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Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, and the *Nouveau Roman*

Abstract: Julio Cortázar and Italo Calvino, friends and foreign writers living in Paris in the 1960s and 1970s, performed a number of literary experiments throughout their time in the city that share a deep connection with the writers of the *nouveau roman*. Its most representative author, Alain Robbe-Grillet, dedicated a series of essays to defining the poetics of this new writing, such as "À quoi servent les théories" (1955) and "Nouveau roman, homme nouveau" (1961), which lie at the centre of my analysis. Calvino and Cortázar read the *nouveau roman* writers and reflected upon Robbe-Grillet's stylistic principles, as I will explain by performing a close reading of Cortázar's *Historias de cronopios y famas* (1962) and *62: Modelo para armar* (1968) as well as Calvino's *Le cosmicomiche* (1968). I will also, however, argue that, at the same time, they both chose to disassociate themselves from Robbe-Grillet's ideas in favour of a more subjective and anthropological conception of literature. A comparative study of their reactions to the *nouveau roman* movement will thus provide an understanding of their wider practices, and we will see how their writing moved away from the rubrics of the *nouveau roman* with which they both have been frequently associated.

Keywords: anthropomorphism, Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, *nouveau roman*, Paris

Cortázar moved to Paris in 1951. From 1962, Calvino began commuting to the French capital from Rome, San Remo, and Turin, spending time there with Esther Judith Singer (also known as Chichita), with whom Cortázar and his first wife, Aurora Bernárdez, worked as translators at the UNESCO headquarters. In 1965, Calvino married Chichita and decided to settle in Paris, where he would be based for the next fifteen years, during which time the two couples developed a close professional and personal relationship. Calvino, for instance, assisted with the publication of Cortázar's work in Italy by the Einaudi publishing house (for which he worked as an editor from 1949 to 1984), and he even wrote the cover blurb for the Italian edition of Cortázar's *Historias de cronopios y de famas*, published in Italy in 1971. While in Paris, Calvino and Cortázar both performed a number of literary experiments that shared a deep connection with the French writers of the *nouveau roman*, as I will explain in this article by performing a close reading of Cortázar's *Historias de cronopios y famas* [Cronopios and Famas] (first published in

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1962) and *62: Modelo para armar* [62: A Model Kit] (first published in (1968) as well as Calvino's *Le cosmicomiche* [Cosmicomics] (first published in 1968). I will also, however, argue that, at the same time, they both chose to disassociate themselves from the ideas of Alain Robbe-Grillet, the most representative author of the movement, in favour of a more subjective and anthropological conception of literature.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a reinvigorated ambition for exploring new narratives appeared among many Parisian writers. Some of these writers presented themselves as the authors of the *nouveau roman*, a group that wanted to revive the historical avant-garde and, according to the critic Niilo Kauppi, "attempted to create a new literature on the ruins of the old" (Kauppi 2010, 13).[1] Among its members were the novelists Michel Butor, George Perec, Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, and its most pre-eminent member, Robbe-Grillet, who undertook the task of theorizing the movement, devoting a series of essays to building up the principles of the group, later gathered together in *Pour un nouveau roman* [Towards a New Novel] in 1963.[2] It was important for these writers, for instance, not to be thought of as an organization adhering to a manifesto in the mode of Bretonian surrealism or Marinettian Futurism. Their stylistic ideas should instead be understood as a "current" (Robbe-Grillet 1965, 45). Robbe-Grillet expressly states that the term *nouveau roman* "is merely a useful epithet that can be used to include all those writers who are trying to find new forms for the novel" (1965, 45). Nevertheless, he modelled and determined the extent of this stylistic modernization in his essays, and recent studies like Galia Yanoshevsky's "The Significance of Rewriting, or *Pour un nouveau roman* as the Manifesto of the *Nouveau Roman*" agree that his essays shaped a manifesto of the same magnitude as that of their predecessors (Yanoshevsky 2003, 44). Moreover, in many ways, Robbe-Grillet's principal claims are similar to those expressed by the previous European avant-gardists of the 1910s to the 1930s: he argues that being avant-garde means "that [the artist] is somewhat ahead of his time, and that tomorrow the common herd will be writing like he does" (1965, 55). Robbe-Grillet privileges an authorship driven by the investigation of unknown territories that adjusts better to modern times because "if we shut our eyes to our real situation in the present-day world," as he warns, "that situation will in the end prevent our constructing the world and the man of tomorrow" (1965, 45). But that man of tomorrow cannot be built

1 The term *nouveau roman* was coined by Émile Henriot in 1957 in order to stress the novelty of the contemporary French novel.

2 Calder Press published a translation by Richard Howard, cited here as Robbe-Grillet (1965), which also includes texts written between 1963 and 1965. I quote from this and other works in English in the course of the article.

out of nothing, as he/she is part of a determinate history, and that involves carrying a cultural baggage. However, in contrast to the high modernists' methods of inclusion in encyclopaedic works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Robbe-Grillet suggests that the writers of the *nouveau roman* should follow the principle of exclusion; as he explains, a true revolution must involve a constant renewal of literary form, which may force the author to leave learnt history and its representations in the background (1965, 154). Robbe-Grillet insists on avoiding, for instance, the figure of the lonely, weather-beaten literary genius about whom we read repeatedly in the self-representations of the Romantics and who, according to Robbe-Grillet, was still present amongst the first avant-gardes. The writers of the *nouveau roman*, he believed, must reject authorial intrusion as well as sentimental depth in their characters, and look at the world and its objects with new eyes, working towards a creation of presence, a narrative detached from deeper meanings and conclusive interpretations: "In the construction of future novels, gestures and objects will be *there*, before they are *something*" (Robbe-Grillet 1965, 54; emphasis in original). These ideas recall the kino-eye technique used in the *cinéma-vérité* of the 1960s, since they also suggest a narrative that focuses on objects and actions developed in a specific setting rather than on the biography of the characters.[3] The technique takes the omniscient narrator further from the position that he/she had in the naturalist novel and leaves him/her with the sole function of describing, without any particular "subjective" interest, what he/she sees. The author, then, assumes the role of a camera/machine, reproducing in detail what the narrator sees, whereas the narrative and its recipient take paramount importance.

In Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie* [Jealousy] (first published in 1957), for instance, we can find the dictums that he defends in his essays. In *Jealousy*, the events are related by an omniscient third-person narrator, and it takes an interpretative effort on the part of the reader to realize that the narrator is perhaps, in fact, the jealous husband of the wife referred to only as "A … ." The husband's descriptions of what he sees intermingle with what he speculates, creating a complexity impossible to solve. The following is a good example of this highly descriptive and impersonal narrative seen through the eyes of A …'s husband:

> The shadow of the column, though it is already very long, would have to be nearly a yard longer to reach the little round spot on the flagstones. From the latter runs a thin vertical thread which increases in size as it rises from the concrete substructure. It then climbs up the wooden surface, from lath to lath, growing gradually larger until it reaches the window sill. But its progression is not constant: the imbricated arrangement of the boards intercepts

3 The kino-eye movement was initiated by the Russian documentary-maker Dziga Vertov in the 1930s and developed by various directors of *cinéma-vérité* such as Jean Rouch and Chris Marker.

> its route by a series of equidistant projections where the liquid spreads out more widely before continuing its ascent. On the sill itself, the paint has largely flaked off after the streak occurred, eliminating about three-quarters of the red trace. (Robbe-Grillet 2008, 3)

This novel is the best example of Robbe-Grillet's articulated reflections on writing, where he illustrates what he means by objective narrative and eradication of depth. The results are exceptionally close to the kino-eye that I mentioned above: for the author, things do not have "a beyond"; they are as they appear to us, to our eyes, because reality "just *is*, and that's all there is to it" (Robbe-Grillet 1965, 158; emphasis in original).

Calvino's *Cosmicomics* is a collection of stories that reflects upon the reasoning of the *nouveau roman* writers, the French structuralists, and the studies of semiologists who believed that all the elements of human culture are interconnected through signs that constitute systems or structures. The stories all have as a protagonist Qfwfq, a polymorphous entity that changes shape from story to story. It acts as a metadiegetic narrator that relates its experiences by taking the shape of an amphibian, a dinosaur, a light particle, or another creature or form that Calvino imagined in order to support a story. All the stories of Calvino's *Cosmicomics* start with a paragraph in italics, which often presents the factual discovery of a physical law narrated in scientific style. In the first story, entitled "The Distance of the Moon," for instance, we find the following introduction:

> *At one time, according to Sir Georges H. Darwin, the Moon was very close to the Earth. Then the tides gradually pushed her far away; the tides that the Moon herself causes on the Earth's waters, where the Earth slowly loses energy.* (Calvino 2009, 3; italics in original)

Premises such as these give a rigorous opening to the stories led by Qfwfq. It is almost as if the stories that follow were meant to be illustrations of the scientific veracity of their introductions. Only "as if," though, because when we start reading we quickly realize that we are being transported to quite a different reality. Instead of scientific truth, Calvino unfolds a rather fantastic setting that will leave both the fictionality of the story and the veracity of the introduction suspended. Indeed, due to this scientific language, the *Cosmicomics* have frequently been approached in terms of the genre of science fiction (Cowley 2014). And I would add that the stories are also comparable to Cortázar's *Cronopios and Famas*, in which Cortázar had already depicted strange anthropomorphic characters. The cronopios are, according to Cortázar, "those green prickly humid things" (Cortázar 1999, 113) that develop very humane emotions, as in the short text "A Cronopio's Sadness," where a cronopio feels terribly sad because its watch is slow. The cronopio knows it is late, but less late than the famas (other anthropomorphized creatures), because according to its watch it is 11:15 and on the famas' it is already 11:20. The cronopio then reflects that it has somehow lost a portion of its life, and

feels unhappy and starts crying. Calvino, responsible for the publication of these microstories in Italy, wrote about the Italian edition as follows, praising and defining the book's anthropomorphic and indeterminate characters:

> To say that the *cronopios* are intuition, poetry, the reversal of rules, and that the *famas* are order, rationality, efficiency, would be to impoverish and imprison the psychological complexity and moral autonomy of their universe within theoretical definitions. *Cronopios and Famas* could only be defined by their behaviours. [...] Moreover, thinking about it, you will see that it is with a resolution worthy of the *famas* that *cronopios* are regarded as *cronopios*, and that when *famas* stop being *famas* there are pervaded by a madness no less bewildering than cronopiesque. (Calvino 1997; my translation, italics in original)

Calvino's Qfwfq bears a certain resemblance to the anthropomorphic cronopios. Even the style of Calvino's narrative is similar to that of Cortázar's: precise and clear, avoiding metaphors and lethargic introspections, all seeming to echo the objective writing laid out by Robbe-Grillet. But these echoes do not necessarily mean that Calvino and Cortázar are following Robbe-Grillet's kino-eye technique. On the contrary, Qfwfq and the cronopios depict specific concerns that turn their scientific writing into a parody of both the determinism of science and the dubious objectivity practised by Robbe-Grillet. In the cosmicomic "A Sign in Space," for example, Qfwfq is a light particle whose function is to travel across the empty space of the universe for eternity. This particle, worn-out by its repetitive routine, one day ventures to leave a sign of its existence at a particular point on its familiar orbit. Qfwfq suddenly has the urge to leave this mark because it realizes that a sign is the only way of proving its own existence: "I felt I was going to conquer the only thing that mattered to me, sign and dominion and name" (Calvino 2009, 34). This sign will change everything for Qfwfq, for from then on it will not only travel through space for eternity, but will also achieve "dominion and name." Therefore, from then on its only worry is waiting, impatiently, for the moment it spots the sign again. The problem comes when Qfwfq, having longed to see its sign again, is not quite sure whether the one it sees is the exact one it left. Qfwfq cannot be certain, and concludes that something else, perhaps another light particle, had the same idea and left its own sign too. This realization generates an unbearable anguish similar to that experienced by the cronopio who was wasting its life because its watch was five minutes slow. Qfwfq, despite being a light particle, experiences a comparable human preoccupation regarding issues of identity, something that the characters of Robbe-Grillet's novels would never do.

Many critics have drawn parallels between Cortázar's writing and that of the French *nouveau roman*, especially in regard to his novel *62: A Model Kit*. Steven Boldy, for instance, argues that *62: A Model Kit* "generates a net of episodes in a manner similar to the construction of Robbe-Grillet's novels" (1980, 196). Jaime Alazraki agrees that the novel is "an impersonal drama" (1994, 235; my transla-

tion) that recalls the stylistic precepts of the writers of the *nouveau roman*. In "Mirrors and Labyrinths: Some Comparisons between Cortázar and the *Nouveau Roman*," J. Ann Duncan states that in *62: A Model Kit* Cortázar followed the precepts of the *nouveau roman* to the extent that he became "the most reminiscent [of Latin American writers] of the *nouveau roman* in techniques" (1976, 2). These influences need to be unpacked, however, for they might not be as straightforward as these critics suggest. In an interview, Cortázar claimed that the authors of the *nouveau roman* did not influence him: "the *nouveau roman* as such has not influenced me because, I suppose, neither Robbe-Grillet's nor Butor's techniques have truly important elements for me" (Alazraki 1994, 202; my translation). He read a wide variety of the French *nouveau roman* writers: in his library, we find books like *Les Demoiselles d'Hamilton* (1972), which includes a text by Robbe-Grillet; *Les Fruits d'or* (1963) by Sarraute; *L'Espace littéraire* (1955) by Maurice Blanchot; as well as works by Philippe Sollers and Claude Ollier, to name only a few examples.[4] Moreover, Cortázar begins *62: A Model Kit* by mentioning an author associated with the *nouveau roman*. During the opening pages, where the narrator, Juan, oscillates between first- and third- person narrative, Cortázar includes a reflection upon Juan's decision to have a meal at the famous French restaurant Polidor[5] after buying a book from the local bookshop. Only a few pages later, Juan informs the reader that the author of the mysterious book is Butor, a pillar among the new novelists (Cortázar 2000, 13). The acquisition is *6,810,000 litres d'eau par seconde* (1965), a book that expands upon some observations of Chateaubriand on the Niagara Falls. The word "Chateaubriand" suddenly, and humorously, connects in Juan's mind with the order made by another diner of *château saignant*. What is more, when Juan starts reading Butor's book, the narrator becomes omniscient and extremely descriptive, recalling the accuracy and kino-eye objectivity of the authors of the *nouveau roman*. Cortázar writes that "if Juan hadn't distractedly opened the book by Michel Butor a fraction of time before the customer had given his orders, the components of the thing that tightened his stomach would have remained scattered" (Cortázar 2000, 18). This passage provides a *mise en scène* of the descriptive, *nouveau roman* style. Cortázar adjusts the style of his narrative to the style depicted in Juan's reading, creating a mirroring – and typically ironic – effect. The narrator continues to comment on the reading disinterestedly – "for Juan to open the book and discover without great interest that in 1791 the author of *Atala* and *René* had deigned to contemplate Niagara

4 Books from the "Biblioteca Julio Cortázar," consulted at the Fundación Joan March in Madrid.
5 This restaurant is where Pataphysicians used to schedule their gatherings. Noël Arnaud recounts that "the Collège de 'Pataphysique made the Polidor the special venue for its feasts" (see Hugill 2012, 117).

Falls" (Cortázar 2000, 18) – surely to emphasize a reticence towards the interests and highly descriptive style of the French novelists.

Thus, one could say that, instead of taking in the ideas of authors such as Butor and Robbe-Grillet, in *62: A Model Kit* Cortázar addresses the new writers with scepticism and irony. To expand on this idea, I find it helpful to focus on the contributions by the characters Calac and Polanco, as I think they are of paramount importance for understanding the "impersonal drama" that Alazraki sees in *62: A Model Kit*. Calac is a writer and could sometimes be held responsible for the whole narrative of the novel (although we have seen that Juan also includes self-reflective passages). Polanco, on the other hand, is probably an inventor. In fact, these two characters are never directly described and their actions constantly mirror each other's. Their arguments are impervious to logic; this is just one example:

> "Of all the people I know, you're the biggest cronk," Calac says.
> "And you're the biggest pettifor," Polanco says. "You call me a cronk, sir, but it's obvious that you've never boneyed your face in a mirror."
> "What you're trying to do is start a fight with me, mister," Calac says. (Cortázar 2000, 55)

The rest of the characters participate in such reflections too. There are, for instance, the triangles of Hèlene, Celia, and Austin, and Juan, Marrast, and Nicole, each in unrequited love with another. But it is in the mirroring duality of Calac and Polanco that all these correspondences coincide and become apparent, because they are at the same time mirror and parody of the exchangeable characterization that Cortázar undertakes in *62: A Model Kit*. However, this "impersonal drama" is far from Robbe-Grillet's understanding of objective writing. Calac and Polanco are not describing what they see but performing an identity that is not static; they are constantly on the verge of dissolving, as illustrated in the above passage, where even language plays a part in the dissolution of meaning and common sense.

Qfwfq also has the ability to take up many shapes, and it could be regarded as all characters and none, depending on the action it is involved in. However, something similar also applies to its identity, as Qfwfq is not a character that describes in detail what is going through its senses, but a character that can become anything: a proto-character. Calvino and Cortázar, like Robbe-Grillet, propose a thoughtful, scientific writing instead of the intuitive, automatic method of the surrealists, or the false determinism of the naturalists. However, their aim is not to narrate the outside world as through a kino-eye like Robbe-Grillet, but to create alternative or fantastic scenarios that question the existence of monolithic and authentic identities, while depicting very human preoccupations. The anthropo-

morphism of Qfwfq, in fact, reminds us of fables and folk tales in which animals acquire the power of speech in order to illustrate a message. Indeed, Calvino recalls that "myth is the hidden part of every story" (Calvino 1986a, 18), and thus "it is impossible to think about the world except in terms of human figures – or, more precisely, of human grimaces and human babblings" (Calvino 1986a, 34). To a certain extent, Calvino agrees with Robbe-Grillet's anti-anthropomorphism, but he confesses that he is unable to turn down the primitive and humanist drive. In "Due interviste su scienza e letteratura" [Two Interviews on Science and Literature], for instance, he explained what differentiates his fictions from Robbe-Grillet's:

> I, on the other hand, have fully accepted and vindicated this anthropomorphism as an absolutely basic literary procedure, and one that even before being literary was mythical, linked to one of primitive man's earliest explanations of the world: animism. It is not that Robbe-Grillet's argument didn't convince me. It is just that in the course of writing I have to come to take the opposite route in stories that are a positive delirium of anthropomorphism. (Calvino 1986b, 33–34)

In his essay "Cibernetica e fantasmi" [Cybernetics and Ghosts] (first published in 1967), Calvino also states that the author is "an anachronistic personage, the bearer of messages, the director of consciences, the giver of lectures to cultural bodies" – and he kills him in a Barthean style: "The rite we are celebrating at this moment would be absurd if we were unable to give it the sense of a funeral service" (Calvino 1986a, 16). Both Calvino and Cortázar are writing from a position in which the author has died, but they both introduce this reflection on the discursive level of the narrative, communicating their own stylistic preoccupations.

Moreover, Robbe-Grillet's fictional work is subjected to his theoretical discernments about stylistic concerns, but, although he is working towards a new and depersonalized style, he is still representing someone's view, like that of the jealous husband, something that disrupts his pretended neutrality. Calvino and Cortázar, on the other hand, are aware of this impossible radical objectivity and invest their efforts in interrogating their own approaches and developing a more conscious writing. I agree with Francis Cromphout's thesis that Calvino is attempting a "literature of consciousness as opposed to an objective literature" (Cromphout 1989, 170) – the latter being a reference to the *nouveau roman*. And, as Guido Bonsaver has noted, in the *Cosmicomics*, Calvino, probably due to moving to the French capital, departs from a "zero degree" of literature, but, contrary to the poetics of the writers of the *nouveau roman*, "he does not try to create an objectified and dehumanized world. In contrast, the *Cosmicomics* are full of 'human'" (Bonsaver 1994, 165; my translation). Calvino's and Cortázar's writings reflect a conscious anxiety that falls far from Robbe-Grillet's eradication of depth

and determination to say things as "as they are." In "Il mare dell'oggettività" [The Sea of Objectivity] (first published in 1960) and "Natura e storia nel romanzo" [Nature and History in the Novel] (first published in 1958), Calvino argues in favour of a literature of consciousness in opposition to Robbe-Grillet's objectivity. He criticizes the "flux of objectivity" of the *nouveau roman* in which "the rationalizing and discriminating individual feels caught like a fly by a carnivorous plant" (Daros 1988, 305; my translation). As Calvino states, Robbe-Grillet develops "a vision of the world [...] that lacks religious vibration and suggestions of the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric" (Calvino 1995, 130–131; my translation). Cortázar also comments on humanism from a similar standpoint, although his views are strongly connected to socialism and the idea of the new man. In an account of his life and work published by the magazine *Life*, he says:

> My humanism is socialist, which for me is the highest degree, for it is universal, of humanism; [...]. I believe [...] that the ultimate end of Marxism cannot be other than bring to the human race the instruments to achieve freedom and dignity, which are consubstantial to him; this involves an optimistic view of history [...]. I believe that socialism [...] will turn man into his own self. (Cortázar 1969, 46; my translation)

In *62: A Model Kit*, there is a character that I have not yet mentioned who represents the emergence of a new socialist humanism for Cortázar. This is the mysterious figure "my paredros" – a term introduced by Calac. "My paredros" becomes a kind of semi-character, a friend or "compadre." In Athens, the *paredros* was the person who took on the role of adviser in a political institution. Both understandings seem relevant to *62: A Model Kit*. Cortázar refers to them on numerous occasions, and Juan describes their function as follows:

> my paredros was a routine in the sense that among us there was always something we called my paredros, a term introduced by Calac and which we used without the slightest feeling of a joke because the quality of paredros alluded, as can be seen, to an associated entity, a kind of buddy or substitute or babysitter for the exceptional, and, by extension, a delegating of what was one's own to that momentary alien dignity without losing anything of ours underneath it all, just as any image of the places we had walked could be a delegation of the city, or the city could delegate something of its own. (Cortázar 2000, 20)

The paredros are thus non-existent referents. The theorist of postmodernity Brian McHale suggests that they might be what Roman Jakobson calls shifters: "those elements of language, especially pronouns and other deictics, which have no determinate meaning outside of a particular instance of discourse, their meaning changing (shifting) as the discourse passes from participant to participant" (McHale 1987, 212). McHale indicates that Calac's paredros, Juan's paredros, and anyone's paredros could be referred to depending on who is speaking at the time because the paredros "has no substance; it is merely an empty slot, filled differently each time

it occurs – a long shadow cast by a pronoun" (McHale 1987, 212). Nevertheless, McHale does not venture an analysis that links this substance to the emergence of the new man, which is what I read in the dissolution of a monolithic characterization. Francesco Varanini states that "in the centre there is always the character-man" – in reference to Cortázar – and continues: "but this is a man who knows he cannot control a scenario that is too complex and contradictory, and suffers for his inability to build a better world. He, then, tries to re-elaborate that impediment with parody" (Varanini 2000, 335; my translation). These liquid and changeable characters disclose a critical consciousness that brings together these two authors. They are writers whose literary experiments are inevitably influenced by the French experimental scene, but they are not tempted to follow the stylistic precepts of the latter. The experiments of Calvino and Cortázar reflect on outdated literature with playfulness, seriousness, and ambiguity; in fact, their projects involve rethinking writing strategies and experimentalisms by way of disentangling them from the programmatic avant-garde narratives rooted in originality and authenticity.

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