JEAN ROUAUD'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION: DESCENDANT OF THE "NOUVEAU ROMAN"?

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Jean Rouaud's first five books pose a question of genre. Largely autobiographical, but with emphases and preoccupations that divide his life not into chronological segments but into emotionally significant themes, they seem to defy classification. They are not pure memoir, because the narrator creates dialogue, thought sequences and action for events which occurred before his birth or away from his presence. Lacking a sequentially coherent narrative, they are not autobiographical novels of the traditional variety. Too involved in a wistful exorcism, not of ravaging demons but of melancholy ghosts, to resemble the most representative of the "nouveaux romans," Rouaud's works yet share with that indeterminate genre a certain self-absorption in construction and an intermittent focus on inanimate objects (988-90).

Rouaud's works are accessible–the themes of family, school, coming of age, loss of loved ones are part of everyone's experience; his lamentation of personal inadequacy and loneliness can be touching and is often very funny. Not only are the themes accessible, but so is the author. He gives interviews; he answers letters; he has a web page! So what are these works? Merely popular and commercial phenomena that fail to qualify as "literature" because Oprah's viewers might actually enjoy them? Are they just a further rehash of what has been done before? Or are they one of the many new and nebulous genres alive at the end of the twentieth century that, like Yve-Alain Bois' "collective novel," claim to be literary? (1045).

The collective novel that Bois calls "a new literary genre" was born of selected letters to the editor from the publication *Libération*:

> Full of anger *à la Céline* or elegiac happiness, of dreary repression or merry exhibitionism, the letters represent a

> kind of grid of all the events of the French social experience as they affect individual lives, and, at the same time, the purest of *Libération* as a literary undertaking, its marginal center, as it were." (1045)

There is nothing collective about Rouaud's works, unless one counts the multiple portraits of various family members. Their voices, however, are all Rouaud's own, as he himself acknowledges. Their utterances are filtered through Rouaud's selective memory or consist of dialogue that he frankly invents. Nevertheless, Rouaud is of the generation to have been influenced by this editorial feature of *Libération*. While his anguished and loving looks at his family may seem miles apart from this irreverent, politically-oriented journal, they are representative of an attitude that found expression there: the "wish to be true to one's experience" and the "highly subjective idiom of the journalists" (Bois 1044). In the confessional environment of the late twentieth century, ironically made available to the individual by the mass media and appropriated by such luminaries as Philippe Sollers (Heath 1058), Rouaud is not out of step with contemporary trends in feeling artistically justified in presenting "the grid of all the events of French social experience" as it has affected his individual life; in believing that his personal "anger," "elegiac happiness," "dreary repression," and, yes, a certain "exhibitionism," whether or not "merry," is legitimate fodder for literary expression (Bois 1045). The grueling and potentially stultifying routine of "petites gens"; Rouaud's desire to find and assert an identity in the face of the devastating loss of his father; his youthful "niaiserie," recounted almost to the point of self-indulgence: all these aspects of his testimony–intensely personal rather than politically cogent–both alienate and democratize the narrator of his novels. Because they isolate him from broader experience, while at the same time establish him as a sort of seeking and stumbling Everyman, they locate Rouaud squarely in the "marginal center" (Bois 1045).

The difficulty in classifying Rouaud's works as to genre–I will call them novels for the sake of convenience–is perhaps symptomatic of a

deeper difficulty that emerges in these works as a theme: the difficulty inherent to a loss of continuity with the past and the lack of a ready-made bridge to the future. Jean Rouaud was a child when a whole generation of writers, artists, and philosophers experienced this loss of continuity, this break with an irretrievable past, this "loss of the father," in the dehumanizing experience of World War II. Some writers began to produce a new genre of fiction

> that did away with the methods of the 19th-century novel and its avatars, dismissed the anthropocentrism of the existential works that had dominated French literature in the postwar era, seemed utterly insensitive to immediate (sociopolitical) problems, showed unusual interest in its own procedures, promoted experimentation, and stressed the relative. (Prince 988)

This "nouveau roman," in competition with film, radio, and television, "could no longer claim preeminence either as a document about the real world or as a narrative of fictional adventures. What it could properly aspire to was examining its own nature and tracing the processes of human consciousness" (Prince 989).

Although Jean Rouaud was far too young to be directly influenced by this innovation at its inception, one might argue that some of the same processes at work on a cultural, political, and philosophical level to create the fertile terrain for the "nouveau roman," were at work for Rouaud on a personal level to create the breeding ground for his own hard-to-place works. In spite of obvious and major differences, Rouaud's novels yet show some of the characteristics of the diverse works that fall under the nebulous heading of "nouveau roman." They are definitely self-conscious as to structure, and the narrator's thought processes are explored both overtly in accounts of his emotions and insecurities and more obliquely in flights of descriptive fancy interspersed among memories and calls to the dead. If the war was the "New Novelists'" break with the past, Rouaud's catastrophic break is the death of his father, followed closely by the deaths of his "petite tante," Marie, and his grandfather. The incalculable impact of these

losses fits significantly for Rouaud into a pre-existing context of loss encompassing the death as a newborn of an older brother and the deaths of all the newborn or unborn brothers and sisters of his father. Rouaud and his mother and sisters are tentative survivors. One has the impression that, in Rouaud's scheme of things, life consists of a narrow and fleeting escape, a thin thread of possibility projecting tenuously into the future. As the war was a devastating watershed separating the familiar past from an unknown and seemingly untraversable future, his father's death is an impasse for Rouaud, a barrier that prevents forward motion. The death comes too early for the child to have reached any real knowledge or understanding of the man and too late to allow him to envision an effective path into the future without that knowledge and understanding.

This checkmate results in a sort of immobility that can be likened to the "nouveau roman's" preoccupation with inanimate objects and which, both in the life of the narrator and in the structure of his narrative, is unbreakable except perhaps by the act of writing itself. The narrator is a floating object, carried by currents, buffeted by waves, essentially passive. Like a victim of nightmare who can see but cannot act, the narrator's life force is focused in his "eye" (Prince 990). Rouaud's novels share this characteristic of the "nouveau roman" that Prince describes as "*école du regard* (school of looking), because of what was felt to be the New Novelists' exaggerated concern with the visual perception and description of inanimate and seemingly trivial objects [. . .]" (990). Rouaud's "description of inanimate and seemingly trivial objects" constitutes some of the most effective segments of his novels, and for this very reason: nothing could better express the narrator's own plight as an inanimate object, his own sense of stagnation in immobility after the death of his father. Like the family property in slow decline, the narrator is an object waiting to be put in its place and finds himself in an "éternel provisoire":

> Après la mort de papa, c'est un sentiment d'abandon qui domine. Le cours des choses épousait sa pente paresseuse avec un sans-gêne barbare: jardin envahi par les herbes, allée bordée de mousses vertes, le buis qui n'est plus taillé,

> les dalles de la cour qui ne sont plus remplacées et où l'eau croupit, le mur de briques percés de trous, les objets en attente de rangement, les rafistolages dans un éternel provisoire. Plus rien ne s'opposait au dépérissement. (*Les champs d'honneur* 82)

It is significant that these inanimate objects are often portrayed as subject to corruption, to an accumulation of dust, to a parasitical invasion, to a moist moldering. There is at once a motif of crumbling away opposed to images of repulsive accretion. Nothing is stable, but this instability implies not motion but decay. The vivid picture of the rust encrusting the garage's metal door is an example: the door is in the process of disintegration but is also the site of an insidious growth and colonization. The destruction depicted by "œilletons à travers la tôle d'une simple pression du doigt," by "feuilles de métal, oxydées, rongés" which "s'écaillaient comme une écorce de platane" is furthered by "de petits atolls ocrés," "des îles puis des continents qui gangrenaient" (*Champs* 93). Similarly, there is the wooden garage door and its "lent pourissement d'étrave sur une côte verte d'algues" (94). The notion that the immobility of inanimate objects is invariably accompanied by disintegration or an entrapping accumulation reappears throughout the novels. There are the descriptions of stones for the never-completed grotto sinking into weeds and brambles (*Des hommes illustres* 77), of the crumbling sidewalk leading to the cemetery where the father is buried (*Le monde à peu près* 62-63), of the "insignes fanés" on regimental flags (*Hommes* 100), of the column at Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle where "la sueur des pélérins a creusé une profonde empreinte de cinq doigts dans le granit" (*Hommes* 27). There is the handwriting which, reflecting the increasing feebleness of the writer, "se défaisait à mesure qu'on tournait les pages, jusqu'à devenir presque illisible sur la fin, quelques notes jetés qui se diluaient dans le blanc des dernières feuilles vierges" (*Champs* 135). Perhaps most significantly, there are the thickening layers of dust on the inventory of his mother's shop–the shop that gives her purpose and identity, but whose walls bound and limit the horizons of her life. These images of

dissolution and smothering accretion suggest a nightmare landscape where movement is impossible and the inanimate victim is slowly consumed without being able to close its eyes.

Sometimes the immobility is of a different variety: an inability to make forward progress, expressed as repetitive motion, or ritualistic activity in a confined space. This motion, which seems to define rather than contradict entrapment, is seen on the part of several characters in the novels. Tante Marie's world is circumscribed first by her labor in the convent, repeating unchanging lessons to ever-passing classes of children, and then by her brother's house, her cottage, the church, and her incessant trots between them. The stroke which leads to her death is announced by her failure to make these daily rounds. The narrator's father is constantly on the road, covering his territory as a salesman; but in spite of suspected liberties taken along the way, his "rounds," instead of implying true freedom, are just that: fatiguing circles which bring him back always to the same starting point, the same obligations, perhaps the same disillusionment. Similarly, the narrator's life as an adolescent is defined by unfulfilling "rounds" between school and weekends at home where the ritual is always the same and ultimately disappointing. The most telling example of his perception of himself as an inanimate object and of the failure of motion or activity to break this immobility is his account of one New Year's Eve rite: "Dorénavant c'en est fini d'être une marionette triste dans un théâtre de poche. De ce moment choisi par vous comme un vrai point de départ, la vie va se mettre en marche avec son cortège de surprises heureuses" (*Pour vos cadeaux* 135). The narrator decides to enter the New Year, standing on his head with his feet in the air. He is soon disabused of the notion that his unconventional posture has effected a new beginning, when his mother greets him with the same wish she offers every year:

> [. . .] après que vous avez réintégré la cuisine, s'inquiétant de votre absence et découvrant votre visage congestionné qui n'a pas eu encore le temps de se vider de son sang, votre mère s'inquiète: tu es malade? Avant, en réponse à votre moue bougonne, de vous souhaiter une bonne santé

> pour l'année en cours. Et vous lui en voulez, quand elle ne vous a rien demandé, ni n'a exigé à aucun moment votre présence, vous lui en voulez d'avoir déjà remis le cours de choses sur sa pente naturelle et désolée. (*Pour vos cadeaux* 136-37)

The most obvious example of immobility expressed as motion appears in the narrator's description of his mother's endless trips back and forth between the show room of her shop and the stock room or the living areas of their home. For the narrator, this incessant activity defines his mother to a great extent and contributes to a host of conflicting emotions on his part. He lauds the energy and determination which enables her to provide for her children after her husband's death; simultaneously admires and views with an ironic eye the perfectionism that drives her to track down a customer's most demanding and outlandish request; and cannot hide a certain resentment that, by her constant motion, his mother inflicts guilt on her children for being needy while at the same time escaping from them psychologically. She makes of herself both a martyr and an elusive object–is paradoxically always and never "there." Even emotional elusiveness, however, contributes to her essential immobility from the narrator's point of view: no progress in mutual understanding is possible between them. His mother, never still and never grasped, yet remains one who never arrives. Like an electric current that cannot even begin to flow unless the circuit is complete, in the narrator's perception his mother never moves, because her destination never materializes. For her, "cette seule interrogation: quelle est la place qui sauve?" (*Cadeaux* 17) is answered perhaps by the shop, but is an open-ended question for her son, who is left always wondering what there is of his mother that does not meet the eye, or if, in fact, she *is* all static surface. One senses this doubt in his description of her as a young girl: "Du moins, découvre-t-on ainsi que notre maman dans sa jeunesse était, au fond, très actuelle" (37).

The immobility of inanimate objects is implicit in the structure of Rouaud's novels. While ranging from vignettes of relatives in *Les champs d'honneur* and *Des hommes illustres* to a myopic look at his

adolescent self in *Le monde à peu près* and a more focused one at his mother in *Pour vos cadeaux*, and culminating in the dual, fanciful monologues of son and mother and the anecdotes of friends which flesh out the portrait of his father in *Sur la scène comme au ciel*, the structure of the novels is never one of straightforward progression, chronologically or psychologically. The novels overlap in time, jump from character to character, and return to the same events. The reader is left with the impression of things that the narrator can not "get past": his mother's desperate hammering on the wall at his father's death, her near escape from the bombs, her laughter at the wake of the villager who resembles Hardy. These incidents and many others are recounted repeatedly. Rather than narratives, the novels seem more like a collection... a bag of obsessively fascinating objects that the narrator takes out again and again, and turns over in his hand to examine from different angles.

The last novel in the series, *Sur la scène comme au ciel*, is the most self-conscious of all in structure. The repeated looks at certain scenes from the past here become passages frankly lifted from the other novels. The practice of putting words in the characters' mouths has evolved in the first portion of this novel to the frank creation of monologues delivered by the mother after her death, in which, for the first time, she puts some of her thoughts, feelings and principles into words. The elusiveness of his mother's nature, her unwillingness or inability to connect with her son, is confronted one last time in the narrator's attempt to meet her on a fundamental level. How ironic that in order to hear her speaking frankly he must invent her words himself. How difficult it is to prevent this examination of the ultimate inanimate object from seeming maudlin. This fine line is skirted by the narrator's tone, which combines irony, humor and an open-eyed look at his own emotional vulnerability.

Other portions of this last novel reinforce the motif of memories as tangible souvenirs; that is, actual events, words, and meanings are not preserved, but only an object which represents them: in this case, an account that expresses those things in part, inaccurately, and subjectively to the point that no one can be sure that a certain memory

bears any more resemblance to reality than the doctored postcards that Joseph sends to give his "petit loup" some idea of his travels (*Sur la scène* 174). The narrator admits that others who knew his father find fault with the holes and distortions and downright errors in his description of the "grand Joseph." His inclusion of their stories in an attempt to provide a more balanced picture is perhaps the most poignant testimony of all to the fact that, for the narrator, his father is, to a large extent, an object of the son's own creation, and that the essence the object is meant to convey will forever remain beyond his grasp.

In conclusion, while it would undoubtedly be a stretch to claim that Rouaud's novels fall into either the category of "nouveau roman" or collective novel, some of the elements of these genres do seem to be present. As with the collective novel, his material is intensely subjective; yet viewed from the perspective of the theme of pervasive immobility, even the narrator's most anguished accounts of family life and his own incapacity and turmoil cease to be merely personal anecdotes and become further examples of the "nouveau roman's" legacy of preoccupation with inanimate objects. Perhaps a new genre should be invented for these works: the "collector's novel." As much as the events recounted, the author's style and structure also seem to be curiosities that he pulls from his gatherer's bag to study and experiment with.

The inanimate objects examined by the "nouveau roman" are described as "seemingly trivial" (Prince 990). Therein lies the question whose answer will perhaps determine the lasting importance of Rouaud's works: are these "collector's items" trivial? Is the author no more than the curator of a dusty museum? Is an individual's account of devastating loss too personal to be of universal value? Does the fact that Rouaud's novels are fundamentally about love diminish them to the status of the paperbacks on grocery store racks? Is the account of the mother's funeral a sentimental sin that must be redeemed by a description of the rusty garage door? Time's answers to these questions will say perhaps as much about the inroads of cynicism on our human responses as it does about the state of literature at this beginning of a new millennium.

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