ments. This is to say that there are, I think, components to the Nouveau Roman other than those you described. Finally, you have given us a kind of thesis, a hypothesis.

Leon Roudiez: A hypothesis.

Michel Rybalka: And you left out a rather significant number of elements of reality, if you will. I am not going to enumerate right now all the elements that you failed to notice, but I would like to mention here, in this regard, Georges Pene and all those connected with the Oulipo. The finest author of the 1970s was perhaps Georges Perec, and it may well be he who, in a sense, has prolonged a kind of New Novel.

Leon Roudiez: I think that I said, or at least suggested, that my list was not exhaustive and that I therefore left out many things. I agree with you that it is a hypothesis, not a demonstration, and I hope that others will now be interested in this hypothesis and will try to determine whether there is, indeed, something to it, whether there is some truth in what I suggested, or rather in what my intuition suggested to me.

As for Georges Perec, okay. He is a very interesting writer. Does he manifest the features that I listed? I am not always sure, but it is possible. We should consider the example of a great many writers by studying their texts. Men or women, it does not matter.

The New Novel — Past, Present, Future: A Roundtable

Alain Robbe-Grillet Monique Wittig
Claude Simon François Jost
Nathalie Saurraute Michel Rybalka
Robert Pinget Tom Bishop

Tom Bishop: Personally, I was very struck by a number of things these last three days. Most notably, that we have found—that you New Novelists have found — points in common rather than elements that separate you. Robert Pinget spoke of solidarity, of writers backing together the Nouveau Roman. I think that this is what is emerging here. It may be a mere tolerance, but I think that it is rather an appreciation that you seem to have for each other, one that you have undoubtedly always had.

Perhaps it is due to the fact that for a long time people wanted to emphasize above all what separates you. In fact, for a while, for a very long time, and all this broke out around the Cerisy colloquium, there was a tendency to define you, to let you be defined by the theoreticians. It seems to me that this time has passed and that today you all speak of your own work, or you all tend to speak of your work, without first thinking of the critical point of view and of the entire theoretical picture, the entire theoretical superstructure, that actually seemed very heavy for a rather long period of time. I see in this a liberation in the way you all view your work. It may be a kind of Olympian detachment that derives from the fact that the Nouveau Roman is better established, but I would like to ask you if, indeed, you do have the feeling that you
Three Decades of the French New Novel

have detached yourselves from the image of you that was projected by the criticism of the 1960s and 1970s.

Claude Simon: As far as our projected image is concerned, if you are referring to day-to-day criticism which, as everyone knows, is fickle, I have never been very concerned with its most often derisive attacks. As for the more serious criticism, that which can be called "theoretical" (and I think you are alluding to Ricardou), it seems to me that it was rather he who separated us, or at least from me. While I continue to consider his theoretical works among the most estimable, I have the feeling that he pushed to the extreme a spirit too radical and sterilizing to be "practical" and that this has worked against him.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: I think it could be said that Ricardou's role has been very positive, as the function of theory for a writer is not at all to comfort him. It is not that he first creates a work and that he is then bolstered by theoretical strongholds, by a defense of the work in question. That is perhaps how Ricardou conceived of it, but for us writers, theory has always played a very different role. It has aimed at chasing us away from ourselves rather than securing us in the positions that we have acquired. All that can be theorized, in other words, is practically of no interest to the creator. Just as the work of art begins where meaning stops, so, too, it can be said that what I am trying to do begins where the theory of what I am trying to do stops. Consequently, theory is very interesting precisely because it shows just how far meaning can go and just where the beginning of what is no longer formal or formalist meaning, but rather the work which remains to be done, may be situated. What interests the writer is the work to be done, not the work he did. And one can theorize only about what already exists.

As far as I am concerned, I do not in any way renounce Ricardou's theoretical works, even if I do consider them mad. As a matter of fact, this madness is part of something that continually fascinates the writer. "And today," Tom Bishop claims, "we have moved away from . . . ." No! It is just that certain theories are outdated, not only the formalist theories of Ricardou, but also an entire period of theorization. This was a time when theory played a very significant role, and it often irritated Americans that theory was so important in France. I think I am very French in this respect: I like theories. Of course I do not necessarily respect them, but I was trained as a scientist and have always been fascinated by scientific theories. A scientist never thinks that a theory has to be right or wrong. This does not exist in science. A theory is not right or wrong: a theory is productive or it is not. There were theories which, at a given moment, produced or resulted in something, even if it was merely a way of chasing ourselves away from ourselves, of driving ourselves out of the texts we had written and which already could be theorized about.

Tom Bishop: But the fact that today those theories have no longer the same . . .

Alain Robbe-Grillet: But others are on their way. Beware!

Nathalie Sarraute: With regard to Ricardou, I have always considered his theories, or at least most of them, to be untenable. They were of no significance for writers, for when they write, writers are not thinking about theories. I do believe, however, that Ricardou's points of view were dangerous to readers—and we are all readers. If I, as a reader, had had to read books according to Ricardou's principles, I would have stopped reading. It would be impossible for me to read a book by Claude Simon, looking for the word "yellow" on page 67 and on page 126, even if this were one of the rules of the game and if Claude Simon had written his book for us to find the word, which, by the way, I do not believe to be the case. This was the danger of Ricardou's theories: they ran the risk of turning people away from reading.

Monique Wittig: I would like to remind you that Alain Robbe-Grillet, in Pour un Nouveau Roman, begins his book by saying that he is not a theoretician. What he does do, however, is explain the problems he has progressively faced in his writings. And the same holds true for Nathalie Sarraute. They both had to defend themselves against a certain press that was misinterpreting what was taking place. I was feeling exactly the same thing a moment ago when I reacted to feminine writing. Today, as soon as a woman writes anything, the sign "feminist writer" is tacked on her. For me, the concept of feminine writing is a paradox that is absolutely unmentionable.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: What Monique Wittig has pointed out is very true. It is true that Nathalie Sarraute published, as did I, writings of a theoretical nature. But these writings of a theoretical nature
are never considered a theory of the novel. By this I mean that a theorist is someone who builds a totality. He is someone who ties together all his preoccupations and then decrees normative truths—about the field of literature, for instance. And it is obvious that neither Nathalie Sarraute, in L’Ere du soupçon, nor I myself, in Pour un Nouveau Roman, have ever done that.

In closing the first session here, François Jost spoke along these lines when he remarked that with Ricardou we had gone from proscription to prescription. What we first theorized about, Nathalie Sarraute and I, was the language of the critics in authority. We analyzed expressions, words, criteria that we found in the press. All that Nathalie Sarraute published in L’Ere du soupçon was, in a way, an analysis of what we were reproached for not doing. Obviously, this was proscription, and we were opposing those criteria.

On the other hand, it is true that Ricardou’s period was one when suddenly people wanted to prescribe, to say “This is what has to be done.” Obviously, this was the very opposite of our own idea of the Nouveau Roman, since when we got together—first Nathalie Sarraute and I and then all our friends—it was precisely under the banner of freedom. What we were claiming for every writer was the freedom to invent the novel, everyone for himself and each novel he wrote.

For me, any writer who invents the novel is a “Nouveau Romancier.” I think that it was Nathalie Sarraute who, already at the beginning, remarked that the word “formalist” was wrongly being applied to those people who were inventing new forms, because on the contrary, the formalists are those who reproduce already existing forms. There was not any prescriptive theorization here at all, only a descriptive analysis of what the critics in authority were saying.

Tom Bishop: Alain Robbe-Grillet, you said yesterday or the day before that the revolution that the Nouveau Roman was intended to be had not materialized and that ultimately literature was not profoundly changed by you, in the plural.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: No, it was changed, but the revolution did not materialize because freedom cannot be an institution. If the Nouveau Roman had succeeded, Ricardou would, in short, have taken over and our novels would have been institutionalized. This was what Stalin did, if you will, with Marxism. He dogmatically transformed what in the beginning was a movement toward, a movement of, something unknown. I am talking about a kind of project which is not even clearly defined for itself and which ventures in a direction that it itself propels. The revolution did not succeed, therefore, fortunately, for if it had, we would have stopped writing. Everyone would have stopped writing. I say fortunately because this movement of continually chasing ourselves away from ourselves must be endless. The greatest danger for a writer is to rest on his laurels, so say that he wrote such and such a book that people liked and that he is now going to write another one just like it.

You know that I, personally, have always been reproached for not writing as well as I did the year before. Those critics who had authoritatively scorned La Jalousie, for instance, claimed, when I published Projet pour une révolution à New York, that it was a pity that I had not continued to write along the same wonderful lines as La Jalousie. But what precisely is important for an artist is that he disappoint his public in order to prevent it from becoming tranquilized. And the fact that the Nouveau Roman has not become institutionalized, I phrased as the fact that the Nouveau Roman has not succeeded, but this failure is its very life.

Tom Bishop: This question of succeeding or not succeeding, of revolutionizing or not revolutionizing, does it not also imply the existence of another generation, one following yours, in which there would be novels linked, in some way, to what you did? Do you have the impression that there are writers who have, in one way or another, followed what you tried to do?

Alain Robbe-Grillet: There are writers all over the world who admit to having been influenced by the Nouveau Roman. I am thinking of Peter Henke, for instance, in Austria or of Julio Cortázar in South America, as well as many others around the world. But to create epigones is not the artist’s goal. What I fear most are the numerous pseudo-Simons, pseudo-Robbe-Grilles, the pseudo-Durases. If someone has to write following in our footsteps, it will not be to our glory, but “against us.” This is exactly how I consider my having been influenced by Sartre, for I wanted to write “against him.” And when people stand up to someone whom they admire, then there is creation: in standing up to, and not at all in following.

François Jost: I do not want to return to the madness of certain
theoricians whom you mentioned a moment ago, but while hearing you speak, I asked myself various questions. These really amount to only one that I will formulate at the end.

I wondered, first, when you were speaking of Ricardou, about the relation of the theorician to the writer. This relation is, in fact, rather new insofar as, except for Mallarmé's or Proust's drawing-room conversations, few writers have continually found themselves confronted by their critics. This seems to me to be something rather peculiar to the New Novel and something rather new. When a critic speaks of the New Novel, he often experiences a feeling of embarrassment insofar as there is always a New Novelist facing him who tells him, "This can no longer be said because it is no longer fashionable" or "This has to do with linguistics," and so on.

Robbe-Grillet often asks: "What impels a writer to write?" Now I would ask him the question, or I would ask myself the question: "What impels a critic to write?" By this I mean, why does a critic choose to speak about the Nouveau Roman rather than about Balzac or Flaubert? There must be a reason why he has chosen one area rather than another. The critic is often supposed to be a kind of angel: not only should he not speak of himself, but of someone else. He should speak, moreover, of someone else in a way that accommodates this someone else. This is something which is difficult to ask of the critic. The critic, when he writes criticism, is looking for something in the writer of which he is unaware. If Ricardou sees exactly the same thing in Flaubert, Roussel, Mallarmé, Poe, Robbe-Grillet, and Claude Simon, it is because, in fact, he is looking for something that he does not manage to find and not merely because he is interested in Robbe-Grillet, Flaubert, Poe, Mallarmé, or Simon. To a certain extent, he tries to understand a little about what is taking place in his head.

Thus the question that a critic may have to face—and it is an agonizing question, a question that always causes anxiety when one is writing, I think—is that of knowing whether, when he speaks about a writer, what he is saying has any chance of corresponding to the texts of which he is speaking. It is a question that we sometimes ask ourselves in all honesty, but then we prefer to go out for a walk! But what I am wondering, with regard to the criticism that has accompanied the New Novel, is whether it did not have at a certain time a certain element of truth. Of course, today, it is very easy to reject a certain kind of criticism, one which, as far as I am concerned, I have always rejected, but is this not simply due to the fact that the New Novel has completely evolved? If it were possible to find generators, or to say in 1970 that a novel was made from, entirely from, the word "yellow" or the word "red," did this not, after all, correspond more or less to something?

It seems to me that what is interesting in this movement of the New Novel is precisely that in practice it has really called into question that on which it was leaning ten years ago. What renders ten-year-old theories obsolete is not the fact that ten years ago the thinking was more stupid than that of today, but mainly that today's novel is no longer yesterday's (and when I say today's and yesterday's novels, I am still situating myself within the New Novel). What Nathalie Sarraute or Claude Simon, Robert Pinget or Alain Robbe-Grillet are producing is, of course, characteristic of Sarraute, Simon, Pinget, and Robbe-Grillet, but it is no longer truly characteristic of the Nouveau Roman, if by Nouveau Roman one means a unique and homogeneous school. This is why it is really stupid for a critic to cling to yesterday's theories and to try to construct a unifying theory like those of the 1970s. But the question I would like to ask of all these New Novelists before us is, specifically, do you not feel that if, in 1970, there was a completely formalistic, and a little too rigoristic criticism, this was due in part to the fact that it could disclose much more easily than today various things that were calling for as structural analysis?

**Claude Simon:** We must agree on the meaning of this "more easily" and the phrase "structural analysis." I do not have the impression that my last novels are less "structured" than those of ten or fifteen years ago. But of course I may be wrong. In any case, is persisting in constructing endless anagrams from the words of the text really underraking a structural analysis (to say nothing of claiming to find in them the keys to the text)? Sometimes this produces interesting results; sometimes it does not. For instance, when Ricardou transforms *La Route des Flandres* [*The Road to Flanders*] into "La Route des flancs" ["The Road of the Flanks"], I remain perplexed. The transformation of *La Bataille de Pharsale* into "la bataille de la phrase" [the battle of the phrase] is much more successful. But where does this lead? The Geneva library owns millions of anagrams by Saussure. He stopped, I think, when he realized that he could also find some on postcards written by a soldier. But what can I
answer Ricardou when he tells me: “Perhaps this was not your intent, but, nevertheless, it is there”? Well, fine. And the same goes for the color yellow which, as he noticed, reappears often in this novel. That, too, is a fact. So what? I think I remember that someone worked with might and main at a similar interpretation of the violet or the mauve in Proust. Once again, all this leaves me rather cold and, in any case, it does not seem to in any way resolve the question of the structures in a novel. At a certain moment, in emphasizing the primacy of the text, Ricardou acted in the interest of the public health. But in overdoing, one falls from one excess into another. On the other hand, I see developing here and there today, notably with Lucien Dällenbach, a criticism which, while continuing to give the text the attention it merits, also makes use of other criteria to open out onto wider and more substantial horizons.

François Jost: I wrote an article in Poétique six years ago about Leçon de choses in which I said that I found this book very funny and extremely interesting, but that your first part, “Génériques,” was somewhat of a let-down as far as the well-known theory of the “generators” was concerned. By this I meant that you began with any number of things—the description of a ceiling, of plants, of waves—and then, at the end of three pages, what could possibly have developed out of a certain number of words came to a sudden end with your saying that one could go on indefinitely, and the novel continued along another line.

Claude Simon: I am sorry, François Jost, but it is just the contrary. Perhaps I should explain the genesis of this novel. In response to a request from the Maeght Gallery, which had had the idea of a series of posters composed of short texts illustrated by painters, I wrote a short description of a room in my country house that was being renovated by masons. This text ended with these lines:

La description (la composition) peut se continuer (ou être complétée) à peu près indéfiniment selon la minutie apportée à son exécution, l'entreindrement des métaphores proposées, l'addition d'autres objets visibles dans leur entier ou fragmentés par l'usure, le temps, un choc (soit encore qu'ils n'apparaissent qu'en partie dans le cadre du tableau), sans compter les diverses hypothèses qui peut susciter le spectacle. Ainsi il n'a pas été dit, etc."

The description (the composition) can go on (or be supplemented) almost indefinitely, depending on the meticulousness exercised in the execution, the yielding to proposed metaphors, the addition of other objects entirely visible or fragmented by wear, time, a shock (or that only part of them appear in the frame of the painting), not taking into account the various hypotheses which may emerge from this sight. Thus it was not said that, etc.

And then, once this text was sent to Maeght, I told myself: “Now that you've written that, do it! Prove that it's possible, go on!” And that is what I did. If the title of the first pages is “Génériques,” what follows is entitled “Expansion.” It is from the elements of the first description that three short stories develop: One recounting the mason's work, another, an episode of war (Soldiers fortifying themselves in a ruined house waiting for an enemy attack), and the third, showing the figures of a reproduction of a painting by Renoir still tacked on one of the walls of the room. I composed the novel, interweaving these three stories a little like the themes of a fugue follow from and overlap each other. So I was delighted when a while ago I heard Pinet speak of music.

One detail might be of interest. When I had almost finished writing this novel, I realized that, in fact, I had only been developing all the connotations of the word “chute” [fall], such as they appear in the dictionary of Littré: chute d'un mur [the fall of a wall], chute de cheval [the falling off a horse], chute d'obus [the falling off shells (military)], chute d'une femme [the downfall of a woman], chute d'une place forte [the fall of a fortified town], chute du jour [nightfall], and so on. But there was nothing premeditated in this. This was just how things happened.

François Jost: This is precisely what I tried to show.

Claude Simon: But you just said that the novel went on with something other than “Génériques”! I do not understand.

François Jost: There was a kind of play with criticism: Calling the first chapter of Leçon de choses “Génériques” was at the same time a joke and a kind of play on structure as a whole. I specifically tried to show that this novel was a disillusionment for the “nouveau lecteur” [new reader], the reader who thought he had understood everything about the functioning of the Nouveau Roman once and for all. The problem has really to do with the relation between the critical commentaries that you come across every day and your practice of writing.
Three Decades of the French New Novel

Claude Simon: It is possible that after having read Leçon de choses, a reader might not easily understand how I went on from there to write Les Géorgiques. And yet, while these two texts are very different, their principles are not. Perhaps I would not even have been able to write Les Géorgiques without having written Leçon de choses. But all this requires long explanations and I am not, at this point, going to begin another lecture.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: Actually, what Ricardou did very well was to de-Ricardolize you!

Robert Pinget: I very much appreciate François Jost’s intervention. I find it very honest. Everyone is ganging up on Ricardou. I think that at a given moment this intelligent critic shed a certain light on our works, and suddenly, though no one knows why, he is no longer spoken of. We ought to acknowledge that he is someone of value.

Claude Simon: Our friend Pinget is Christianly making himself the defender of the poor and the orphan. It is touching and very charitable, although I wonder whether true charity would not rather be to warn someone that he is treading on thin ice. No one has said here that Ricardou’s writings are worthless. The problem, if I must repeat myself, is that, like all theses pushed to the extreme, those that he developed, in practice, led him to a dead end, and his followers along with him. In this regard, he is dangerous. Moreover, he seems to have been suffering, for some time now, from a pathological megalomania, which is of no help either. Just as I did not spare him my public approbation when I found what he was doing interesting, I have told him very frankly (and in writing) what I think today. That is all.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: I would like to extend this debate to the more general topic of the relation between the writer or the creator and critics in general. The New Novel is a good example because it has been widely considered. A lot has been written about the Nouveau Roman, and with great diversity. Personally, I have always been very interested in what was being written about it and, of course, in what was being written about me in particular. The first thing that I realized is that a critic is not a scientist. The critic develops his own fantasies and he can do only that. The critic is a kind of minor writer in some cases, major in other cases. I am thinking of Barthes, for instance. Yet he remains one who does nothing but develop his own fantasies. Though I spoke of academic criticism as having been unresponsive to the Nouveau Roman, that criticism was still very interesting. There were many lessons to be learned from it, precisely because the fantasies of an ideology were present within the criticism and it was very interesting to get to know them. Of course, the interest was not for the purpose of revising our writings, but to enable us to situate our own efforts. As far as university-related or high-level criticism is concerned, people such as Blanchot or Barthes, for example, were interested in me. But I understood from the start that their effort was not really to speak about me, for Blanchot could never speak about anyone but Blanchot and Barthes could speak only of Roland Barthes.

The funniest thing is that they both wrote articles on Le Voyeur at a time when I was almost unknown. These two articles are extraordinary! One would think that they are not about the same book. In one, called “Littérature littérale,” Roland Barthes spoke of Le Voyeur as if there were no sexual crime in the book. He never mentions it. His article is written entirely on the level of things: objectivity and a kind of realism which, of course, was not simple, for Barthes had a shrewd mind. Blanchot, on the other hand, saw only the sexual crime. In fact, Blanchot’s text started with this sentence: “Where does the light illuminating Le Voyeur come from?” This light was the crime itself. So why is it that this light which illuminates Le Voyeur was never seen by Barthes?

You know, for three years after publication of Les Gommes, I never said that this text was linked with Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex. For three years, no one mentioned it. Not one critic ever said it, not even Barthes, who wrote a text on Les Gommes in which he never mentioned either Sophocles or Oedipus. Does this mean that Barthes’s texts were uninteresting? Of course not! They were fascinating! But what is most fascinating is that it is possible to write two such different things. And soon it was three, because when Goldmann got involved, there was an entirely different point of view. In other words, the value of this very Barthesian notion of the polysynomy of the text must be affirmed, not by one critic, for probably he himself would be able to develop only his own fantasy, but by several critics.

I was very fond of Ricardou. He was fascinating. For me, his only mistake was in not acknowledging this polysynomy. At the colloquia devoted to us in Cerisy, he had a tendency first to rectify
the mistakes of other critics and then our own mistakes. He has a dogmatic mind, a normative mind, but theory is not always normative. A scientist using the particle theory to study light would never say that the wave theory is wrong. He would easily admit to another physicist working on the wave theory. Now you know that these two theories are incompatible. They cannot go together. A coherent world where light would be both waves and particles is not possible. Nevertheless, physicists of light are not at all bothered by this contradiction. And what I ask of this supposedly scientific criticism is that it function like modern science, like this science which knows that it is never true, but merely interesting. And this, I think, was the case with Barthes, with Blanchot, and to a great extent, with Ricardou as well.

Monique Wittig: But for one who is working either on the wave or the particle theory, both are legitimate, both are right, is that not so?

Alain Robbe-Grillet: How can they be legitimate if the two are incompatible and are mutually destructive? If light is made of particles, it cannot be made of waves.

Monique Wittig: And yet, it is so for both theories.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: No, there has never been any experiment up to now, though we keep trying, where the two theories would work together. People have to consider either one or the other. They are as mutually exclusive as Goldmann and Barthes.

Tom Bishop: And with respect to criticism, Monique Wittig, does one critical point of view on a particular writer not exclude another?

Monique Wittig: No, because they are what I call heterogeneous elements. It is possible to have a heterogeneous point of view where two points of view do not negate each other, where each is right from its own perspective.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: I think it is much more interesting if the two points of view negate each other, if the two poles are irreconcilable. You know, in the translation of Hegel’s dialectic, the equivalents of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis were used in French and “synthesis” clearly showed that the French mind could not tolerate this contradiction. Aufladung does not at all mean that there is a synthesis of the two, but only a level of going beyond where the two converge on something else. And the fact that in the dialectic, thesis and antithesis are incompatible, that they are at odds with each other, is, in my opinion, essential. And this is all the more so when we speak of literature, for literature is precisely the place where those struggles between incompatible poles take place.

It has been much debated, for example, whether the Nouveau Roman is objective or subjective. What is more interesting is that it cannot be both and, nevertheless, both are there. You can read the Nouveau Roman objectively, as Barthes did, or subjectively, as Blanchot did. The two are there operating in the text. And the text is precisely the place, the site, of this contradiction between irreconcilable things. Both are not true for if they were, they would tolerate each other, but not tolerating each other, they are mutually exclusive. In Hegel’s description, one of them has to die, it is completely out of the question that both survive.

I would also like to make a brief point relevant to the problem of consciousness because problems of consciousness—the hero’s consciousness, the other characters’ consciousnesses, the narrator’s consciousness, the writer’s and the reader’s consciousnesses—are very important problems because they have given rise to numerous misunderstandings. The misunderstanding very often in question is that the public imagines that the writer is hiding something, that the writer knows what is taking place in his character’s consciousness, but that he is not saying what it is. This was true to a certain extent of L’Etranger [The Stranger] by Camus insofar as “the stranger,” Meursault, appears as an empty consciousness only in the first part of the book, his consciousness overflowing—as Nathalie Sarraute has often remarked, both in her theoretical essays and here—at the end. Unlike L’Etranger, one of the basic characteristics of the Nouveau Roman, one which has profoundly shocked the reader, is what has been called the dehumanization of the characters. With the New Novel, the reader was said to be facing heroes who were no longer human beings because they no longer possessed a consciousness. In fact, while they did not have a humanist consciousness, they did possess another kind of consciousness.

What is strange is that readers remain completely conditioned by a transcendental philosophy which maintains that consciousness is full and that it diffuses fullness and meaning around itself, while what we call a modern consciousness, or a Husserlian consciousness, is an empty consciousness. There is nothing within consciousness,
Husserl claims. Consciousness is simply a movement of outward projection, what he calls phenomenology. What is very bizarre is that the word “phenomenology” has very often been used by the critics, and most often it is misused. For some of them, in other words, phenomena were things in themselves which existed outside the consciousness of the subject, and consequently, man was said to have been replaced in Robbe-Grillet’s books by objects. This has been widely maintained. Others, on the other hand, supposed that in this phenomenology, the notion of intentionality was, despite everything, an intention which issued from a fullness within consciousness.

Now, what is a modern consciousness? What is there in the characters of the New Novel that unites us so well, Pinget, Simon, Sarraute, and all the others? It is precisely that the consciousnesses are no longer full consciousnesses. They are consciousnesses which exist only in this movement of outward projection. The question that we might ask ourselves is whether the writer is such a consciousness. Also, I think that we are obliged to say that the consciousness of the novelist is a struggling consciousness. By that I mean that no one can really claim to be a Husserlian consciousness. This does not exist. We continue to be transcendent consciousnesses, humanist consciousnesses, while within our consciousness there takes place, as well, this struggle between the old human consciousness—God, truth, and so on—and this purely Husserlian consciousness. This consciousness never has anything inside itself, but is unceasingly projecting itself out of itself, away from this self in which there is nothing, toward the world where there is nothing either.

Nathalie Sarraute: I think that my friends will agree that the New Novel was most useful as a total liberation of the forms and the content of the novel. When I wrote L’Ere du soapçon in 1950, people asked me what I meant by “traditional.” This was a word that was not used. People did not even know its application. New novels are published which are not written in the traditional form: writers may completely suppress chronological time, not use proper nouns, organize the dialogue as they wish. They are not judged on these things.

This freedom derives, I think, from the movement of the Nouveau Roman. Young writers are not even aware of the freedom they are enjoying. And the same holds true for their private lives. The new generations have no knowledge of the tyranny to which preceding generations were subjugated. I believe that it is one of the advantages, one of the successes, of the Nouveau Roman that the forms of the novel have become free. All liberations are slow, and it is not possible to determine their effects on the basis of a few years.

Robert Pinget: I would like to say that I disagree with Robbe-Grillet as far as Husserl is concerned and the rejection of any religious significance, for I have always been a believer. I do not write of it in my work, but to deny the divine presence . . .

Alain Robbe-Grillet: I have just said the contrary.

Robert Pinget: This is not true.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: I have just said that a Husserlian consciousness does not exist. I just said yesterday that there is no pure revolutionary and that God is always within us. This was precisely my whole point. We are the place of those contradictions and the New Novel is no longer the novel of conquered freedom, because freedom cannot be conquered for once and for all since it, too, is a movement of conquest. We need God to be atheists.

Claude Simon: This whole discussion is completely beyond me. For example, we have mentioned the characters of the Nouveau Roman. What does this mean? Which characters? And which New Novels? We are getting bogged down in total confusion. The status of the character in Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Pinget, Nathalie Sarraute, or myself is as different as a carp from a rabbit, a hummingbird, or a cauliflower. So what are we speaking about? I would like to know, and to know what I am doing here. My little contribution to this colloquium denounced the danger, a deadly one in my opinion, faced by art when from time to time a certain scientism is introduced, and I have just listened, apropos of the novel, to a passionate discussion on theories of physics.

Personally, I could care less. I tried to say yesterday that I am a simple craftsman and that the expression which I think best suits a description of my work is “puttering about.” The entire question for me consists of staring a sentence, seeing it through, and finishing it. Already on this level, very complex problems of structure are faced which are very hard to resolve, and I succeed only by a good
deal of erasing and by trial and error. The same holds true for paragraphs, chapters, and the totality of the novel. This is trouble enough, believe me. So when I hear people speaking of higher philosophy, laws of physics, “Husserlian consciousness,” or other matters, I ask you to excuse me, but I must humbly confess that this is completely beyond my competence and my preoccupations.

Nathalie Sarraute: As for me, when I write, I never think of any consciousness, whether Husserlian, full, outwardly projected, or remaining within. This would completely prevent me from writing.

The attack on establishment fiction that occurred in this country in the 1960s and 1970s bore an implicit relation to that which had begun somewhat earlier in France, and thus the effort was to explore the ways writers in America had responded, both to the established dogma and to the example set by the French New Novelists. This acknowledgment of the American writers of their appreciation of the French achievements was what drew them to the colloquium, and it was in tribute to their visiting colleagues that the Americans, by invitation, read from their own work, allowing their texts, in and of themselves, to reveal and celebrate the kinship.

The readings, which allowed for a synoptic view of the imaginative territories investigated by these writers, illustrated common concerns and consistent strategies within an arena of extraordinary diversity. And the dialogue that accompanied these readings, focusing not on the question of influence but on that of affinities, revealed aesthetic and technical complementary counterpositions and related efforts. Jonathan Baumbach, for example, in introducing the session, offered the following list of concerns shared by “some or all” of the Americans with the Nouveaux Romanciers: