

Zones of Influence: Juan José Saer and the *nouveau roman*

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In 1967 Juan José Saer published a translation of a short story written by Alain Robbe-Grillet, “La plage” [“The Beach”], in a small literary journal from Rosario called *Setecientosmonos*. In the following year, 1968, he completed the first Spanish translation of Nathalie Sarraute’s *Tropisms*. That same year he was awarded a scholarship to spend six months in Paris researching the relations between the literary avant-garde phenomenon of the *nouveau roman* and the film avant-garde of the *nouvelle vague*. Saer did not finish his research—and he also never left France—but he did meet and interview the most

important writers of the *nouveau roman*: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor and Claude Simon. The *nouveau roman*, however, didn't fade away for Saer with that project; in fact it remained a constant point of reference for him not only in his critical work, but also in his fictional oeuvre.

In the 1960's, at the time when Saer started writing, the Argentinian intellectual center was considered to be the city of Buenos Aires. Borges, Cortázar and the *Contorno* group led by David Viñas dominated the literary scene with their fantastic stories, in the case of the first two, and the political realist texts, in the case of *Contorno*. All the big publishers, most of the literary journals and literary critics were located in the metropolis. Thus, many authors such as Leopoldo Lugones, Carlos Mastronardi, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and Manuel Gálvez migrated from their hometowns into the urban center to try to find ways to publish and to make themselves known in its various literary circles. Others struggled to make a name for themselves in the literary sphere by staying in their own towns while others, as in the case of Saer, moved directly from their small towns in Argentina to cities around the world, without passing through the Argentinian center of cultural legitimacy.

The case of Saer is an interesting one, because even though he decided never to return to Argentina, he never ceased to write in his native language and locate his fictional work anywhere else but in the Argentinian province of Santa Fe. Paris appears as a setting in one novel, *La pesquisa* [*The Investigation*], but as a story that one character, Pichón Garay, who lives in Paris, tells his friends when he goes on vacation to Argentina. As opposed to other Argentinian authors who emigrated to Europe, like Héctor Bianciotti and Juan Rodolfo Wilcock, both of whom decided to write in the languages of their newly adopted countries (French in the case of Bianciotti and Italian in the case of Wilcock), Saer not only never wrote in any other language than Spanish, but also tried to capture in his books the linguistic details of the spoken language of his province while distancing himself from topics that could be considered regionalistic. From his very first book Saer starts developing his "zone"; repetition is key to understanding his poetics: his use of the same place—the province of Santa Fe—in which to base his books, of a restricted repertoire of characters that appear in

more than one book, of recurring themes and an attentive focus on the formal elements of the text form the foundation of his literary project.

Critics, nonetheless, described his first books as being regionalist works. This can be explained by some of their characteristics such as the use of characters that were marginal, the oral intonations of some of his short stories or his decision to choose rural settings instead of urban ones for his fictions. Saer's first books almost went unnoticed and the reviews that he got for most of them labeled him as a realist or regionalist writer—and we should keep in mind that in Argentina being a realist writer was opposed to being a writer from the avant-garde.

As what I believe was an intentional gesture towards some of the literature produced in Argentina and against those critics who didn't appear to understand his literary project or who expected a different type of literature from the young author, Saer began to explore different literary models in order to situate himself on the other side of what he called "official literature" which included the authors from the literary phenomenon of the Latin American "boom" and many of the anti-realist and anti-regionalist critics. One of those models was the *nouveau roman*.

Saer read very carefully the theoretical works of the writers of the *nouveau roman*. Aside from his translation of the works already mentioned, which were Saer's only published translations, he also wrote extensively on the subject. In his book of essays *El concepto de ficción* [*The Concept of Fiction*], a book that includes essays written from 1965 to 1996, Saer directly or indirectly refers to the *nouveau roman* in close to a dozen of his essays. He takes up the topic again in his two other non-fictional books, *La narración-objeto* [*The Narration-Object*], published in 1999, and *Trabajos* [*Works*], published posthumously in 2005. Even the two volumes that compile his unpublished works, *Papeles de trabajo I* and *Papeles de trabajo II* contain references, criticism, notes and comments about books and theories of the *nouveau roman* and finally his book *El río sin orillas. Tratado imaginario* [*The Shoreless River. Imaginary Treatise*], makes reference to the *nouveau roman*. There is also a long unpublished manuscript that was given as a conference with the title of "Le *nouveau roman* y nosotros" that analyzes the concept of "objectivism," some novels of Butor, Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute and their respective theories on the novel.

This “list” is meant to show that the relationship between Saer and the *nouveau roman* was not some ephemeral fascination that was triggered with his arrival in France in the late 1960’s (the moment when the *nouveau roman* was in its most mature stage) as some critics have suggested. Saer’s interest predates his trip. It was also, as I have mentioned, the *reason* for his trip and it was an important point of reference for him.

Saer’s work is normally studied, albeit superficially, in relation to the *nouveau roman* when considering what most of his critics have called his “experimental phase,” namely the four books that he published from 1968 to 1980 (*Cicatrices*, *El limonero real*, *La mayor* and *Nadie nada nunca*). But since the publication of his book *Cicatrices* [*Scars*], if not before, his interest in the poetics of the *nouveau roman* exceeds those parameters and extend to his entire narrative project both from the outside—that is, from where he positions himself ethically as a writer, a position that mirrors that of the *nouveaux romanciers*—and from the inside of his fiction in intertextual segments, allusions, references and also in his adoption of some of the formal strategies used in the works of the *nouveau roman*. Those could be summed up in slow paced narration, repetition, novels with open endings, vague characters, metatextual references, *mise en abyme*, incredibly detailed descriptions, narratorial unreliability and the use of mnemonic, unconscious and oneiric states to blur textual limits. In his narrations space takes on a privileged role; since description is a central element in Saer’s texts, space of course will be the focus of those descriptions. Space, in the *nouveau roman* is, as María Teresa Gramuglio comments, “the object of a sight that establishes it as foreign, exteriorizes it and discovers it in slow itineraries that make inventories of details, objects, measurements and distances” (GRAMUGLIO, 1967, p. 14). In the literature of Juan José Saer, the space represented and described is the same, but because it is pictured with the particular strangeness of the narrator’s perception, it keeps its mystery. Saer tells us that one can write all the possible details of a place but one will never be able to capture its nature.

The structure of *Cicatrices* aims to make problematic the novelistic genre using some of the narrative strategies that we just mentioned. The three main characteristics that the novel shares with

the *nouveau roman* are the temporal organization of the novel, the use of the *mise en abyme* and the meticulous descriptions that Saer will continue to use in his other novels; descriptions of the city of Santa Fe, but also of minimal or trivial actions such as gestures and movements.

The novel is divided into four chapters that are also temporal divisions of the events that are being narrated. The first chapter comprise the events that happened from February to June, the second chapter the events that happened from March to May, the third chapter includes April and May and the fourth chapter one day in May, specifically, the day of May 1st. All the chapters have different narrators that in some way or another are related to the main event, which is a murder suicide.

The structure of the novel can be described as a spiral and the center or common denominator would be the crime. In that sense, the novel can also be read as a work of detective fiction, except for the fact that there isn't an investigation of a crime in the classical sense but what we are given are references and fragments of the crime that the other characters bring about in their independent narrations. This use of the techniques of detective fiction to render the narration problematic was also a common practice of Robbe-Grillet.

In his book *For a New Novel*, Robbe-Grillet wrote that the modern novel brought about an ending to the time of linear narratives and that his intention was to erase in his texts all traces of time substituting it with space. "Time", he says, "seems to be cut off from its temporality. It no longer passes. It no longer completes anything" (ROBBE-GRILLET, 1992, p. 155). In order to capture the instant the narrator must deny continuity. In his novel *The Voyeur*, there is a missing hour in the course of the narration. That hour where the main character doesn't seem to remember where he was or what happened, was also the same hour where a crime was committed. Throughout the rest of the novel we see the main character trying to remember the events that happened in that specific hour to determine whether he was guilty of the crime or not. Signs, symbols, references suggest to the reader that he is guilty, but the novel ends without ever clarifying if he was actually the criminal. Time, then, is interrupted and this interruption undermines the linear narrative: after that missing hour, the reader feels the same uncertainty as the main character.

The whole structure of *Cicatrices* disconcerts the reader in a similar way since the temporal order of the narration is subverted: the first chapter begins with a pool game but the end of that chapter is nevertheless chronologically prior to the game and that first chapter is actually chronologically the last one of the novel. The fractured structure of the novel allows the reader to begin any chapter without reading the other three.

The use of the *mise en abyme* is everywhere apparent in the novel although I will limit myself to just two examples. Jean Ricardou identifies three types of *mise en abyme* techniques in the *nouveau roman*. He calls them *repetition*, *anticipation* and *condensation* (RICARDOU, 1973, p. 50). In Saer's novel we can recognize all three of them. The first chapter already announces the organization of the novel when the narrator makes a comment about the light that comes down from different roof lamps and ends up illuminating certain areas of the room. He says:

The cone of light that falls on the green table isolates us like the walls of a tent. There are several cones of light across the hall. Each so isolated from the others, and hanging so perfectly apart, that they look like planets with a fixed place in a system, in orbit, each ignorant of the other's existence. (SAER, 1997, p. 6)

Each chapter of the novel would be a particular "planet" or cone of light that illuminates only the events narrated by a specific character. This announcement serves as an *anticipation* of what is about to happen in the text. Before we are able to understand the organization of the novel, since we are still in the first chapter, the narrator already makes it clear. Of course, it will only be after reading the whole book that we can trace this sign and figure out what Saer was doing.

In the first chapter we are also told how Fiore kills himself since the judge, a friend of the narrator, lets him enter the questioning room when he starts interrogating Fiore. The last thing that Fiore says before jumping through the window is that the pieces cannot be put together. He refers to the series of events that brought him to that moment in his life, but his statement could be extrapolated to the novel itself which appropriately ends with a latin quote taken from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians: "Nam Oportet Haereses Esse" (SAER, 1997, p. 278)

which can be translated as “It is well, or fitting, that there be dissent,” another *mise en abyme* that works as a *condensed* depiction of the structure of the novel.

The third aspect of the novel that closely mirrors the novels of the *nouveau roman* is the description. Robbe-Grillet, in his book *For a New Novel* discusses the problem of description in the novel and points out that if description used to work as an instrument to make something clear and visible for the eyes of the reader (his point of comparison being the realist novel of the 19th century) the intention for his novels is to do the opposite. Descriptions used to serve to present a stable universe and the authenticity of events, words and gestures. That representation of the security of the world collapsed with the modern novel. Robbe-Grillet affirms that if description used to be able to make things visible, “now it seems to destroy them, as if its intention to discuss them aimed only at blurring their contours, at making them incomprehensible, at causing them to disappear altogether” (ROBBE-GRILLET, 1992, p. 147). The third chapter of the novel, the version of the judge, contains the most direct representation of the type of description that can be associated to the *nouveau roman*.

In Saer’s novel the intention mirrors that of Robbe-Grillet while it posits the question of how to narrate an event. We read:

Soon I reach the suspension bridge, which I have seen approach me. Its columns, darkened and gleaming from the water, are only half-visible here and there through breaks in the fog (...) Then [the bridge] disappears. He is behind me. Then the bridge too. Now the old waterfront extends ahead, its oil-stained asphalt covered with fractures and holes. Now the concrete railing, its endless, weathered balustrade. Every so often, a missing column brakes the uniformity. And sometimes a broken column has fallen to pieces over the enormous gray slabs of the wide sidewalk. From beyond the waterfront I see the leafless, tall poplars approach me and then disappear. The fog approaches, a solid, white wall (SAER, 1997, p. 173).

Narrative fragmentation, the feeling of strangeness in all the characters and their uncertainty reinforce this type of description as well as Saer’s use of repetition of certain phrases and words to emphasize the impossibility to capture the real. In this case, the fog reappears and every object of the city is surrounded by it. These meticulous

descriptions are almost still images and even though they have been related to a cinematic experience—the sight of the narrator would be the camera that captures the scenes with all their details and expresses them as he *sees* them—we could say that they tend to offer themselves to the reader more as paintings: images in the works of Saer stress the “being there” of things and the futile nature of language in its effort to capture their essence.

In *Cicatrices*, Saer adopts the Sarrautian concept of “suspicion” but if in Sarraute this suspicion was mostly directed towards the construction of the novel with the bourgeois individual in its center, for Saer the suspicion falls on the perception that the individual has of the real. The third chapter, narrated by the judge is a paradigm of this situation: the insufficiency of sight, the complexity of the real and the process of writing are interrelated in this character when he tries to narrate the vision of a city occupied by what he described as gorillas. The judge that looks and perceives is also the judge that writes and reiterates the emptiness of the real: “The sun is coming up, but the wet fog surrounds the car so closely that all I can see is the inert body of the car and the slowly drifting whitish masses that have erased the waterfront, if there really is a waterfront, and which completely obscure my vision, if—beyond the fog—there really is anything for my eyes to see” (SAER, 1997, p. 242).

The judge looks, reads, interprets, perceives and judges the meaning of the real, but his perception of it slowly gets blurry until it cancels itself with the fog that covers everything that is visible: “I can only make out blurs moving slowly through the fog” (SAER, 1997, p. 171), “the platforms fade into the fog” (SAER, 1997, p. 171), “I see tall palms approach me, wrapped in fog” (SAER, 1997, p. 172), “for a moment there is nothing but the car and the fog” (SAER, 1997, p. 173), “I stare at the fog” (SAER, 1997, p. 174). In this novel nothing is really achieved, and the meticulous descriptions only serve to make more obvious the failure of the subject to capture everything that his sight can process.

For Saer’s literature one can say, with Heraclitus, that no one can step into the same river twice; memory and perception would be his river and language the individual trying to recount the same story over again.

The majority of Saer's critics have been reluctant to read his texts in relation to the *nouveau roman*, claiming the "originality" of Saer's own literary project. But this project itself shows a stable theoretical horizon that includes and privileges the discourse of the *nouveau roman*. In any case, to say that Saer was influenced by the *nouveau roman* does not diminish in any way his originality. On the contrary, Saer uses a place, his "zone," through which he addresses universal topics in his narrative explorations. If anything, his use of the narrative strategies of the *nouveau roman* contributes to his particular form of originality.

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