grouchenka or Rogojine, and above all, only more precise, more complicated, more delicate and broader than elsewhere, in the

These attitudes are repeated so often in countless different situations, throughout Dostoievski's works, that we might almost reproach him with a certain monotony. In fact, at times we have the impression of being in the presence of a veritable obsession.

"All of these characters," wrote Gide,<sup>1</sup> "are cut from the same cloth. Pride and humility remain the secret motives of everything they do, although differences of dosage give varied reactions." But it appears that humility and pride are also mere modalities, mere shadings, and that underneath them there is another, still more secret motive, a movement of which pride and humility are but repercussions. It is doubtless to this initial movement, which lends impulse to all the others, to this spot at which all the trunk lines that traverse this tumultuous mass converge, that Dostoievski alluded when he spoke of his "source," "my eternal source," from which he derived, as he said, "the material for each one of my works, even though their form be different." This meeting place, this "source," is rather hard to define. We might perhaps convey an idea of it by saying that, when all is said and done,

<sup>1</sup> André Gide, *Dostoievski*, p. 145.

it is nothing but what Katherine Mansfield called, with some fear and, perhaps, slight distaste: "this terrible desire to establish contact."

It is this continual, almost maniacal need for contact, for an impossible, soothing embrace, that attracts all of these characters like dizziness and incites them on all occasions to try, by any means whatsoever, to clear a path to the "other," to penetrate him as deeply as possible and make him lose his disturbing, unbearable opaqueness; in their turn, it impels them to confide in him and show him their own innermost recesses. Their momentary dissimulations, their furtive leaps, their secretiveness, their contradictions, the inconsistencies of their conduct, which, at times, they appear to multiply for the mere pleasure of it, and dangle before the eyes of the other, are, in their case, nothing but coy, flirtatious attempts to arouse his curiosity and oblige him to draw nearer. Nor is their humility anything but a timid, round-about appeal, a way of showing that they are quite near, accessible, disarmed, open, acquiescent, in complete surrender, completely abandoned to the understanding, the generosity, of the other: all the barriers erected by dignity, by vanity, have been



only muddy, winding roads before them; and some can only walk backward, stumbling over countless obstacles. All, however, have the same goal.

They all respond, they all understand. Each one knows that he is nothing but a fortuitous, more or less felicitous assemblage of elements derived from the same common source, that all the others harbor within themselves his own possibilities, his own stray impulses; this explains why each one of them judges the actions of others as he would his own, at close range, and from within, with all their countless shadings and contradictions which prevent classification and indiscriminate labeling; why no one can ever have the panoramic view of the conduct of others that, alone, makes rancor and blame permissible; it explains the disturbed curiosity with which each one continually scrutinizes the souls of others; the astonishing premonitions, presentiments, the clear-sightedness, the supernatural gift of penetration, which are not the sole privilege of those who are enlightened by Christian love, but of all these dubious characters, these parasites with their saccharine, bitter talk, these larvae who continue to dig

and stir in the very dregs of the soul and sniff with delight its nauseous slime.

Crime itself, assassination, which is a sort of ultimate end of all these movements, the bottom of the abyss toward which they all continue to lean, fearful and attracted, is merely, in their case, the supreme embrace, and the only definitive break. But even this supreme break may yet be repaired thanks to public confession, by means of which the criminal deposits his crime in the common patrimony.

In fact, in all of Dostoievski's works, with perhaps one single exception, no definitive break, no irreparable separation, ever occurs.

If, here and there, one of the two partners permits himself too great a deviation in conduct, or is so bold as to remain aloof and look down upon the other, the way Veltchaninov does in *The Eternal Husband* when, "the game" having been up for a long time, he becomes again the satisfied man of the world he had been formerly, before the game started, a brief call to order suffices (a hand that refuses to be stretched out, four words: "and what about Lisa?") for the polite varnish to crack and fall away, and contact to be re-established.



In only one of his stories—and it is also the only one that is really despairing—the *Notes from Underground*, which is situated, as it were, on the very confines, in the extreme forefront of his entire oeuvre, because of the pitiless refusal the man underground meets with on the part of his comrades, narrow-minded, dull little civil servants, and the young officer, Zverkov, the root of whose name is a word that means “animal” or “beast,” with the stupid head of a ram and elegant, clever, self-assured manners, full of a remote sort of politeness, who “examines him in silence as though he were some curious insect,” while he carries on before them, hurling in vain his shameful, ludicrous appeals at them—here, it will be recalled, the break does occur.

This continual need to establish contact—which is one of the primal characteristics of the Russian people, in whom Dostoevski's work is so firmly rooted—has contributed to making of Russian soil the chosen soil, the veritable black loam of “the psychological.”

Indeed, nothing could be better calculated than are these impassioned questions and answers, these attractions, these feigned withdrawals, these pursuits and flights, these flirtings

and rubbings, these clashes, caresses, bites and embraces, to excite, disturb, bring up to the surface and allow to spread, the immense, quivering mass, whose incessant ebb and flow, whose scarcely perceptible vibration, are the very pulse of life.

Under the pressure of this tumult, the envelope that contains it wears thin and tears. There occurs a sort of displacement from outside inward, from the center of gravity of the character, a displacement which the modern novel has never ceased to stress.

Many have noted the impression of unreality—as though we saw them transparently—that Dostoevski's characters make upon us, despite the minute descriptions that he felt obliged to give in order to satisfy the demands of his epoch.

This comes from the fact that his characters tended already to be what, more and more, characters in fiction were to become, that is, not so much “types” of flesh-and-blood human beings, like those we see around us, to enumerate whom seemed to be the novelist's essential goal, as simple props, carriers of occasionally still unexplored states of consciousness, which we discover within ourselves.



It may be that Proust's snobbishness, which recurs in an almost maniacally besetting manner in all of his characters, is nothing but a variety of this same need of fusion, only grown and cultivated in a very different soil, in the formal, refined society of the Faubourg St. Germain, at the beginning of this century. In any case, Proust's works show us already that these complex, subtle states (we should say, these movements) the slightest shadings of which, in the anxiety of his quest, he has succeeded in capturing in all his characters, remain what is most precious and soundest in his work; while the envelopes, which were perhaps a bit too thick—Swann, Odette, Oriane de Guermantes, or the Verdurins—are already on the way to the vast waxworks to which, sooner or later, all literary "types" are relegated.

But, to return to Dostoievski, these movements upon which all his attention, that of all his characters and also of the reader, are concentrated; which derive from a common source, and despite the envelopes separating them from one another, like little drops of mercury, continually tend to conglomerate and mingle with the common mass; these roving states which,

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from one character to another, traverse the entire oeuvre, are to be found in everybody, refracted in each one of us according to a different index, and each time they present us one of their as yet unknown, innumerable facets, thus allowing us to sense something that might foreshadow a sort of new unanimism.

The tie between this work, which is still a living source of research and new techniques, still rich in promise, and the work of Kafka, to which people tend to contrast it today, appears evident, and if literature were to be regarded as a continuous relay race, it would no doubt have been from Dostoievski's hands, more certainly than from those of any other, that Kafka would have seized the token.

It will be recalled that his K., whose very name is reduced to a mere initial, is but a slender prop. And the sentiment or cluster of sentiments gathered and held together by this frail envelope are nothing if not this same passionate, anxious desire to establish contact that runs like a guiding thread through Dostoievski's entire work. But whereas the quest on which Dostoievski's characters are bent leads them to seek a sort of interpenetration, a total and ever possible



fusion of souls, in the most fraternal of worlds, the entire effort of Kafka's heroes is aimed at a goal that is at once less ambitious and less attainable. All they want is to become, "in the eyes of these people who regard them with such distrust . . . not their friend, perhaps, but in any case, their fellow citizen" . . . , to be able to appear and justify themselves before unknown, unapproachable accusers, or to seek to safeguard, despite all obstacles, some paltry semblance of a relationship with those closest to them.

This humble pursuit, by virtue of its desperate obstinacy, of the depths of human suffering, the distress and complete abandonment that it brings to light, extends well beyond the domain of psychology and lends itself to all kinds of metaphysical interpretations.

However, readers who would like to assure themselves that Kafka's heroes have no connection with those characters in fiction whose authors, out of a need to simplify, through prejudice or from didactical motives, have emptied them of "all subjective thought and life," and present them as "the very image of human reality when it is divested of all psychological

conventions," need only re-read the minute, subtle analyses that Kafka's characters indulge in with impassioned lucidity, as soon as the slightest contact is established between them. As, for instance, the skillful dissections of K.'s conduct and sentiments toward Fr̥ida, performed with the keenest of blades, first by the landlady, then by Fr̥ida, then by K. himself, and which reveal the complicated interplay of delicate wheelworks, a flash of multiple and often contradictory intentions, impulses, calculations, impressions and presentiments.

But these moments of sincerity, these states of grace, are as rare as the contacts that may give rise to them (love between Frieda and K.—if their strange relationship may be so called—or hatred for K. on the part of the landlady).

If we were to try to locate the exact spot in Dostoievski's writings at which Kafka "seized the token," it would no doubt be found in the *Notes from Underground* which, as we have seen, constitutes a sort of ultimate limit, the furthestmost point of this oeuvre.

The hero of these *Notes* knows that, for the officer who "takes him by the shoulders and without any explanation, without a word,



moves him to one side and passes on, as though he did not exist," he is now nothing but a mere object, or, in the eyes of Zverkov, with his "ram's head," a "curious insect"; as he tries to mingle with the crowd and "slips between the passers-by in the most odious way," he feels "like an insect"; he becomes very clearly aware that, in their midst, he is nothing but a "fly," "a nasty fly." This furthestmost point at which he finds himself for a very brief moment—for he will quickly be revenged, he will discover within easy reach human beings with whom the closest fusion will always be possible (such as Lisa, whom he will immediately cause to suffer, and by whom he will succeed in making himself both intensely loved and hated)—this furthestmost point to which he is driven for an instant only, will be the same world without exit, enlarged to the dimensions of an endless nightmare, in which Kafka's characters will flounder.

We all know this world, in which a sinister game of blindman's buff is in constant progress, in which people always advance in the wrong direction, in which outstretched hands "claw the void," in which everything we touch eludes us, in which the person we clutch for a moment

These "gentlemen" whom it is impossible to know even by sight, whom you can watch for vainly your entire life long, who "will never speak to you and never allow you to appear before them, whatever pains you may take and however insistently you may importune them," with whom you cannot hope to establish any sort of relationship other than "to be mentioned in an official report" which they will probably never read, but which, at least, "will be filed in their records," themselves have only a distant knowledge of you, which is both general and precise, like the information to be found in the card-index of a penitentiary director's office.

Here, where distances as immense as interplanetary space separate human beings from one another, where you constantly have "the impression that all connection with you has been broken off," all landmarks disappear, your sense of orientation becomes dulled, little by little your movements become disordered, your sentiments disintegrate (what remains of love is nothing but a savage tussle in which the lovers, under the indifferent gaze of the spectators, "make desperate assault on each other, disappointed, powerless to help," or else, a few

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satinette stars distributed upon receipt of two coupons cut from the textile ration-card; of crematoria on which hung large posters giving the name and address of the sanitary firm that had built the model; and of gas chambers in which two thousand naked bodies (as in *The Trial*, their clothes had previously been "carefully folded and put aside") writhed under the gaze of well-girthed, booted and decorated gentlemen, sent on a mission of inspection, who watched them through a glass-covered orifice to which they approached, each in turn, respecting precedence and exchanging polite phrases.

Beyond these furthestmost limits, to which Kafka did not follow them, but to which he had the superhuman courage to precede them, all feeling disappears, even contempt and hatred; there remains only vast, empty stupefaction, definitive, total don't-understand.

To remain at the point where he left off, or to attempt to go on from there, are equally impossible. Those who live in a world of human beings can only retrace their steps.

*Temps Modernes*  
October, 1947.

*Although* critics may prefer, like good pedagogues, to appear not to notice anything and, on the other hand, seize every opportunity to proclaim, as though announcing a fundamental truth, that the novel, unless they are very much mistaken, is and always will be, first and foremost, "a story in which characters move and have their being," that no novelist is worthy of the name unless he is able to "believe in" his characters, which is what makes it possible for him to "infuse life" into them and give them "fictional relief"; although they may continue to lavish



praise on novelists who, like Balzac or Flaubert, succeed in making their hero "stand out," thus adding one more "unforgettable" figure to the unforgettable figures with which so many famous novelists have already peopled our world; although they may dangle before young writers the mirage of exquisite rewards that are supposed to await those whose faith is greatest: that moment, familiar to a few "real novelists," when the character, by virtue of the intensity of the author's belief and interest in him, actuated by some mysterious fluid, as in table-rapping, suddenly starts to move of his own momentum, and takes in tow the delighted creator who has only to let himself be guided, in his turn, by his creature; finally, however sternly critics may add threat to promise, warning novelists that if they are not vigilant, their best-armed rival, the cinema, will one day wrest the scepter from their unworthy hands—it is of no avail. Neither reproaches nor encouragements are able to revive a faith that is waning.

And, according to all appearances, not only has the novelist practically ceased to believe in his characters, but the reader, too, is unable to believe in them; with the result that the char-

acters, having lost the twofold support that the novelist's and the reader's faith afforded them, and which permitted them to stand upright with the burden of the entire story resting on their broad shoulders, may now be seen to vacillate and fall apart.

Since the happy days of Eugénie Grandet when, at the height of his power, the character occupied the place of honor between reader and novelist, the object of their common devotion, like the Saints between the donors in primitive paintings, he has continued to lose, one after the other, his attributes and prerogatives.

At that time he was richly endowed with every asset, the recipient of every attention; he lacked for nothing, from the silver buckles on his breeches to the veined wart on the end of his nose. Since then he has lost everything: his ancestors, his carefully built house, filled from cellar to garret with a variety of objects, down to the tiniest gewgaw, his sources of income and his estates, his clothes, his body, his face. Particularly, however, has he lost that most precious of all possessions, his personality—which belonged to him alone—and frequently, even his name.

Today, a constantly rising tide has been flood-



ing us with literary works that still claim to be novels and in which a being devoid of outline, indefinable, intangible and invisible, an anonymous "I," who is at once all and nothing, and who as often as not is but the reflection of the author himself, has usurped the rôle of the hero, occupying the place of honor. The other characters, being deprived of their own existence, are reduced to the status of visions, dreams, nightmares, illusions, reflections, quiddities or dependents of this all-powerful "I."

Our minds might be set at rest, if we could impute this method of procedure to an egocentricity peculiar to adolescence, to the timidity or inexperience of the beginner. As it happens, however, this youthful malady has attacked some of the most important works of our time (from *Remembrance of Things Past* and *Marshlands*, to the *Miracle de la Rose*, not to mention the *Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, *Journey to the End of the Night* and *Nausea*; in other words, works in which the authors have given immediate proof of very evident mastery and rare forcefulness.

What is revealed, in fact, by the present evolution of the character in fiction is just the opposite of regression to an infantile state.

It shows, on the part of both author and reader, an unusually sophisticated state of mind. For not only are they both wary of the character, but through him, they are wary of each other. He had been their meeting ground, the solid base from which they could take off in a common effort toward new experiments and new discoveries. He has now become the converging point of their mutual distrust, the devastated ground on which they confront each other. And if we examine his present situation, we are tempted to conclude that it furnishes a perfect illustration of Stendhal's statement that "the genius of suspicion has appeared on the scene." We have now entered upon an age of suspicion.

To begin with, today's reader is suspicious of what the author's imagination has to offer him. "There is nobody left," Jacques Tournier complains, "who is willing to admit that he invents. The only thing that matters is the document, which must be precise, dated, proven, authentic. Works of the imagination are banned, because they are invented . . . (The public), in order to believe what it is told, must be convinced that it is not being 'taken in.' All that counts now is the 'true fact . . .'"\*

\* *La Table Ronde*, Paris, January, 1948, p. 145.



But Tournier should not be so bitter. This predilection for "true facts" which, at heart, we all share, does not indicate a timorous, sedate mind, forever ready to crush under the weight of "sound reality" all daring experiment, all impulse toward evasion. On the contrary, we must do the reader the justice of admitting that he needs little coaxing to follow the writer along new paths. He has never really balked before the perspective of effort, and when he agreed to examine with minute attention each detail of Père Grandet's dress and each object in his house, to evaluate his poplar trees and vineyards and supervise his stock-market transactions, it was not because of a liking for sound reality, nor from a need to cuddle down snugly in the nest of a familiar world, whose contours inspired confidence. He knew well where he was being taken. Also, that it would not be plain sailing.

Something unwonted, violent, lay beneath these everyday appearances. Every gesture of the character was a reminder of some aspect of this fact, the most insignificant bauble reflected some facet of it. It was this that had to be brought out, explored to the very limit, investigated in its most secret recesses. Here was a compact, abso-

it here. He has made the acquaintance of Joyce, Proust and Freud; the trickle, imperceptible from without, of the interior monologue; the infinitely profuse growth of the psychological world and the vast, as yet almost unexplored regions of the unconscious. He has watched the watertight partitions that used to separate the characters from one another give way, and the hero become an arbitrary limitation, a conventional figure cut from the common woof that each of us contains in its entirety, and which captures and holds within its meshes the entire universe. Like the surgeon who eyes the exact spot on which his greatest effort is to be concentrated, isolating it from the rest of the sleeping body, he has been led to center all his attention and curiosity on some new psychological state, forgetting meanwhile the motionless character, who serves as its chance prop. He has seen time cease to be the swift stream that carried the plot forward, and become a stagnant pool at the bottom of which a slow, subtle decomposition is in progress; he has seen our actions lose their usual motives and accepted meanings, he has witnessed the appearance of hitherto unknown sentiments and seen those that were most familiar change both in aspect and name.



despite their richness and variety, turned out to be much less tonic than had been supposed—the French reader, as well, is no longer interested.

It goes without saying that all these attitudes with regard to the novel are all the more familiar to the author who, being himself a reader, and often a very perceptive one, has also experienced them.

The result is that when he starts to tell a story and says to himself that he must make up his mind to write down for the mocking eyes of the reader, "The Marquise went out at five o'clock," he hesitates, he hasn't the heart, he simply can't bring himself to do it.

And if, after taking his courage in hand, he decides not to give the Marquise the considerate attention demanded by tradition, but to write only of what interests him today, he realizes that the impersonal tone, which is so well adapted to the needs of the old-style novel, is not suitable for conveying the complex, tenuous states that he is attempting to portray; the fact being that these states resemble certain phenomena of modern physics, which are so delicate and minute that even a ray of light falling on them disturbs

constantly adding and which, since he first learned to read, has been regularly growing as a result of the countless novels he has absorbed.

But, as has already been demonstrated, the character as conceived in the old-style novel (along with the entire old-style mechanism that was used to make him stand out) does not succeed in containing the psychological reality of today. Instead of revealing it—as used to be the case—he makes it disappear.

So that, as a result of an evolution similar to that in painting—albeit far less bold, less rapid, and interrupted by long pauses and retreats—the psychological element, like the pictorial element, is beginning to free itself imperceptibly from the object of which it was an integral part. It is tending to become self-sufficient and, in so far as possible, to do without exterior support. The novelist's entire experimental effort is concentrated on this one point, as is also the reader's entire effort of attention.

The reader, therefore, must be kept from trying to do two things at one time. And since what the characters gain in the way of facile vitality and plausibility is balanced by a loss of fundamental truth in the psychological states for



actually belong to it. In the same way that photography occupies and fructifies the fields abandoned by painting, the cinema garners and perfects what is left by the novel.

The reader, instead of demanding of the novel what every good novel has more than often refused him, i.e., light entertainment, can satisfy at the cinema, without effort and without needless loss of time, his taste for "live" characters and stories.

However, the cinema too would appear to be threatened. It too is infected by the "suspicion" from which the novel suffers. Otherwise, how may we explain the uneasiness which, after that of the novelist, is now being evidenced by certain "advanced" directors who, because they feel obliged to make films in the first person, have introduced the eye of a witness and the voice of a narrator?

As for the novel, before it has even exhausted all the advantages offered by the story told in the first person, or reached the end of the blind alley into which all techniques necessarily lead, it has grown impatient and, in order to emerge from its present difficulties, is looking about for other ways out.

Suspicion, which is by way of destroying the

pare their opportunities with ours!" she said. And she added proudly that, "for the moderns," the point of interest would "very likely lie in the dark places of psychology."

No doubt she had much to excuse her: *Ulysses* had just appeared. In a *Budding Grove* was about to receive the Goncourt Prize. She herself was working on *Mrs. Dalloway*. Quite obviously, she lacked perspective.

But for most people, the works of Joyce and Proust already rise up in the distance like witnesses of a past epoch, and the day will soon come when no one will visit these historical monuments otherwise than with a guide, along with groups of school children, in respectful silence and somewhat dreary admiration. For several years now interest in "the dark places of psychology" has waned. This twilight zone in which, hardly thirty years ago, we thought we saw the gleam of real treasures, has yielded us very little, and we are obliged to acknowledge that, when all is said and done, this exploration, however bold and well carried out it may have been, however extensive and with whatever elaborate means, has ended in disappointment. The most impatient and most daring among the

novelists were not long in declaring that the game was not worth the candle, and that they preferred to turn their efforts in another direction. The word "psychology" is one that no present-day writer can hear spoken with regard to himself without casting his eyes to the ground and blushing. It has something slightly ridiculous, antiquated, cerebral, limited, not to say pretentiously silly about it. Intelligent people, all progressive minds to whom an imprudent writer would dare admit his secret hankering for the "dark places of psychology"—but who would dare to do so?—would undoubtedly reply with pitying surprise: "Indeed! so you still believe in all that? . . ." Since the appearance of the "American novel" and the profound, blinding truths with which the literature of the absurd has continued to swamp us, there are not many left who believe in it. All Joyce obtained from those dark depths was an uninterrupted flow of words. As for Proust, however doggedly he may have separated into minute fragments the intangible matter that he brought up from the subsoil of his characters, in the hope of extracting from it some indefinable, anonymous substance which would enter into the composi-

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with his conscience and meet the requirements of his time, it is with them and not with himself or those like him that he should be concerned.

But if, having torn himself away from his jar, he attempts to turn his attention toward these men and make them come to life in his books, he is assailed by fresh misgivings. His eyes, having become accustomed to semi-darkness, are dazzled by the garish light of the outside. As a result of examining only the tiny space around him, of staring lengthily at one spot, they have become magnifying lenses that are incapable of taking in vast expanses at one time. Long maceration in his jar has made him lose his innocent freshness. He has seen how difficult it was, when he examined closely some tiny recess in himself, to make an inventory of all the things to be found there: not of any great importance, he is well aware, more than often disappointing, but concerning which a rapid examination, made from a distance, would never have permitted him even to suspect their existence. He consequently has the impression of not seeing these men from the outside clearly. Their actions, which he respects and admires, seem to

him to be like very wide-mesh nets: they let slip through their large holes all this turbid, teeming matter to which he has grown accustomed, and he is unable to break himself of the habit of looking for the living substance, for him the only living substance; also, he is obliged to admit that he sees nothing in what they bring back but large empty carcasses. These men whom he would so like to know and make known, when he tries to show them moving about in the blinding light of day, seem to him to be nothing but well-made dolls, intended for the amusement of children.

Furthermore, if it is a matter of showing characters from the outside, devoid of all swarmings and secret tremors, and of recounting their actions and the events that compose their story, of telling stories about them, as he is so often incited to do (isn't this, people continually tell him, the gift that best characterizes the real writer?), the cinema director, who disposes of means of expression that are far better suited to this purpose and much more powerful than his own, succeeds, with less fatigue and loss of time for the spectator, in easily surpassing him. And when it comes to describ-



tradition continues to blossom in the sun, people have finally noticed that, after all, something is happening. Novelists whom nobody would ever accuse of making revolutionary claims are forced to recognize certain changes. One of the best contemporary English novelists, Henry Green, has pointed out that the center of gravity of the novel has moved, that more and more importance is being given to dialogue. "Today," he writes, "it is the best way to give the reader real life." And he even predicts that it will be "the principal support of the novel for a long time to come."

In the silence that surrounds him, this simple statement is an olive branch for our die-hard. It makes him take heart immediately. It even revives his wildest dreams. No doubt, the explanation Mr. Green gives of this change risks destroying all the promise contained in his remark: it is probably, he adds, because "nowadays people have stopped writing letters. Instead, they use the telephone." It is not to be wondered at then that, in their turn, characters in fiction should have become so talkative.

But this explanation is disappointing in appearance only. It should not be forgotten that

Mr. Green is English, and it is well known that reserve often incites his countrymen to adopt a tone of playful simplicity when speaking of serious matters. Or perhaps it is a dash of humor. Perhaps, too, after making this bold statement, Henry Green experienced a certain fear: if he were to carry his investigation too far, where would it not lead him? Might he not eventually come to ask himself if this single indication of his were not a sign of profound disturbances that could lead to re-examination of the entire traditional structure of the novel? Might he not end by claiming that contemporary novel forms are cracking on all sides, and thus instigate, even invite, new techniques adapted to new forms? But the words "new forms" and "techniques" are even more immodest and embarrassing to pronounce than the word "psychology" itself. They result immediately in your being accused of presumption and bumptiousness, and arouse, in both critics and readers, a feeling of mistrust and annoyance. It is consequently more proper and more prudent to limit oneself to mention of the telephone.

But however great our novelist's fear of ap-

acters and new conflicts that appear in the societies that succeed one another, and it is in the novelty of these characters and conflicts that the principal interest and only valid renewal of the novel lie.

And it is true that we cannot repeat what Joyce or Proust did, even though Stendhal and Tolstoy are repeated every day to everybody's satisfaction. But isn't this, first of all, because the moderns displaced the essential interest of the novel? For them it no longer lies in the enumeration of situations and characters, or in the portrayal of manners and customs, but in the revelation of a new psychological subject matter. Indeed, it is the discovery, if only of a few particles of this subject matter, which is an anonymous one, to be found in all men and in all societies, that constituted for them and continues to constitute for their successors, genuine renewal. To re-work after them this same material and, consequently, to use their methods without changing them in any way, would be quite as absurd as for supporters of the traditional novel to re-write with the same characters, the same plot and the same style, *The Red and the Black* or *War and Peace*.

On the other hand, the techniques used today



protection and security it offered. And the reader, being deprived of all his accustomed stakes and landmarks, removed from all authority, suddenly faced with an unknown substance, bewildered and distrustful, instead of blindly letting himself go, as he so loves to do, was obliged constantly to confront what was shown him with what he could see for himself.

Just in passing, he must have been extremely surprised by the opacity of the fictional conventions that had succeeded in concealing for so long what should have been obvious to all eyes. But once he had taken a good look and arrived at an independent judgment, he was unable to stop there. At the same time that they had awakened his powers of penetration, the moderns had awakened his critical faculties and whetted his curiosity.

He wanted to look even further or, if one prefers, even closer. And he was not long in perceiving what is hidden beneath the interior monologue: an immense profusion of sensations, images, sentiments, memories, impulses, little larval actions that no inner language can convey, that jostle one another on the threshold of consciousness, gather together in compact

renunciations or humble submissions, all have one thing in common: they cannot do without a partner.

Often it is an imaginary partner who emerges from out our past experiences, or from our day-dreams, and the scenes of love or combat between us, by virtue of their wealth of adventure, the freedom with which they unfold and what they reveal concerning our least apparent inner structure, can constitute very valuable fictional material.

It remains nonetheless true that the essential feature of these dramas is constituted by an actual partner.

For this flesh-and-blood partner is constantly nurturing and renewing our stock of experiences. He is pre-eminently the catalyzer, the stimulant, thanks to whom these movements are set in motion, the obstacle that gives them cohesion, that keeps them from growing soft from ease and gratuitousness, or from going round and round in circles in the monotonous indigence of ruminating on one thing. He is the threat, the real danger as well as the prey that brings out their alertness and their suppleness, the mysterious element whose unforeseeable re-

actions, by making them continually start up again and evolve toward an unknown goal, accentuate their dramatic nature.

But at the same time that, in order to attain to this partner, they rise up from our darkest recesses toward the light of day, a certain fear forces them back toward the shadow. They make us think of the little gray insects that hide in damp holes. They are abashed and prudent. The slightest look makes them flee. To blossom out they must have anonymity and impunity.

They consequently hardly show themselves in the form of actions. For actions do indeed develop in the open, in the garish light of day, and the tiniest of them, compared with these delicate, minute inner movements, appear to be gross and violent: they immediately attract attention. All their forms have long since been examined and classified; they are subject to strict rules, to very frequent inspection. Finally, very obvious, well-known, frank motives, thick, perfectly visible wires make all this enormous, heavy machinery work.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These gross motives, these vast, apparent movements, are usually all that is seen by both writers and readers, who are borne along by the movement of the



But lacking actions, we can use words. And words possess the qualities needed to seize upon, protect and bring out into the open these sub-

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action and spurred on by the plot in behaviorist novels. They have neither time nor means—not having at their disposal a sufficiently delicate instrument of investigation—to see clearly the more fleeting, subtler movements that these grosser movements may conceal.

Indeed, we can understand the aversion these writers feel for what they call “analysis,” which, for them, would consist in pointing out these perfectly visible, frank motives, thus doing the reader’s work for him and giving themselves the disagreeable impression of forcing already open doors.

It is nevertheless curious to observe that, to escape the boredom of going round and round in the narrow circle of customary actions, in which they find really nothing much left to be gleaned, seized with the desire natural to all writers to take their readers into unknown regions, and haunted, in spite of everything, by the existence of the “dark places,” but still firmly convinced that action by itself can reveal them, they make their characters commit unwonted, monstrous acts which the reader, comfortably settled in his own clear conscience and finding nothing in these criminal acts that corresponds to what he has learned to see in his own conduct, regards with proud, horrified curiosity, then quietly thrusts aside to return to his own affairs, as he does every morning and every evening after reading his newspaper, without the heavy shadow that submerges his own dark places having lifted for a single second.

it is bound to be in a position of inferiority. And by renouncing the means that the novel alone has at its disposal, they renounce what makes it a unique art, or rather, simply an art.

There remains, then, the opposite method, Proust's, or recourse to analysis. This latter one, in any case, has the advantage over the former of maintaining the novel on its own ground, and using means that only the novel affords. It also tends to furnish the reader with what he has a right to expect from a novelist; that is, experience increased not in breadth (this may be had at less cost and more effectively through documents and news reports) but in depth. And above all, it is not conducive, under the cloak of so-called renovations, to an attachment to the past, but looks frankly toward the future.

As regards dialogue, in particular, Proust himself—concerning whom it is no exaggeration to say that, more than any other novelist, he excelled in the very minute, exact, subtle, highly evocative descriptions of the play of features, the glances, the slightest intonations and inflections of voice in his characters, which give the reader almost as much information as actors would with regard to the secret meaning of their words



—is practically never content with simple description, and he rarely leaves the dialogue to the reader's free interpretation. He only does so, in fact, when the apparent meaning of the words spoken exactly covers the hidden meaning. Should there be the slightest discrepancy between the conversation and the sub-conversation, should they not entirely cover each other, he immediately intervenes; at times, before the character speaks, at others, as soon as he has spoken, to show all he sees, explain all he knows; and he leaves no uncertainty except that which he himself is bound to feel, in spite of all his endeavors, his privileged position, the powerful instruments of investigation he has forged.

But these countless, tiny movements which prepare the dialogue are for Proust, from his point of observation, what waves and eddies on a body of water are for a cartographer who is studying a region from the air; he only sees and reproduces the broad, motionless lines that these movements compose, the points at which the lines join, cross or separate; he recognizes among them those that have already been explored, and designates them by their known names: jealousy, snobbishness, fear, modesty, etc. . . . ;

haviorists through appeal to these blind forces are undoubtedly much weaker than their authors are willing to believe—even in those of their works in which the implications are richest and the sub-surface indications deepest—it is nonetheless true that these forces exist and that one of the virtues of a work of fiction is to allow them also to come into play.

And yet, in spite of the rather serious charges that may be brought against analysis, it is difficult to turn from it today without turning one's back on progress.

For it is surely preferable, in spite of all obstacles and possible disappointments, to try to perfect, with a view to adapting it to fresh research, an instrument which, when further perfected by new generations, will permit them to describe more convincingly, with more truth and life, new situations and sentiments, than to fall back upon devices made to seize what today is mere appearance, to tend to strengthen more and more the natural penchant we all have for effects of illusion.

It is therefore permissible to dream—without blinding ourselves to all that separates the dream from its reality—of a technique that

might succeed in plunging the reader into the stream of these subterranean dramas of which Proust only had time to obtain a rapid aerial view, and concerning which he observed and reproduced nothing but the broad motionless lines. This technique would give the reader the illusion of repeating these actions himself, in a more clearly aware, more orderly, distinct and forceful manner than he can do in life, without their losing that element of indetermination, of opacity and mystery that one's own actions always have for the one who lives them.

The dialogue, which would be merely the outcome or, at times, one of the phases of these dramas, would then, quite naturally, free itself of the conventions and restraints that were made indispensable by the methods of the traditional novel. And thus, imperceptibly, through a change of rhythm or form, which would espouse and at the same time accentuate his own sensation, the reader would become aware that the action has moved from inside to outside.

The dialogue, having become vibrant and swollen with these movements that propel and subtend it, would be as revealing as theatrical



dialogue, however commonplace it might seem in appearance.

All of this, of course, being merely a matter for possible research and hope.

However, these problems, which dialogue poses more and more urgently to all novelists, whether they care to recognize it or not, have been solved, up to a certain point, only in a very different way, by an English writer who is still little known in France, Ivy Compton-Burnett.

The absolutely original solution, which has both distinction and power, that she has found for them, would suffice for her to deserve the position unanimously accorded her by English critics and by a certain portion of the English reading-public; that is, the position of one of the greatest novelists that England has ever had.

Indeed we cannot help admiring the discernment of both critics and public who have been able to see the novelty and importance of a work which, in many respects, is disconcerting.

For nothing could be less timely than the social groups that Ivy Compton-Burnett describes (the wealthy upper middle-class and the

petty English nobility during the years 1880 to 1900); nothing could be more limited than the family circle in which her characters move, nothing more outmoded than the descriptions of their appearance, with which she introduces them, or more astonishing than the off-handedness with which she unravels her plots, according to the most conventional methods, and the monotonous obstinacy with which, during forty years of labor, and throughout twenty books, she has posed and solved, in an identical manner, the same problems.

But her books have one absolutely new feature, which is that they are nothing but one long continuation of dialogue. Here again, the author presents them in the traditional manner, holding herself aloof, very ceremoniously aloof, from her characters, and limiting herself as a rule, just as the behaviorists do, to simply reproducing their words and quietly informing the reader, without trying to vary her formulas, by means of the monotonous "said X.," "said Y."

But these dialogues, upon which everything rests, have nothing in common with the short, brisk, lifelike conversations that, reduced to themselves, or accompanied by a few cursory



explanations, risk reminding us more and more of the heavily circled little clouds that issue from the mouths of the figures in comic supplement drawings.

These long, stilted sentences, which are at once stiff and sinuous, do not recall any conversations we ever heard. And yet, although they seem strange, they never give an impression of being spurious or gratuitous.

The reason for this is that they are located not in an imaginary place, but in a place that actually exists: somewhere on the fluctuating frontier that separates conversation from sub-conversation. Here the inner movements, of which the dialogue is merely the outcome and, as it were, the furthestmost point—usually prudently tipped to allow it to come up to the surface—try to extend their action into the dialogue itself. To resist their constant pressure and contain them, the conversation stiffens, becomes stilted, it adopts a cautious, slackened pace. But it is because of this pressure that it stretches and twists into long sinuous sentences. Now a close, subtle game, which is also a savage game, takes place between the conversation and the sub-conversation.

More often than not, the inside gets the better of it: something keeps cropping out, becoming manifest, disappearing then coming back again; something that continually threatens to make everything explode.

The reader, who has remained intent, on the lookout, as though he were in the shoes of the person to whom the words are directed, mobilizes all his instincts of defense, all his powers of intuition, his memory, his faculties of judgment and reasoning; there is hidden danger in these sweetish sentences, murderous impulses are creeping into affectionate solicitude, an expression of tenderness suddenly distills a subtle venom.

Occasionally, ordinary conversation appears to win the day, when it suppresses the sub-conversation too deeply. Then, often just at the moment when the reader thinks he will finally be able to relax, the author suddenly abandons her silence and intervenes to warn him briefly and without explanation that none of what has just been said is true.

But the reader is not often tempted to depart from his attitude of vigilance. He knows that here every word is of importance. The bywords,



which is comprehensible of course in persons who are so busy reading. But then they suddenly begin to pronounce a masterpiece and praise to the skies, a work that is devoid of all literary value, as will be proven, some time later, by the indifference, then the oblivion, into which its weakness will inevitably let it slip.

In their wake, the public is carried off its feet by a veritable tidal wave which raises it to the peak of admiration and enthusiasm.

Once all bans have been lifted, it is astonishing to see with what avidity the most faithful and most enthusiastic lovers of literary masterpieces—those who, ordinarily, when faced with a new work, are so forbidding, so severe, so fastidious—devour these works as though they were the most succulent of foods; even more succulent, they confess (and why should they hide a taste that is shared by the most respected critics?), than those that are offered them by the great works of the past. Here no adaptation is necessary; we enter in without effort and immediately everything goes quite smoothly; the characters are like us, or like people we know, or else as we imagine those of our contemporaries whom we should like to know.

Their feelings, their ideas, their conflicts, the situations in which they find themselves, the problems they must solve, their hopes and their despair are all ours: we feel quite in our element in their lives. In vain a few sophisticated spirits, a few maladjusted persons express certain reservations. It is the lack of art, they say, in a way that is as vague as it is pretentious, which discommodates them. Or perhaps the weakness of style. But they are immediately snubbed; they call down upon themselves general disapproval, they arouse people's distrust and hostility. They are taxed with favoring art for art's sake. Accused of "formalism." And in reality, they only get what they deserve. For who on earth would think of laying himself open to sarcasm so clumsily as this, of treating such serious questions with such blundering frivolity?

But let several months, more often several years, go by, and we witness the following astonishing fact: not only the new readers of these novels, but their greatest admirers themselves, if they have the misfortune to commit the imprudence of rereading them, as soon as they pick up one of these books, have the same pain-

ful sensation that the birds who tried to pilfer Zeuxis' famous grapes must have had. What they see is nothing but an illusion of reality. A flat, inert copy. The characters are like wax dummies, fabricated according to the easiest, most conventional methods. Clearly, these books cannot even be used, as may certain novels of the past, as documents of their epoch, for it is hard to believe that these childish plots, these puppets that are the leading characters, and which imitate the grossest sort of semblance, could ever have had the feelings, faced the conflicts or been obliged to solve the problems that the living men of their time did.

What happened, then? And how may we explain such a metamorphosis?

It should first be observed that the authors of the works under discussion are not devoid of talent. They undoubtedly have what are usually referred to as the gifts that go to make a novelist. Not only do they know how to concoct a plot, develop action, create what is called "atmosphere," but moreover, and above all, they know how to seize and represent likeness. Every gesture their characters make, the way they smooth their hair, adjust the pleat in their



temporaries, to reform them, to instruct them or to fight for their emancipation—applies himself, while making an effort to cheat as little as possible and neither to trim nor smooth anything for the purpose of overcoming contradictions and complexities, to seizing with all the sincerity of which he is capable, to scrutinizing as far as his sharpness of vision will permit him to see, what appears to him to be reality.

To achieve this, he works unceasingly to rid what he sees of all the matrix of preconceived ideas and ready-made images that encase it, as also of all the surface reality that everyone can easily see and which, for want of anything better, everyone uses; and occasionally he succeeds in attaining to something that is thus far unknown, which it seems to him he is the first to have seen. When he tries to bring to light this fragment of reality that is his own, he frequently notices that the methods of his predecessors, which were created by them for their own ends, can no longer serve his purpose. He therefore rejects them without hesitation and applies himself to finding new ones for his own usage. Little does he care if, at first, they disconcert or irritate his readers.

His passion for this reality is so great and so sincere that he shrinks from no sacrifice it may entail. Indeed, he accepts the greatest of all those that a writer may be led to make: loneliness and the moments of doubt and distress that attend it (and which have caused some of the greatest to make such statements as: "People will understand me in 1880,"<sup>1</sup> or, "I'll win my suit in the Court of Appeals,"<sup>2</sup> which it is unfair to interpret as vague childish dreams of posthumous conquest and glory, for they show these writers' need to keep up their courage, to maintain their confidence, to persuade themselves that what they were practically alone in seeing was true, and not a mirage or, as Cézanne came to believe, the result of defective vision).

Style (whose harmony and visible beauty are such a constant, dangerous temptation for writers) is for this writer merely an instrument, the only value of which is that of serving to extract and embrace as closely as possible the fragment of reality that he is trying to lay bare. All desire to write "beautifully" for the pleasure of doing so, to give aesthetic enjoyment to him-

<sup>1</sup> Stendhal.

<sup>2</sup> Baudelaire.



self or to his readers, is quite inconceivable for him; style, from his standpoint, being capable of beauty only in the sense that an athlete's gesture is beautiful; the better it is adapted to its purpose, the greater the beauty. And this beauty, which is composed of vigor, precision, vivacity, suppleness, boldness and economy of means, is merely the expression of its effectiveness.

This reality, to which all of these writers held fast with such undivided, sincere passion, once a certain number of them had succeeded in seizing it, whether in its metaphysical, poetic, psychological or social aspects—at times it was their good fortune, or rather their compensation, to seize it in all these aspects at one time—nothing was ever able to destroy or even debase it. Though the ideas are often out of date, the sentiments only too well known or outmoded, the characters cruder than those we have since come to know; though there is nothing unpredictable in either the development or the outcome of the plot; beneath the heavy apparatus that these novelists were obliged to construct to capture this reality, and in which today it seems to us to be imprisoned, we sense it like

a hard core that lends its cohesion and firmness to the entire novel, like a source of heat that radiates throughout its parts something that everyone recognizes but that no one is able to designate otherwise than by such vague terms as "truth" or "life." This is the reality to which we always return, in spite of our momentary betrayals and deviations, thus proving that, when all is said and done, we too prize it above all else.

This is not at all the case with the formalists and their writings. And they are the ones to whom this term of formalists is most applicable, even though they generally use it only in derision to designate the writers in the opposite camp, reserving for themselves, however strange such blindness may seem, the name of "realists."

It is quite obvious, however, that reality is not their main interest, but form, always, form invented by others, and from which a magnetic force makes them unable ever to break away. At times this is the harmonious, pure form in which so-called "classic" writers tightly enclosed objects created from one single piece of the dense, heavy matter upon which their efforts were concentrated. The fact that these objects, having



tion. In fact, however the author may try to maintain this character in a motionless state, in order to concentrate his own and the reader's attention on the barely perceptible tremors in which it seems to him that the reality he would like to disclose has taken refuge, he will not succeed in keeping it from moving just enough for the reader to see in its movements a plot whose ins and outs he will follow with curiosity, while impatiently awaiting the ending.

And so, no matter what the novelist may do, he cannot distract the reader's attention from all sorts of objects that just any novel, whether good or bad, can furnish him.

Many critics, in fact, encourage this absent-mindedness and frivolity in readers by giving in to it themselves, thus fostering confusion.

Indeed, it is astonishing to see with what complacency they dwell upon anecdotal features, relate the "story" and discuss the "characters," appraising their verisimilitude and examining their morality. But it is with regard to style that their attitude is strangest. If a novel is written in a style that recalls the classics, they usually attribute the qualities of *Adolph* or *The Princess of Cleve* to the subject matter, however in-

digent, that this style covers. If, on the contrary, one of these novels with such lifelike characters and thrilling plots should happen to be written in a flat, slipshod style, they mention this fault indulgently, as an imperfection that is to be regretted, no doubt, but that is of little importance; only the fastidious will be shocked by it and it in no way affects the real value of the book: something, in other words, as superficial and insignificant as a small wart or an ordinary pimple on a handsome, noble face. In reality, however, it is more like the telltale pimple that appears on the body of a plague victim, the plague in this case being nothing else but an attitude that is hardly sincere and hardly honest toward reality.

But the confusion reaches its peak when, as a result of the novel's tendency to be an art that always lags behind the others, and that is less capable of breaking away from outmoded forms that have been emptied of all living content, people want to make it into a weapon of combat that will serve the revolution or maintain and perfect revolutionary gains.

This leads to strange results that constitute a rather disquieting threat not only to the novel



reproachable hero and a traitor, will do even better since, for the masses, whose sensitivity and clear-sightedness these novelists greatly underestimate, they are either magnificent bird snares or very effective scarecrows. A plot that moves forward briskly according to the rules of the old-fashioned novel will make these puppets pirouette about and create the kind of facile excitement that succeeds so well in sustaining the reader's flagging attention. And since the style, which is a sort of digest style, the same in all of these books, never serves to reveal a new reality, never makes a crack in the varnish of conventional appearances that covers it, but flows sluggishly along without encountering the slightest obstacle, coating smooth surfaces—well, there is no doubt that this style will never be too commonplace, too simple or too fluent, since these are qualities that can make a work accessible to the great masses of people and help them to swallow down these substantial foods that it is one's duty to offer them.

Thus, in the name of moral imperatives, we end by accepting the immorality that, in literature, results from a negligent, conformist, hardly sincere, hardly honest attitude toward reality.

maladjusted, lonely individuals, morbidly attached to their childhood, withdrawn into themselves and cultivating a more or less conscious taste for a certain form of defeat, by giving in to an apparently useless obsession, succeed in digging up and laying bare a fragment of reality that is still unknown.

Their works, which seek to break away from all that is prescribed, conventional and dead, to turn toward what is free, sincere and alive, will necessarily, sooner or later, become ferments of emancipation and progress.

We can understand that it should have seemed and should still seem inopportune to allow the masses, who had been maintained in ignorance for centuries, to have too rapid access to a deeper knowledge of the complexities and contradictions of their lives: this would tend to divert them from the task of construction on which their existence depends, and which requires their concentrated attention as well as their entire effort.

However, the indifference, the increasing detachment not only of their leaders but of the masses themselves with regard to literary works that lack vitality, that are fabricated according