Aspects of the French Novel

by David Taylor

English Association Bookmarks
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SCOPE OF TOPIC
Aspects of the French novel from its origins to the modern day; the intention is not to provide a complete history of the French novel, but instead to discuss some of the salient points in its evolution.

Books to read
The following translations are currently available:
André Gide, *Strait is the Gate* (Penguin, 1990)
André Gide, *The Immoralist* (Penguin, o/p)
Georges Perec, *W or the Memory of Childhood* (Collins Harvill, 1990)

NOTES
It is tempting to view the 'novel' as a term referring to a homogeneous group of texts. Unfortunately, like the rest of literature, the novel has never been and never will be a clearly defined medium. Since it first appeared around the seventeenth century, it has continuously metamorphosed into a form which nowadays is sometimes described, rather paradoxically, as the 'anti-novel'. Nevertheless, this whole stream of literature does still have several cohesive elements: the 'novel' is normally a prose work of imagination of some length which portrays characters and actions.

As far as the French novel is concerned, *Princesse de Clèves* by Madame de la Fayette is considered to be the first great work to be classed a 'novel'. It would be easy for anyone to recognize the traits of the novel in this text. *The Princesse de Clèves* would be viewed as a tragedy by modern readers (and incidentally by some contemporary readers as well, despite the purpose of the work to show an image of the perfect picture of a morally correct individual).

It depicts the life of Mademoiselle de Chartres whose mother deems it fit to marry her to the Prince de Clèves. The daughter does not have any complaint with this, as she understands the qualities within her husband who is utterly devoted to her. However, it is only after the marriage that she meets the Duc de Nemours and realizes the passion and love which should be the backbone of any marriage. Whilst the Duc and the Princesse recognize the feelings that bind them, the Princesse remains faithful to her husband and even explains the situation to him. This does increase their mutual esteem, but it breaks the husband's heart and he dies shortly afterwards. Although this now leaves the Princesse free to pursue her true love, she does not spend her life with the Duc. She retires to a convent and does not live for much longer.

Madame de la Fayette intended this as a portrait of correct moral stature, with the heroine not deviating from the 'right' code, even to achieve her own happiness. Most readers today would find it difficult to comprehend her self-denial and indeed even at the time of publication some readers found this to be the case. The result is that Madame de la Fayette's character causes frustration rather than admiration.

The work is, nonetheless, the textbook example of a novel: it aims to produce a well-rounded description of the characters and their lives.
The works of one author, Honoré de Balzac, writing in the nineteenth century, epitomize this concept of the French novel. It is almost pointless to cite any single work of his.

The Human Condition is the collective title given by Balzac to his oeuvre, in all of which his intention was to produce a written account of real life. It is essential to understand this belief in the possibility of creating a realistic interpretation of the world in literature in order to understand later novelists’ reactions to Balzac’s work. Balzac's novels involve lengthy descriptions which are meant to allow the reader to see the scene and the characters, to believe that they are real. The novels often portray the relationships between contrasting characters, some strong and some weak, in an attempt to capture the world in words. Although almost any of his novels illustrate Balzac's theories and practice of writing, his best known are Old Goriot, A Distinguished Provincial in Paris and Cousin Betty. It is easy to distinguish the morals or characteristics, such as jealousy or ambition beyond one's means and their effects, that are examined in each book, which makes them somewhat superficial and not exceptionally searching works.

The twentieth century has seen the more interesting developments in the French novel. Whilst English counterparts of these earlier examples could be found, recent works contain trends more exclusive to French literature.

André Gide wrote what have become known as psychological novels, these being investigations of people's motives and true characters. He attempted to put into words the souls of his characters. At the time many viewed him as an immoral writer, but this may be more for his lifestyle than his work and some still today (somewhat prudishly) view his writings as corrupting.

Strait is the Gate is a short novel which contains some of his most tragic and thought-provoking writing. The main characters are cousins, called Alissa and Jerome, who love each other. There is no technical reason why they should not marry, but Alissa rejects Jerome out of a desire to avoid profane love and in order to retain her purity. Alissa's sister, Juliette, also loves Jerome, but when she realizes that it will never amount to anything, she shows her ability to function more pragmatically in the world than the other two by leaving and leading another life. In short, she understands the dictum 'life goes on' and heeds it.

The most intriguing aspect of this book lies in its climax, before Alissa dies, where Jerome returns to her house and attempts to force his way in, to break the barrier that lies between them (and this may obviously be interpreted in many ways), but Alissa pushes the door shut. Excerpts from her diary show, however, how she had wanted Jerome to manage to get in. This brings many things into question, the most fundamental being -- just how hard was he trying? The matter becomes even more intriguing when we learn that she had quickly returned to the door and opened it, to find him gone. Jerome's desire to enter could not be that great, since he does not persist, but leaves immediately after his first failed attempt. So, although it is easy to see Strait is the Gate as a portrayal of unrequited and tragic love, it is more intriguing to look at the intricacies of the characters' psyches. It becomes more and more plausible that both of them are exhibiting signs of sado-masochism, for does Jerome not find happiness and satisfaction out of the denial and from the emotional torment? Is Alissa's moral righteousness not more convincing translated into a masochistic pleasure in denying her more basic instincts? Does she not seem gratified with the power she wields over Jerome? Of course, this view also tends to make the reader more nervous as this comes closer to something regarded as taboo even by some today, especially if they can see a part of themselves in the characters -- and most of Gide's characters are created in such a way that a little of them exists in all of us.

Another of Gide's fascinating works is The Immoralist, which is a somewhat misleading title as the protagonist, Michel, is more of an amoralist. Michel leads a life believing in individualism and abhorring imitation. In the book's most unsettling scene, Michel witnesses a youth steal a pair of scissors. The youth believes he has been the one exhibiting power and
freedom and yet, all the time, he was being watched in the mirror by Michel who was therefore really in the position of power. It is an unusual description which excites both the character and the reader by its investigation of voyeurism. Since the occurrence is quite safe, dealing only with the theft of a pair of scissors, there is no reason to be threatened by enjoying the piece, but it should provoke thought and arouse an interest in examining the intimations of such a discovery.

Also by Gide, *The Pastoral Symphony* examines the life of a blind girl who is cared for by a pastor, who grows to feel something more than platonic love for his ward. The pastor's son, Jacques, also loves Gertrude. Eventually she gains her sight, to discover that the pastor, whom she loved, did not look the way she had envisaged, while Jacques was physically attractive. In the manner of true heroines, she dies in a stream! Again it is worth reading for the tension and relationships between the characters which highlight human tendencies, albeit the ones which people prefer to remain hidden.

Since the Second World War, there has been a movement in French literature known as the *nouveau roman* or 'new novel'. Some modern writers have rebelled against the works of authors such as Balzac, who has become regarded as the antithesis of their stream of thought.

This group, consisting of such writers as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor and Georges Perec, should not perhaps be branded as the same, because their beliefs, aims and means are not identical. The power of the critics was wielded in the sixties, however, and they were condemned to be regarded as belonging to this same group of 'anti-novelists'.

They could no longer believe in the power of language to represent reality. Unlike Balzac, who saw lengthy descriptions as a way of recreating reality, they did not agree that language could create anything except print on a page. For them, no matter how many words are employed, all that remains is black on white. For instance, pages dedicated to the description of a table do not create anything but a virtual table made of words; the author can never actually make the table. Nothing tangible is created except text.

In addition, they did not like the fictional reality of literature, particularly when claimed as a representation of the real world. The problem is well exposed by the analogy with the genre of the horror film. According to this, a woman trapped alone in a country home, knowing that there is an axe murderer outside, does not phone the police, but rather goes out to investigate, preferably in a flimsy nightdress! Fiction does not so much ask a suspension of disbelief as a belief in a different reality. Think, for instance, about the importance of objects in novels. Often they are codified, given a relevance and linked to a character or a characteristic, and yet they are really no more than fictional objects which should not relate to characters or events.

In short, these authors saw how society had become accustomed to reading texts in a certain way and expecting certain things from a novel.

Georges Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood*, written in the mid-seventies, is a most extraordinary book. It presents itself as a novel of two parts, but is more a text consisting of fragments which only become unified on close examination. The book is split into two texts by a caesura in the middle and by an alternation of chapters between an 'autobiography', reconstituted from old photographs, and an adventure story. The 'fiction' concerns a man who uses the assumed identity of Gaspard Winkler, a child who has been shipwrecked. The first half ends with him leaving to find this child, but the second begins with a description of an island called 'W'. The poignancy lies with the 'fictional' Winkler searching for the real Winkler, just as the author searches for his identity by his examination of the evidence. It becomes obvious that the fiction is as real and useful as the 'autobiography', especially since the Perec of the book admits that his memories are unsure and untrustworthy. The text is useless for truth, except for the truth which has been created within it, which often becomes
more important than the ‘truth’. (Compare how, in some ways, it does not matter whether Robin Hood or King Arthur existed – their legends have as much validity as history. Their ‘value’, although such a word is somewhat inappropriate, is judged by society to be equally important as their factual counterparts.) Indeed, a part of the new French novelists' ideas challenges our acceptance of history as true and attempts to show that memory, language and problems of representation all contribute to making what is perceived as fact to be actually much more closely related to fiction than we normally believe.

W or the Memory of Childhood is never a simple text. The second half depicting the island becomes gradually more sinister as the island, which is based on the Olympic ideal, is exposed as a metaphor for the Nazis and their ideology. Thus the island too becomes a 'truthful' form of Perec's childhood. All the aspects of the book become both false and true. It is a novel like few others, which would leave an inattentive reader baffled and even disappointed. Once the 'meaning' of the elements is understood, however, the extent of the genius required to create such a skilfully interwoven and interconnected text becomes obvious. It is also evident that the reader discovers more from the text with each reading, continually being astonished by its revelations, never tedious to experience.

It is easy therefore to see the divide which lies between the first French novel and the more modern texts. The novel's evolution has passed through many stages from a simple text regarded as a truth to something which claims to be nothing more than a collection of words with no reality other than its own.

This Bookmark can by no means pretend to be a description of every aspect of the French novel nor even a full exposition of any of the texts mentioned. (That is something to be achieved by each reader individually over a number of readings.) Its aim will have been attained if it has provided a useful introduction to these texts and a way to begin to understand them and, more importantly, to enjoy them.

Further Reading

All of the authors discussed have many more texts translated. Whilst the major text for Gide was Strait is the Gate, the others mentioned (The Immoralist and The Pastoral Symphony) are equally worth reading. Perec also wrote Life: A User's Manual in which a character named Gaspard Winkler 'reappeared'. Perec wrote many other superb novels: A Man Asleep is written, strangely, in the second person and printed together with Things.

Criticism

John Cruickshank, French Literature and its Background (OUP, 1970)
Elizabeth Wright, Psychoanalytical Criticism (Routledge, 1990)