

**Art and the Artist  
in the Literary Works  
of Elsa Triolet**

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**Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**The University of Leeds,  
Department of French,  
July 1991.**

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

**Claire Davison: "Art and the Artist in the Literary Works of Elsa Triolet",  
Ph.D Leeds University, July 1991.**

This thesis takes a representative selection of Triolet's works to study the themes of writing and creativity as they are presented in the novels. These are all portraits of artists and the accounts of the search for a synthesis of aesthetic freedom and ethical responsibility. It considers Triolet's importance as a foreign writer, adopting a new creative language to be adopted by a different cultural environment, to be essential in understanding her importance to the French literary tradition. By emphasising her formative years in the avant-garde circles of pre-revolutionary Russia, my study demonstrates her considerable contribution to the meeting of Russian and French aesthetic theories. I extend this with close textual readings of certain works to demonstrate her techniques in novelistic construction which reveal many Formalist practices before Formalist works in translation made their official influence on creative methods.

The introduction considers the reasons for Triolet's neglect as a writer. It then considers various contemporary and recent critical appraisals which indicate the interest she has received until present and which allow me to define my own critical approach. Part One traces Triolet's literary evolution from her formative years in Russia, through exile to her first publications in Russian. It then considers her insertion into French literary activity, and her association with the schools of socialist realism and the "nouveau roman".

Part Two examines two traditional novels which portray the creative and metaphorical roles of the artist and his work, showing the constant conflict between private and public lives. In Part Three, I show how aspects of novelistic traditionalism are gradually foregrounded so that the work develops a dual-sided character where it both narrates and examines the processes of its own narration. In Part Four, this move to highly self-conscious aesthetics demonstrates an idiosyncratic exploration of new paths for the novel that bring visual, auditive and cinematographic media into the traditional domain of written art. Accompanying the very post-modernist experimentation, I show how this research within the novel into the novel's own future has an ethical and redemptive purpose whose final conclusion is that creativity and human freedom are inexorably interwoven.



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## Foreword

I gratefully acknowledge the help of the late Dr. Maxwell Adereth who gave me access from the beginning of my research to his correspondence with Elsa Triolet over seven years and transcripts of his conversations with Aragon.

All references to Triolet's texts are given immediately after the quotations. The volume references where appropriate are taken from the *Oeuvres Romanesques Croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Louis Aragon*, abbreviated to O.C. followed by volume and page number.

# Introduction

Un critique - c'est un lecteur absolu qui prend la plume.<sup>1</sup>

This study can be situated at the intersection between several lines of thought. Taking a representative selection of Triolet's writings, it considers them in terms of the theories of genre and their application to the works; the problems of reading and interpretation; the now conflicting now complementary notions of Modernism and engagement. It revolves throughout around the evolving question of fiction and reality. Whilst drawing on both Formalist and Structuralist thought and approach, together with the Socialist Realist models with which Triolet's works tend to be associated, the study also offers subjective and interpretative perspectives on Triolet's role and importance as a novelist and a theorist on the art of the novel.

The decision to examine her work from what may appear an excessively heterogeneous combination of critical approaches is itself strategic. Both contemporary and more recent critical analysis, the latter being strikingly deficient, have tended to be wedded to one or another school that has either appropriated Triolet's works as exemplary or scorned them as partisan, if not futile. Categorised by a mostly falsified, and certainly ill-informed reputation, Triolet has existed in general as the muse-like figure of "Elsa", or, even more metonymically, as "les yeux d'Elsa". The few significant points of her biography, and her large and immensely varied oeuvre are only just beginning to receive serious critical attention that disregards the mythical writer to research the texts.

I should perhaps mention at this point the literary areas in which Triolet was active, whilst emphasising that my study will concentrate on the literary

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1. Tsvetaeva, *Le poète et la critique*, p.26.



works. This main field offers four works written in Russian, as well as fifteen novels written in French and several collections of short stories and essays, including the Prix Goncourt collection, *Le Premier accroc coûte deux cents francs* (1944). She wrote two biographical studies, of Mayakovsky and Anton Chekhov; also translating the works of both writers into French. Her translations into French include works by Gogol, Tsvetaeva and Shklovsky; she translated Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* from French into her native language. Her principal translation work, perhaps, is the bilingual volume, *La Poésie russe*, which she also directed and edited. A weekly contributor to *Les Lettres françaises* and the Russian intelligentsia's weekly, *Literatournia Gazeta*, she wrote theatre reviews for nearly twenty years. Her theatrical leanings are complemented by an interest in cinematographic techniques and genres, which led to the film in collaboration with Konstantin Simonov, *Normandie, Niemen*.<sup>2</sup>

The present study aims to develop a serious examination of her novels as works of art originally situated between two cultural traditions, two critical audiences. This opens up immense possibilities for the art and nature of the novel, beyond the elusive, somewhat unsatisfactory concept of tradition and genre. Leaving aside what I would consider to be the mostly incidental questions of biography and personal reputation, I shall attempt to uncover and evaluate the novelistic world of Triolet's works. To enlighten and dispel the myth of Triolet, it would however be useful to start by summarising the outline of her biography in at least geographical terms, identifying her origins as a fictional writer and the critical attentions, both falsifying and flattering, that her works have received. I shall then consider how she can be situated in terms of other contemporaneous artists to show both the direction and scope of the present study as well as indicating the new research perspectives her works may attract.

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2. Triolet's drafts for the film date from the late 1940's but work began seriously in collaboration with Simonov and Charles Spaak in 1958.



Born in St. Petersburg in 1896, Triolet studied to be an architect, living in an intellectual, artistic milieu that made her a life-long friend of Roman Jakobson, a school-girl friend of Mayakovsky as well as the loved and admired friend of Shklovsky. Her own peer-group, plus that of her sister Lili, married to Osip Brik, brought her into contact with the innovative and influential movements of the Futurists and the Formalists, as well as the literary school, the Serapion Brothers. Leaving Russia in 1917 with her husband, the Frenchman, André Triolet, she lived in Tahiti for three years. Having left her country before the founding of the Soviet Union, she was refused re-entry when her marriage failed, and so joined the increasingly significant community of Russian and other exiles in Berlin in the early 1920s. Several years of exile and drifting between Berlin, London and Paris came to a close in 1928, the year she met Aragon. She remained in contact with family in Russia and regained access to the country after Mayakovsky intervened on her behalf. She returned for meetings, conferences and for interpreting purposes, notably the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934 but from 1930 was officially resident in France.

The couple spent most of the war in hiding in the south of France, publishing and writing various articles and texts in Resistance journals, notably Triolet's own *Le Drome en armes*. A short-lived personal and literary success was followed by the devastating cold war which affected Triolet as both a communist's wife and as a Russian who never dissembled her nostalgia for her country. This nostalgia and sense of exile are of course particularly acute as they look back to a country and epoch long-since replaced.

The climate of the 1960s was more favourable to the socialist leanings of the Triolet-Aragon couple and her series *L'Age du nylon*, and the last novels were very favourably received by readers and critics alike. After her death in 1971, however, the initial respect and hommages paid to her, notably by the retrospective exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale and the memorial concert given on her



grave by Rostropovitch, soon gave way to indifference and forgetting.<sup>3</sup> Her works disappeared from print, her name, which had only ever been lightly graven on the French literary heritage, disappeared; only the love poems written by Aragon remained. Read now by a generation ignorant of the real couple celebrated by Matisse as "Elle et Lui, Elsa et Louis", "Elsa" has become synonymous with war-time patriotism and the motherland, mythicised and mystified to the extent that many baccalauréat students now are not even aware that "Elsa" was anything other than a symbol.

Let us establish, then, the combination of factors which have denied Triolet any real, critical attention until the present decade. She published her first novel in French, *Bonsoir, Thérèse* in 1938 although she had already written four works in Russian. She started writing with the encouragement of Gorky who had been moved by the letters Triolet had written to Viktor Shklovsky and which the latter published in his novel, *Zoo, or letters not about love*. Her first work, *Zemlyanitchka*, (1926), had been favourably received in the Soviet Union, but the ensuing volume *Camouflages* was scorned and rejected by every Russian editor in an era that was beginning to exhort mythical heroes and uplifting socialist messages. Thus blacklisted, Triolet was excluded indefinitely from publication in Russia. This refusal precipitated her remarkable creative transition from Russian to French, a linguistic achievement that can be traced in her notebooks in which Russian and French texts alternatively pick up the narrative and overlap before the first novel developed from these in 1938.<sup>4</sup> This work received notable critical appraisal which renders even more elusive the later dismissal of her literary worth.

Paul Nizan remarked:

Il n'a jamais paru tant de livres féminins, presque tous gâtés par cette faculté d'expression et d'effusion qui est l'un des pièges où tombent les femmes qui écrivent, comme les hommes tombent dans la sentence,

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3. See the *Catalogue de la Bibliothèque Nationale, Elsa Triolet, 1972*, organised and conceived with the direction and guidance of Aragon by Marcelle Beaudiquez and Alain Massuard.

4. See Marianne Delranc's study of the linguistic genesis of the novel in *Recherches Croisées Vol.1*, ps.209-250.



l'éloquence, la rhétorique enfin. On ne fera point ces griefs à *Bonsoir, Thérèse* de Madame Elsa Triolet: c'est un livre volontaire et serré, écrit avec un accent singulier de réticence et de secret, une sorte d'exactitude cruelle.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly Sartre responded with both passionate and proleptic insight:

Elle ne se soucie même pas d'être l'égale de l'homme: cette égalité-là, il y a beau temps qu'elle la possède, elle ne songe pas à l'affirmer, peut-être qu'elle l'a oubliée: elle est par-delà, elle est libre.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of this immediate critical recognition, reinforced by the Prix Goncourt in 1944 and other, disinterested but serious literary praise such as that offered by Edmonde Charles-Roux for example, who called her "un grand écrivain français"<sup>7</sup>, how can we explain why Triolet received what Apel-Muller has called a "non-recevoir de la part de la critique"?<sup>8</sup>

It might firstly be borne in mind that Triolet was Russian in an era marked by fervent hostility and misunderstanding between the Soviet Union and the West. The shared cultural heritage between Russia and France before the final halting of any exchange whether social, artistic or personal, should otherwise have consolidated Triolet's appeal. At the same time, she was not eligible for the privileged status of émigré in the sense that she was not a political or religious refugee, nor did she wish to stop loving and recalling her country. To the contrary, nostalgia and homesickness play an essential role in the text and sub-text of Triolet's novels. Placed by the "manigances" of history outside the 1917 revolution, she nevertheless shared with romantic intellectuals throughout Europe the initial fervour and trust in the people's revolution. Not only did she refuse the status of an émigré, but she was also refused by an important percentage of the émigré population in Paris. It has been suggested that this systematic refusal was on account of her Jewish origins, even if she cannot be at all associated with the practice or the upholders of this religion.<sup>9</sup> Not belonging to the Orthodox circles in

5. Nizan, "Bonsoir, Thérèse", (15.12.38). *Pour une nouvelle culture*, p.291.

6. Sartre, "E.Triolet - Bonsoir, Thérèse", *Europe* no. 194, p.282.

7. Charles-Roux, "L'étrangeté d'être étrangère", *Europe*, no.506, p.81.

8. Apel-Muller, "Un écrivain en devenir," *Faites entrer l'infini*, (publication de la société des amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet), p.4.

9. See Apel-Muller, "Un écrivain en devenir", *Faites entrer l'infini*, 5.3.1988, p.6.



exile, she was exiled by them. This exile was of course not total, for Paris had collected her artistic and cultural exiles alongside the political and religious ones, and Berberova suggests that by the 1930s, Triolet's home had indeed become a meeting point for certain Russian visitors and exiles.<sup>10</sup> Triolet's particular exile is important in that it denied her the group identity and group promotion that for many exiles replaced the identity lost and irrecoverable in the old Russia.

If the French literary establishment has always been chauvinistic, it is all the more so for a foreign woman, a fact that marginalised Triolet's writings even more. This is exacerbated by the fact that, as Aragon's wife, her works were overshadowed by his literary reputation and production. His eulogies and adoration estranged her from her own public image, reducing her to a model of beauty, feminine charm and masculine objectification. Triolet herself claimed that this excessively visual portrait of a woman, stressing her physical beauty, alienated her particularly from women, as her letter to Maxwell Adereth demonstrates:

J'ai oublié la malfaisance des femmes. Une haine collective: "qu'a-t-elle de plus que nous?"<sup>11</sup>

The reception of Elsa-as-muse was as much the creation of the public as of Aragon, as indeed the latter was anxious to point out, claiming his intention to celebrate the very real, intellectual and spiritual qualities of his wife and not just her mythical beauty. Nevertheless, the image was rapidly canonised. Nor should we excuse Aragon entirely, for he certainly did little *initially* to help his wife's literary career and her assertion of a creative subjectivity. Thus, we can read Triolet's accusation in a particularly lonely diary entry:

Tu aurais pu m'aider en prenant parti, en me disant écris! Mais tu ne voulais pas le dire, tu ne savais rien de ce que j'écrivais, tu ne connaissais pas le russe, et tu craignais le pire.(...) Et quand j'ai recommencé à écrire, c'était contre toi, avec rage et désespoir parce que tu ne me faisais pas confiance.<sup>12</sup>

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10. See Berberova, *The Italics are mine*, p.583.

11. Letter to Adereth, (undated), "lundi", between 28.5.69 and 9.9.69.

12. Quoted in Preface, O.C. vol.1, p.30-1.



Perhaps a greater personal and professional reproach can be heard in the letter from which Aragon quotes in the passage after Blanche has left her husband in *Blanche, ou l'oubli*. Initially maintained by Aragon specialists to be a fictional insert within the novel, the letter from Triolet to her husband was discovered by the director of the Aragon-Triolet Research Foundation in 1988. The director, Michel Apel-Muller, made his discovery known at the inaugural meeting of the British section of the "Fondation de recherches, Triolet - Aragon", in Glasgow, 20th May 1989:

Mais quand je relis tes grands caractères bleus, ces jambages de malheur, je suis pris d'une telle honte, ivre d'un tel désespoir... Je voulais faire une chose affreuse. Ce que je mérite. Recopier ici cette lettre dont je parle. Et puis je l'ai relue, je n'ai pas pu.(...)

Seulement, j'aimerais que tu saches que pour toute ma maladresse, mon égoïsme, mon inattention, mes colères, mes humeurs, mes grossièretés, cette façon de considérer ce que je fais comme le plus important(...)

j'aimerais que tu saches que j'ai payé chaque jour, chaque nuit, que je paye encore.(...)

Dans ta lettre tu me disais, - et je crois que c'est tout ce que je pourrais ici en reproduire sans mourir de honte, comme un échantillon., tu me disais: *Ce que je veux? Rien. Le dire. Que tu t'en rendes compte. Mais j'en ai déjà essayé, je sais que c'est impossible...*, tu vois, deux lignes, pas même, mais déjà cela j'étouffe d'horreur de moi.<sup>13</sup>

If I bring attention here to this contradictory image of Aragon and Triolet's confrontation over the question of her emotional and professional lives, it is also to underline the strategic differences between the position adopted in my present study and those critics who associate so strongly the two writers together that they refuse the idea of a serious study of Triolet alone.<sup>14</sup> This is perhaps the criticism that can be in part directed at the "Groupe de recherches" who will receive greater attention later, but where the principal interest in Triolet's works is as a new perspective on Aragon's work. It is also perhaps inevitably handicapped by the personal friendship many of the associates had for the Triolet - Aragon couple, which inclines them more towards biographical research and interest than it does to

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13. Aragon, *Blanche ou l'oubli*, O.C. vol.38, pp.166-7

14. We may note, rather predictably, that they do not display the same hesitation before treating Aragon individually.



pure literary investigations.<sup>15</sup> Despite the serious attention she is receiving, researchers still tend to dwell romantically on the interwoven couple, or consider Triolet as the important figure behind the greater Aragon. The tactical side to the decision made by the "Groupe de recherches" to promote Aragon exclusively at present, assuming that interest in Triolet will follow automatically, may be explained in terms of financing and capturing serious public attention now. There remains the threat that they will thus confirm Triolet's secondary, reinforcing role as the wife, the muse, who also wrote.

The significance of Triolet as a woman writer could have discriminated positively in her favour in the recent re-evaluation of lost and unappreciated women's writing. As Suzanne Ravis wrote:

On voudrait vérifier et comprendre l'absence paradoxale de référence à Elsa Triolet dans le mouvement d'intérêt porté à l'écriture féminine.<sup>16</sup>

We may wonder whether the "myth of Elsa" has influenced feminist critics against Triolet, so that they too have been more convinced by the mythical beauty and muse than by a real and independent woman beneath. This can be seen even in the case of a positive criticism which refers repeatedly to the modern, ideal woman, in a new myth presented as preferable to the traditional one:

Lilith...an expressive force that could carry Adam far from his prosaic world and inspire him to move toward the Ideal. She was the source of his inspiration.<sup>17</sup>

If this were the case, we could suppose that Triolet has been rejected precisely as a woman existing as a male objectification, taking pride in her external, physical appropriation; that is to suggest that feminist critics have been duped by a male myth. It must be borne in mind that Triolet's writings are also unsympathetic to the consolidation of a female-identified author. Even when she

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15. The first major translations and publications (intended for the publication between June and December 1991) will be the letters between Triolet and Lily Brik; and between Triolet and Shklovsky. The latter, which promise literary as well as personal interest, are unavailable for consultation while the translation work is in process.

16. Suzanne Ravis, "Perspectives de la recherche sur Aragon et Elsa Triolet," *La Pensée*, no.260, p.97.

17. Pflaum-Vallin, "Elsa Triolet and Aragon - Back to Lilith", *Yale French Studies*, no.27, p.88.



refers to her own role as writer, she refers to herself as "l'écrivain" and "il", a characteristic both unmotivating and displeasing for a feminist critic wishing to reassert the value of a woman's writing.

Unfortunately, when Triolet has been considered as a woman writer, it is within the same facile, female stereotypes that have always plagued the criticism of women authors. For example, Jacques Madaule, whilst introducing his study of her as one that should put an end to the misunderstanding and critical refusal surrounding Triolet, asserts that "pas une ligne d'elle qui aurait pu être écrite par un homme".<sup>18</sup> Such words, even if not misintended, tend to link her works with the typically *feminine* writing categorised by Nizan above, rather than with novels worthy of serious attention. Madaule also commits the patronising mistake of underlining the "feminine" qualities of her literary works by drawing the comparison between a woman writer and a house-cleaner:

Elsa est une femme(...) Elle est, de ce fait, plus naturellement orientée vers la vie privée, les événements quotidiens et, si vous voulez, le détail, ce fastidieux détail qui sans cesse recommence et avec quoi l'on n'en est jamais fini. Jamais une maison n'est balayée une fois pour toutes, et c'est de tout ainsi dans le ménage, comme on dit.<sup>19</sup>

Other critical appreciations tend to fall into the trap of condescension. The habit of calling her "Elsa" even when addressing mail or reviews to her in *Les Lettres françaises* tends to reinforce the superficial, light character behind the name. In a similar fashion, Stevie Smith became the jocular, light-hearted Stevie. Forenames, no matter how endearing or genuine, reduce the bearer's significance. "Elsa" compares as awkwardly with Camus, Gide or Butor, for example, as "Stevie" does with Eliot or Auden. Examples of this extremely friendly but hardly serious address can be found throughout the critical works:

On pourrait écrire une histoire de notre époque, des fluctuations, avec les romans d'Elsa.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Madaule, *Ce que dit Elsa*, p.9.

19. Madaule, "Elsa Triolet, témoin de son époque," *Europe*, no.454, p.9.

20. "Témoin de son époque," *Europe* p.18.



Louis Aragon croit sûrement que le plus précieux de lui-même s'en va avec Elsa: nous, nous savons que le plus précieux d'Elsa, il va continuer de l'assumer comme il l'a si splendidement fait.<sup>21</sup>

Even respect and admiration are expressed, perhaps inadvertently, in trivialising or condescending terms which remove Triolet from the centre of the male-orientated cultural discourse:

Ah comme elle eut souscrit, Elsa, aux récents Etats Généraux de la Culture, elle qui fut de toutes les batailles pour dire, à la façon du conte danois, que le roi était nu.<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting to recall Mayakovsky's criticism of informal address which is unavoidably unliterary even if of friendly intent:

Les vers des amis d'Essénine ne vont pas bien loin. Vous pouvez les distinguer des autres d'après la manière dont ils s'adressent à Essénine, familièrement, en l'appelant "Serioja". "Serioja" n'existe pas en tant que fait littéraire. Il existe le poète - Sergueï Essénine. C'est de lui que nous vous demandons de parler. L'introduction du mot familier "Serioja" détruit aussitôt la commande sociale et la méthode formelle.<sup>23</sup>

The current awakening of interest in Triolet's work is as yet doing little to readjust this damaging familiarity. In Messidor's re-publication of *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon* (1990), the cover bears the abridged title *ELSA choisie par Aragon*. The full title then appears on the inside title page.

Regrettably, recent feminist approaches to Triolet's work, such as Nancy Jane Breed's thesis, start by bearing witness to some of the original aspects of Triolet's novelistic architectonics, but come to disappointingly traditional conclusions to which we shall be returning in Part Four:

The implication (of the unusual structure of *Bonsoir, Thérèse*) for the female artist is that artistic form and artistic identity are one, and that traditional masculine forms are therefore unsuitable for a female voice.<sup>24</sup>

The other aspect of Triolet as a woman writer to be underlined is the inestimable damage caused by self-satisfied critics who seek to go no further than ridiculing women's literary expression:

21. Jean-Louis Barrault, "Elsa Triolet", *Europe*, no.506, p.67.

22. Apel-Muller, "Un Ecrivain en devenir", *Faites entrer l'Infini*, p.8, 5.3.88.

23. Mayakovsky, *Comment faire les vers*, in *Maiakovski, vers et proses*, p.352.

24. N.J.Breed, *Feminine Self-Consciousness, Masculine Referent*, Ph.D thesis, Princetown University, p.8.



We may ask why women novelists in general are less apt to be trail blazers than men.

(...)

Uneven though the novel is, especially in the description of men, it offers a psychological study of woman full of contradictions and thereby is true to life.<sup>25</sup>

The final barrier to evoke that has prevented Triolet from receiving consolidated, critical attention is political. Aragon's commitment to and participation in the French Communist Party is well-known and well-documented. The image of the two being so concentrated on Aragon's personality, it has always been presumed that Triolet shared his devotion fully. This image is consolidated by the fact that the most serious critical attention paid to Triolet has been in primarily political reviews, *Les Lettres Françaises* and *La Nouvelle critique* for example. In this way, criticism is either orientated towards celebrating the essentially political aspects of her texts, or mentioning them as depositories for unquestionable Socialist truths. At the same time, serious criticism tends to be overlooked precisely since it figures in journals with a mostly pre-selected and politically orientated public. For example, we can see the unfortunate bias of Jean Marcenac's praise:

...c'est une plaisanterie ou une calomnie d'imaginer, parce que l'historien Régis Lalande ne croit pas à la vérité historique, qu'Elsa Triolet remette en cause, par exemple, l'interprétation marxiste de l'histoire.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, we can either suspect of flattery, or overlook, the words of Chabrol:

Vous êtes un de nos plus grands romanciers vivants, des deux ou trois plus grands.<sup>27</sup>

This political misunderstanding can be avoided by recalling that Triolet never adhered to any political party whatsoever, and she certainly had no political role in the Communist Party, even if she shared acquaintances who were active members. Her texts are strikingly apolitical other than their background of historical actuality which is representative but not biased. Her concept of the political interweaving of

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25. Konrad Bieber, "Ups and Downs in Elsa Triolet's Prose", *Yale French Studies*, no.27, pp.83-84.

26. J.Marcenac, "Inventer ou mourir", *Les Cahiers du Communisme*, p.81.

27. J.P.Chabrol, "Le Monument d'Elsa", *Les Lettres françaises*, no. 678.



commitment and personal life can be found in the Preface to the *Oeuvres Croisées*. It is hardly a resoundingly politicised, or indeed original conceptualisation:

Je veux simplement dire que pour tout le monde au monde pour les absolument apolitiques, les événements extérieurs à leur vie personnelle et intime jouent un rôle. (vol.1, p.36)

(...)

L'être humain fait et subit son époque, l'être romancier comme les autres. (p.45)

The ambiguous association of Triolet and socialist realism, a school with which she identified herself thus reinforcing some critical prejudice, will be studied in the second chapter.

There is of course a field of sincere critical analysis which may be limited but which still indicates in passing the serious critical approaches to which my study will be drawing attention. The research-within-the-text into the reader and writer dialectic can perhaps be seen in embryonic form in Marcenac's review:

Je crois qu'avant tout, Elsa Triolet est un conteur. Tout ce qu'on dit et dira de son oeuvre devrait servir à exprimer ce long, infini plaisir de lecture, le lien intime et constant que cette sorte d'écrivain tisse avec le lecteur.<sup>28</sup>

By reducing her literary achievements to those of a "conteur", however, Marcenac totally overlooks the remarkable formal experimentation that can be traced certainly from Triolet's first work in French. Magny similarly refers to Triolet and her readers, here suggesting that Triolet is not quite in control of her prose. Had she associated Triolet with a modernist tradition, however, she would have illustrated and demonstrated the vast potential of literature when the writer is precisely only ever instrumental in the realisation of the work:

Il n'est pas sûr que Mme Elsa Triolet en sache tellement plus que le lecteur sur ses personnages, ni qu'elle soit en mesure de répondre aux indiscretes questions que le lecteur voudrait posées.<sup>29</sup>

Magny's comments must be seen in the context within which she set Triolet's works, not as serious and experimental, modernist works of fiction but as popular novels:

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28. Marcenac, "L'Art du conte", *Europe*, no.506, p.169.

29. Claude Edmonde Magny, *Littérature et Critique*, p.52.



*Mille Regrets, Le Cheval blanc*, se lisent avec le même entraînement qu'un bon Agatha Christie.<sup>30</sup>

This inability to read beyond the story-content of the novels is intriguing. It derives in part from the very accessible "stories" of certain novels, in part from their often straightforward and unsophisticated linguistic and lexical nature. The intentional accessibility of her texts should, however, be borne in mind:

J'écris en clair. Je reste dans l'immédiat déchiffrable, au premier degré. (..) Je veux dire que je suis méticuleuse, que j'aime l'envers et l'endroit de mon métier, que je fignole un roman comme l'artisan une cassette. L'artisan en soigne également ce qui se voit et ce qui ne se voit pas, aménage des tiroirs secrets...<sup>31</sup>

Narrative simplicity and accessibility point to an important comparison that can be made between Triolet's and Chekhov's literary works, as Mayakovsky's remarks about the latter may indicate:

La langue de Tchekhov est précise comme "bonjour", simple comme "donnez-moi un verre de thé".

La manière d'exprimer les pensées dans la comprimé d'un petit conte, rappelle déjà le cri pressé du futur: "Economie!"

Ces formes nouvelles de l'expression d'une pensée, ce point de vue juste sur les véritables problèmes de l'art donnent le droit de parler de Tchekhov comme d'un maître du verbe.<sup>32</sup>

This comparison will be greatly extended throughout this study. Camus first expressed the almost overlooked essence of Triolet's literature that risked being overshadowed by the easily-read diegeses:

Vous semblez toujours si à l'aise dans le concret et dans le quotidien (...) qu'on ne sent jamais la leçon, ou plutôt qu'on ne la sent qu'à la fin en comprenant qu'il faut relire.

Redressing this balance, this study is almost exclusively concerned with the second readings, defined by Riffaterre as those in which we put the signification aside to look at the significance.<sup>33</sup> Far beyond easily-read tales, a long literary interior monologue can be identified that interweaves novel writing with criticism, that makes of each novel a portrait of the artist which is precisely a journal

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30. Claude Edmonde Magny, p.50.

31. Triolet, *La Mise en mots*, pp. 69-70

32. Triolet, *L'Histoire d'Anton Tchekhov*, pp.164-5.

33. Riffaterre, "L'Illusion Référentielle", *Littérature et réalité*, pp. 96-100.



recording the writing of the novel. Claude Duchet's review of *L'Ame* anticipated this meeting within the novel of extra-novelistic themes and leitmotifs which are as essential to the novelistic structure and reception as are the main story lines:

Roman, conte philosophique, feuilleton de la vie quotidienne, chronique d'un entre-deux-mondes, méditation sur le présent et sur l'avenir.<sup>34</sup>

A far more penetrating insight is offered by Eichenbaum, significantly a Russian avant-garde Formalist, and as such particularly interested in freeing works from the restricting concept of "biophilism".<sup>35</sup> They foregrounded how the works were made rather than what they talked about, using secondary and forgotten works rather than canonised masterpieces:

Le roman chez Elsa Triolet associe dès *Bonsoir, Thérèse* et de façon très dense les modalités du discours à celle du récit. Le diégétique est loin d'être premier.<sup>36</sup>

Analysing Triolet's cultural heritage and formative years in Russia and her literary activity and contribution in France, this study aims to foreground the important meeting in her works not just of two literary traditions but of the innovations in genre, possibly unconsciously stimulated by this "bi-destin". This peculiar, acute sense of exclusion and involvement may explain why Jakobson in particular appreciated the eternal ambivalence in terms of character, verb and reception present in Triolet's work. Jean-Pierre Faye brought attention to Jakobson's admiration of Triolet's work and the important questions *La Mise en mots* foregrounds, in advance of linguistic research:

Il désignait (*La Mise en mots*) comme *the marvellous book* (...) "ce livre, envisageant la langue comme facteur majeur de vie et de création" à travers "la théorie de la mise en mots, donc toute la science du langage".(...)

"Bi-destin des bilingues" insiste encore le télégramme de celui qui a écrit tout son oeuvre en cinq langues - russe, tchèque, français, allemand, anglais.(...)

La rencontre qui rend parfaite la terminaison d'un cycle par quoi tout un pan du siècle du langage tient debout, va être - préfacés par Jakobson et

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34. Claude Duchet, "L'Ame", *La Pensée*, no.111, p.113.

35. This neologism was created in *Un écrivain malgré la critique*, Produigis's critical study of Gombrovicz, Gallimard, 1990.

36. Eichenbaum, *Théorie de la Littérature*, p.573.



traduits par Elsa - la parution prochaine en langue française des poèmes de Khlebnikov.

*Raclez un peu le langage et vous verrez l'espace et sa peau.*<sup>37</sup>

Little attention has yet been paid to Triolet's important function as a meeting point where French and Russian literatures interweave. We can identify passing tributes that point to Triolet's original creative and critical position:

L'apport d'Elsa Triolet à la communion des cultures est à proprement parler inestimable.<sup>38</sup>

Elsa Triolet aura été ici entre la France et la Russie le lien vivant.<sup>39</sup>

Il faudra dire un jour tout ce qu'Elsa, et, avec elle, par elle, Aragon ont fait pour donner à lire aux Français la poésie russe, la littérature russe. Quand cela sera compte, on sera stupéfié.<sup>40</sup>

I shall be returning frequently to the works of other, bilingual and generally exiled writers to consider their particular understanding of alterity and subjectivity; to recall their particular insertion into an adoptive literary tradition, for as Eichenbaum maintains:

Whenever an author strikes roots in a foreign soil, he does so not of his own volition but *by request*.<sup>41</sup>

The theme of the exiled artist and his/her relation to creativity and the social and political context provides the broad structure of this study. Rather like the Russian Matrushka dolls where the larger outer doll opens up to reveal a smaller, but identical doll inside who in turn contains another, my study of Triolet, bilingual bi-cultural artist studies the artists within her works. These protagonists consider during the novels' diegeses their own relation to their work. Moreover, the works themselves, independent of the artist's volition, can be seen to provide

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37. Jean Pierre Faye, "La Mise en lien", an important essay bearing witness to the personal role Triolet had in the meeting of structural linguistics and Russian Futurism in pre-revolutionary Russia. Faye here quotes from the telegram sent by Jakobson on hearing the news of Triolet's death. *Europe*, no.506, p.100.

38. Sergei Youkévitich, "Les Deux amours d'Elsa", *Europe*, no.506, p.15.

39. Léon Robel, "Elsa Triolet, la Russie et la France" in *Europe*, no.506, p.108. Robel, a lecturer at the University of Paris III, is currently supervising the translations of various letters and unpublished documents into French.

40. Léon Robel, telegram sent following Triolet's death in 1971. Published in *Les Lettres françaises*, no.1175.

41. Eichenbaum, *Lermontov*, (1924), quoted by Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, p.268.



commentaries on the fragile, interwoven union of art and actuality. In the third part of the work, this textual and meta-textual analysis is reinforced by the putting into question of the narrating personality. This section considers the very nature of conventional realism as it is explored within the texts. In Part Four, I shall indicate how all the principal novelistic traditions are exploded as the author tries to account for the authenticity and the falsity of the text. This exploding of convention is achieved in two clear ways: by foregrounding the widening separation between words and meaning; and by conflating other art forms and techniques in the search for new novelistic horizons. The comparison between the search for, and definition of the artist, and the Matrushka doll is also significant within Triolet's texts. We shall consider how this very Russian figure epitomises the structure of Triolet's texts, so that the immediate theme and form open up to reveal what the "nouveaux romanciers" have called *mises en abyme*. We may recall that in his earliest essays written in exile, Nabokov evokes these magical dolls during his attempts to quell his nostalgia:

Celui que je préférais entre tous était un jeu d'une douzaine de girondes, "babas", de bois, chacune étant légèrement plus petite que la suivante, et creuse à l'intérieur, si bien qu'elles pouvaient s'imbriquer l'une dans l'autre.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, to reinforce this peculiar "bi-destin" where Russia is present in leitmotifs without figuring significantly in the immediate text, I shall refer to this pattern of "histoires enchassées", to which Shklovsky brings our attention in his *Theory of Prose*, as the Matrushka technique. This also gives greater importance to the visual effects achieved in certain novels, and also to the symbolic roles I shall identify in the works of art within the texts. This is to say that often the object of the artist's attention within the text can be seen to represent in a condensed form the narrative structures of the surrounding work. Whilst this often overlooked textual depth refers back to Triolet's formalist links in pre-revolutionary Russia, we shall consider how this same formal experimentation associates her with many

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42. Nabokov, "Le Rire et les rêves"(1923), *La Vénitienne*, p.21.



features of French Modernism and Post-Modernism. To maintain this thematic and structural harmony, I shall refer principally to bilingual and exiled critics and theorists of the novel whose personal knowledge of linguistic and cultural exteriority has perhaps shaped their apprehension of the alternative reality classified as art.

If in Western European traditions, Modernism has been seen as a remarkably individual, post-romantic movement, Russian Modernism was launched with a strikingly social role so that aspects of engaged writing were indivisible from aspects of innovative experimentation. This comes together in Triolet's works to offer a firm Chekhovian-style morality derived from a constant faith in art, meeting in the assertion of a principled aesthetics that celebrates art as it looks ahead to a more human future. The comparison with Chekhov is asserted by Edmonde Charles-Roux:

S'il est un domaine où elle a excellé, c'est bien celui de l'impossible oubli, de la solitude étrangère. Pour moi, il n'est de musique répondant à la sienne que la musique tchékoviennne.<sup>43</sup>

Following Aragon's death, at which he bequeathed all his and Triolet's papers, manuscripts, personal letters and personal library to the "Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques", and the subsequent establishment of the "Groupe de recherches Elsa Triolet-Aragon", research perspectives have suddenly opened enormously even if the activities of the group are as yet in their embryonic stages.<sup>44</sup> Conferences, journals and associations of friends and researchers have all contributed to the diffusion of information and respect throughout Europe and the United States, as well as in the Soviet Union. If the recognition and renewed interest that Triolet's works have yet to witness are assured by this immense new

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43. Edmonde Charles-Roux, "L'étrangeté d'être étrangère", *Europe*, no.506, p.71.

44. A detailed account of the documents presently held by the C.N.R.S can be found in the special edition of *La Pensée*, no.260, with a foreword by Claude Simon. An initial account of research perspectives can be found in this edition in the essay "Perspectives de la recherche sur Aragon et Elsa Triolet" by Suzanne Ravis-Françon. The most recent evaluation of publications and research is in the publication by the "Groupe de recherche sur Aragon et E.Triolet" on the 1st July, 1989, *Rapport scientifique soumis pour évaluation à la commission 43 du comité national du C.N.R.S.*



perspective, then perhaps as the Director of the Triolet - Aragon Foundation, Michel Apel-Muller, anticipated in 1970, French literature may yet find itself surprisingly invigorated:

Tout cela qui relève de *La Mise en mots* indique assez la profondeur d'une oeuvre dont l'influence sur le roman français des trente dernières années est loin encore d'avoir été mesurée.<sup>45</sup>

It is certainly my hope that Triolet will gain recognition, not as the modern Bard of French literature but at least as a courageous, innovatory and extremely sensitive writer who, whilst never ceasing to watch and refuse the self-inflicted degradations of mid-century political and social actuality, always looked calmly and positively ahead to an era in which she may not participate but when mankind would at last come of age. It is this perspicacity and modest optimism, combined with a constant and unyielding faith in the redeeming virtues of art, that reinforces the comparison of Triolet with Chekhov. The comparison may yet go further, to the extent that the future Chekhov saw for his own works, quoted in a letter at the end of Triolet's study of the writer, may prove equally applicable to Triolet herself:

On me lira pendant sept ans ou sept ans et demi, ensuite on m'oubliera. Puis il se passera encore quelque temps et on recommencera à me lire, et, cette fois-ci, on me lira pendant longtemps.<sup>46</sup>

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45. Apel-Muller, "La présence d'Elsa", *La Nouvelle critique*, no.36 N.F, p.43.

46. *L'Histoire d'Anton Tchekov*, p.207.

# **Part One**

## **Cultural Climate and Critical Context**



# Chapter One

## Russia

Je aurais voulu  
vivre  
et mourir à Paris  
s'il n'eut pas existé  
cette terre -

*Moscou.*<sup>1</sup>

The vast modernist context in which we can situate Elsa Triolet's education and formative years is well-documented and immensely rich. From the point of view of science, it was an era coming to terms with the inestimable repercussions of relativity after Einstein's first thesis was published in 1905. Philosophically, the era explored the tenets and depths of knowledge which was no longer a priori but linked to perception, according to Husserl; where subjective logic was rooted in the powers of the mind, rather than according to the conventional logic of naturalistic time and space, according to Bergson. Social philosophy had been revolutionised by Darwinism and genetics; medicine and traditional sickness destroyed by Freud and the unconscious. The prominent note of Modernism is that of fragmentation; the human mind was suddenly confronted with an immense and incalculable freedom but also an individual sense of loss and chaos.

Repercussions of the "new era" were felt throughout the artistic world. For example, "fragments" made up the characters of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, conceived to portray the intellectual conceptualisation of a modern chaos:

L'âme de mes personnages est un conglomérat de civilisations passées et actuelles, de bout de livres et de journaux, des morceaux d'hommes, des

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1. Maiakovski, *L'Adieu*, 1925, in *Maiakovski, vers et proses*, p.269.



lambeaux de vêtements de dimanche devenus haillons, tout comme l'âme elle-même est un assemblage de pièces de toutes sortes.<sup>2</sup>

The mysticism of nineteenth-century Symbolism was regarded as an outworn vestige of religious faith; the revelation of the psychological, phenomenological and subjective aspects of reality rendered slavish the alternative to Symbolism, Naturalism. Photography and the moving image invigorated the plastic arts, bringing together the first mixed media art-forms. These captured by their very resistance to former classifications, the new modernist mentality. Overthrowing a previous monopoly of types, systems and absolutes, Modernism thrived on the interrelations at the heart of the new order of reality. This new order was based on flux, appearance, imagination and plurality:

les poètes (...)s'efforcent de se préparer à cet art nouveau, plus vaste que l'art simple des paroles où chefs d'orchestre d'une étendue inouïe, ils auront à leur disposition: le monde entier, ses rumeurs et ses apparences, la pensée et le langage humain, le chant, la danse, tous les arts et tous les artifices, plus de mirages encore que ceux que pouvaient faire surgir Morgane sur le Mont Gibel, pour composer le livre vu et entendu de l'avenir.<sup>3</sup>

An exhaustive study of the nature, origins and indeed the very limits of Modernism is of course utterly beyond the scope of a single work or thesis chapter. In this section, I shall attempt merely to situate Triolet in the context of her modernist tradition and consider to what extent the particular nature of Russian Modernism may explain the inclination of her critical thought, and *perhaps* certain of her novels, towards socialist realism. If her work does not entirely cohere with the typology of Russian Modernism, French socialist realism or French Modernism individually, I shall consider the particularly enriched identity deriving from what she classified in her meta-textual and self-analytical study, *La Mise en mots*, "un bi-destin. Ou un demi-destin. Un destin traduit".<sup>4</sup> If the character of Modernism is based on fragmentation, flux and its linguistic problematics, these specific qualities are particularly recurrent in a bilingual writer caught between the indecipherability

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2. Strindberg, "Préface de l'auteur à *Mademoiselle Julie*".

3. Apollinaire, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, included in Wijk, *Guillaume Apollinaire et l'esprit nouveau*, p.IV.

4. *La Mise en mots*, p.8.



of two language systems, between the subjectivity and alterity of two linguistic subjectivities that are at once enriched and undermined by their eternal duality.

### **Cubo-Futurism and Formalism.**

The direct associations between the theoretical innovations of the Russian Cubo-Futurists and the Formalists and their influence on Triolet's novelistic development are essential to my approach to her works. This interest may be considered uneasily in view of the earlier refusal of biophilism. Contextual interest, however, is focused entirely on the intertextuality that can be traced within the works. This intellectual contextualisation points to what H el ene Cixous describes as the "authors of the author". This has the additional attraction of applying an originally Formalist methodology to Formalist-influenced texts. The founding principle of Formalism was to render the author secondary, almost outside the literary work whilst foregrounding the character of literary language and strategies as their primary concern:

In my theoretical work, I have been concerned with the internal laws of literature. To use an industrial metaphor, I am not interested in the condition of the world cotton market or in the policies of the trusts, but solely in the count of the yarn and the weaving techniques.<sup>5</sup>

The principal features of Russian Modernism should be recalled. The creative artists sought to democratise art so that, by rescuing aesthetics from the symbolist ivory towers, art was brought to the streets:

Bringing art again into the daily lives of the masses by incorporating it into the daily design of everyday things.<sup>6</sup>

It was an art deliberately aiming to sever its links with the past and celebrate its novelty, even if it drew on tradition and establishment to formulate its creeds. In aesthetic practice, it drew very powerfully on the juxtaposition of word and image, a technique employed with great originality within a French literary context by Triolet. This aspect of Russian Futurism is outlined by Camilla Grey:

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5. Shklovsky, quoted by Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, p.119.

6. Naum Gabo, "The Concept of Russian Art", *World Review*, p.53.



The spiritual affinity between the members of the "World of Art" and the symbolist school was later realised in a physical inter-development of literature and painting which is one of the most outstanding characteristics of the cubo-futurist and subsequent schools of abstract painting which developed in Russia during the years 1910-1921.<sup>7</sup>

This inter-linking of visual and verbal media is also a significant link between the Futurists and the Formalists. The sense of unity binding traditionally separate art forms is particularly characteristic of Formalist practice. More than any other Modernist critics, the Formalists directed their studies towards the cinema, for example, as well as towards traditional types of fiction. Mayakovsky, Shklovsky, Eichenbaum and Tynyanov wrote cinema and film theories. Sergei Eisenstein was both an innovatory cinematographer and director, and was also implicated in Formalist exchange. His theory of visual montage draws on the same principle of "*ostraneniye*" or "defamiliarisation" which Shklovsky applied to literary structures. Christopher Pike has also pointed to the very visual terminology of Formalist lexicology - for example foregrounding, the shift, the laying bare of devices, the stair-case construction.<sup>8</sup> My textual examinations of Triolet's fictions will demonstrate the very clear application of the Formalists' techniques in her writings. This also points to a very neglected comparison between certain of Triolet's methods with those of the French "nouveaux romanciers" who are accepted as having been highly influenced by Todorov's translations of Formalist writings into French in 1965. As Part Three indicates, Triolet's *Bonsoir, Thérèse* written in the 1930's and published in 1938 offers a striking similarity with later works by Sarraute or Duras. The question of French avant-garde literary experimentalism will be considered at greater length later in Chapter Two. We should already recall, however, the essential influence and overlapping of Formalist thought on the later research of the French Structuralists. In the words of Erlich:

If one is justified in saying that Russian Formalism at its best was or tended to be Structuralism, it would be equally correct to argue that in many

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7. Camilla Grey, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922*, p.65.

8. See *The Futurists, The Formalists and the Marxist Critique*, ed. Christopher Pike, p.12.



crucial areas the Prague Linguistic Circle merely amplified the Formalist insights.<sup>9</sup>

In keeping with modernist investigations into the nature of modern reality, and in parallel with Cubist exploitations of pictorial space, the Formalists drew constant attention to what Jakobson called the *literaturnost'* or "literariness" of the written word. They examined and foregrounded the creative potential of the written word as a code. A specifically literary space was revealed by the perpetual change and ambiguity in a novelistic reality. The word was examined as both transitive and intransitive; mimetic and symbolic. Even the traditionally mimetic nature of recorded discourse was questioned by the analysis of the passage from oral to written language. As a result of this research, the sign became linked to value; reality became simultaneously referential and contextual. In the sempiternal debates between art and reality, the former came to be seen as a finer, ordered version of a generally chaotic and disordered reality. This had the dual effect of confirming the exceptional vision of the artist whilst investing his or her aesthetic existence with an ethical purpose - that of offering a clearer, enlightening means to go beyond verbal or intellectual lacunae. Hence the importance of form, making art a stylised, finer version of reality, and making the artistic process of becoming the most essential aspect of art:

L'art est un moyen d'éprouver le devenir de l'objet; ce qui est déjà devenu n'importe pas pour l'art.<sup>10</sup>

The Formalists and Cubo-Futurists invigorating research into the dynamic forms and frontiers of reality also launched their exploration of the changing classifications of genre and literariness. These themes were developed strategically to bring the notions of literary autonomy into line with the gradually utilitarian and scientific demands being made on literature by the late 1920s. The notion of "factography" or "literature of fact", maintained the changing concepts of what is, and is not, literary by juxtaposing diaries, memoirs, journalism and travelogues

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9. Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, p.200.

10. Shklovsky, *L'art comme procédé*, in Todorov (ed), *Théorie de la littérature*, p.83.



within essentially literary forms. This development had two striking characteristics. Firstly, it organised within written art a montage structure similar to the collages assembled by the Cubists. This had an idiosyncratic impact on the notions of artistic space and the interwoven dimensions of "art" and "reality" narrated in the very structures of the work. Such dynamic structures were labelled the "architectonics" of the work, for form was no longer a simple container of a tale, but a motivating force in the novelistic whole. The achievement of collage form in literary montage will be examined in Parts Three and Four. The second essential aspect was the combining of aesthetic creation and ethical participation without embracing directly partisan forms:

...liberating the writer from the much more confining demand that he interpret reality in the light of dialectical materialism. To fix the writer firmly on the ground of fact meant to free him from the obligation to produce ideologically tendentious "imaginative literature".<sup>11</sup>

The traditional consecutive and logical passage of time became an outmoded concept that was invigorated by temporal juxtaposition:

Destroying the traditional framework of temporal arrangements and (...) creating multiple stylistic and thematic planes.<sup>12</sup>

This was analysed in the theories of literary dynamism where the structure and reception of the work was related to temporal defamiliarisation. The digressions and amplifications of a basic tale were achieved by devices Tomachevsky identified as the *sjuzhet* and the *fabula*. The Formalists illustrated their theory with Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, where the *fabula* can be resumed in a brief sentence but the structural devices employed in the narration make the *szujhet* of a well-known richness and complexity. The Formalists quote Tolstoy himself defining the role of the critic to demonstrate the solid grounds of their research in an era that began to suspect them of bourgeois revisionism.<sup>13</sup> According to Tolstoy, the nature of

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11. E.J.Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution*, p.90.

12. Barooshian, *The Russian Cubo-Futurists*, p.34.

13. It is interesting to note that despite the politically revolutionary claims of the Soviet leaders, Lenin and Stalin were extremely suspicious of the avant-garde artists, whom they accused of bourgeois intellectualism, whilst expressing their respect and confidence in the traditional writers of the former Russian Empire.



criticism was an investigation into "the laws governing that labyrinth of linkages which is literary art".<sup>14</sup>

Concentrating on the form of artistic creation, and in keeping with Bergson's philosophical subversions of recognition and perception, the Formalists emphasised the duty of the artist to deform habitual images. A world usually cloaked in the veil of indifference and habit was offered in its startling actuality to the alerted audience:

In each art, then, the artist picks out of reality something which we, owing to a hardening of our perceptions, have been unable to see ourselves.<sup>15</sup>

Art is not a copy of nature; its task is to distort nature so that it is fixed in a different consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

This Formalist concept was expressed most concisely in Shklovsky's essay, "Art as Technique":

Et voilà que, pour rendre la sensation de la vie, pour sentir les objets, pour éprouver que la pierre est de pierre, il existe ce que l'on appelle art.<sup>17</sup>

If the Formalists were mostly critics and theoreticians of poetics, rather than writers of fiction, a group of writers worked alongside them who, whilst sharing many Cubo-Futurist and Formalist principles, founded a literary and creative union known as the Serapion Brothers. Like their theoretician counterparts, the Serapions welcomed the dynamic, revolutionary energies of the era whilst asserting the incompatibility of literature and propagandistic politicising. Jakobson stated this literary orientation, maintaining:

the autonomy of the aesthetic function rather than the separatism of art.<sup>18</sup>

The Serapions sought a romantic-modernist synthesis for the writer. Whilst asserting freedom of expression and choice of material, they sought stylistic and compositional experimentation. If they welcomed the 1917 revolution privately, they inveighed against demonstrating these sympathies in their fictions. The links

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14. In Shklovsky's essay, *Literature and Cinematography*, quoted by Erlich, p.241.

15. Bergson, quoted in T.E.Hulme, *Speculations*, p.156.

16. Maiakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniye*, I, p.279, quoted by Barooshian, p.43.

17. Shklovsky, *Théorie de la littérature*, p.83.

18. Quoted by Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, p.198.



with Elsa Triolet are various. On a personal level, she can be linked with Shklovsky, often considered a sort of father Serapion, Gorky and Vladimir Pozner<sup>19</sup>. The eponymous figure behind their movement was a Hermit, Serapion, a character from E.T.Hoffmann's series, *Tales of the Saint-Serapion Brothers* (1819-1820). Serapion believed in the reality of his poetic visions and lived to a strikingly old age laughing at those who tried to convince him of his delusions. The belief in an artistic vision that is at once a fiction and a truth beyond the artificial truths of constructed "reality" will be seen throughout this study as the very foundations of Triolet's fictional world. Her use of Hoffmann's tales can be seen directly in *L'Inspecteur des ruines*; similarly, Edgar Allan Poe's story *Kempelen's Chess-Player* (1836) provides the themes and structure of *L'Ame*; but the division between the real and the imaginary, between the habitual and the grotesque, is a recurrent narrative feature that she shares with Hoffmann, Poe and Gogol. As Madaule emphasised in his review of her works:

Ce sont là des bouleversements fantastiques. Ce n'est pas au hasard que je reprends l'adjectif dont Elsa s'est servie. Le fantastique ne naît pas ici de l'imagination mais de la réalité même et des éléments hétéroclites qu'elle juxtapose.(..)

Les choses les plus réelles ne semblent pas tout à fait vraies. On est tenté de faire des "collages" pour les authentifier.<sup>20</sup>

The independence of the writer, according to the Serapions, so that s/he may be both politically sensitive and creatively apolitical, is announced firmly in Lev Lunc's Serapion "manifesto":

We Brothers are almost all realists. But we know that other things are also possible. A work may reflect the epoch, but it may also not reflect it, and it becomes none the worse. (...)

For we demand only one thing: a work should be organic, real, should live its own life.

Its own life. Not be a copy of nature, but live on a par with nature.(...)

Whom are we with, Serapion Brothers?

We are with the Hermit Serapion. We believe that literary chimeras are a

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19. See Pozner's *Panorama de la littérature russe contemporaine*, pps 324-327.

20. Jacques Madaule, "Elsa Triolet, témoin de son époque", *Europe*, no.454, p.15-16.



special reality, and we will accept no utilitarianism. We do not write for propaganda. Art is real, like life itself.<sup>21</sup>

We may note here the striking parallel between this statement and Kundera's declaration of poetic allegiance: "I am attached to nothing but the depreciated legacy of Cervantes".<sup>22</sup> Apart from his personal acquaintance with the Triolet-Aragon couple, Kundera provides an interesting comparison with Triolet in terms of personal situation, invigorating novelistic techniques and literary ethics to which I shall be returning frequently.

Triolet's links with socialist realism will be treated in the next chapter. But we may already note that despite her own self-diagnosis as a socialist realist writer, and despite the political stance of certain of her non-fictional writings, such as *L'Ecrivain et le public* for example, her novels themselves are far more closely related ideologically to the tenets of the Serapions than they are to the adepts of committed literature. Coinciding with Bakhtin's methodology in his analysis of Dostoevsky, where he located the nature of the *writer* in his fictional writings, rather than in his self-analytical non-fictional work, *The Diary of a Writer*, Triolet's *novels* offer a far clearer indication of her literary practices than do her self-conscious studies in writing.<sup>23</sup> Triolet herself can be seen to subscribe to this perspective:

*Je suis poète. C'est ce qui fait mon intérêt...ainsi commence l'autobiographie de Vladimir Maïakovski; répétant après lui: Je suis romancier. C'est ce qui fait mon intérêt. (vol.32, p.265)*

The phantasmagorical and mythical elements that haunt Triolet's texts, as they do much of the Serapions' writings and modernist literature in general, have both ethical and aesthetic functions. Mythical figures, offering a sense of collective memory and external reference, inhabit the very frontiers of the real and the imaginary, the fictional and the historical, narrating the original character of the

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21. "The Serapion Brothers talking about themselves", (Serapionovy brat'ja o sebe), *Literaturniye zapiski*, no.3, ps 30-31.

22. *The Art of the Novel*, p.20.

23. See Bakhtin, *L'Esthétique de la création verbale*, p.322. Todorov subscribes to Bakhtin's method in his *Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism*; similarly, Kundera repeats it in *The Art of the Novel*.



poetic world and the poetic space. In a reality that is fragmented and multidimensional, traditionally fictional concepts are reasserted as the very incarnations of a reality in which all knowledge and fact is an invention. Myth also has the ethical function of bringing order and structure to the dissipated remnants of previous truths. T.S.Eliot showed how Joyce's treatment of myth was:

a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the paradox of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.<sup>24</sup>

Myths point to a new era of union between poetic imagination and scientific investigation, such as Apollinaire foresaw in his "Esprit Nouveau", and Khlebnikov's works demonstrate in their fusing of a nostalgic yearning for a mythical past of harmony and a scientific quest that should redeem mankind:

We are a new kind of people rays who have come to illuminate the world.  
We are invincible.<sup>25</sup>

Je dirai plus, les fables pour la plupart s'étant réalisées, c'est au poète d'en imaginer de nouvelles que les inventeurs puissent à leur tour réaliser.  
L'esprit nouveau exige qu'on se donne de ces tâches prophétiques.<sup>26</sup>

The vision of unity in poetic and scientific purpose is significant to my study:

Il me semble qu'un bon critère pour juger de la qualité d'un roman serait, en fin de compte, que l'on y décèle, étroitement mêlées, la précision du poète et l'intuition de l'homme de science.<sup>27</sup>

In an effort to celebrate the importance and foresight of the artist, s/he is heralded alongside the scientist in the pursuit of the future. This reinforces science with the imaginative powers and morality of art, whilst recalling the essential role the artist should be playing. This notion is illustrated throughout Triolet's novels, most particularly in the *Age de Nylon* series which re-works myths of automatons and flight, and can be read as a theory of art itself. The nature of art, its relation and importance to actuality and history, and its future in the emerging world of cybernetics and spatial conquest form the structure, themes and motifs of the

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24. Quoted by James MacFarlane in *Modernism*, p.83.

25. Khlebnikov, quoted by Barooshian, p.21.

26. Apollinaire, *L'Esprit nouveau*, p.XIV.

27. Nabokov, *Littératures I*, p.44.



trilogy. They assert the need to maintain the vision and morality of the artistic vision within the scientific proposals for the future.

### The Model of Mayakovsky

The figure of Mayakovsky, "one of the most-quoted and least understood writers in the world"<sup>28</sup> can be said to be present in almost all of Triolet's texts. As a friend, Futurist and upholder of the 1917 revolution, Mayakovsky was closely associated with Triolet, remaining one of her closest links with the Soviet Union and spending a great deal of time in Triolet's home during his visits to Paris. His love and affection for her are heard not just in the indications he gave about "how verses are made" but in his charming reflexion "je ne parle que le triolet".<sup>29</sup> The repercussions of Mayakovsky's personal, symbolic and mythical roles are vast. As a firm upholder of the October Revolution, he was convinced that the new epoch was a poetical as well as political inauguration and dedicated his art fervently to the propaganda and advertising slogans that would speak to the people and thus educate them into the new era:

The revolution of content - socialism-anarchism - is unthinkable without the revolution of form - futurism (...) One thing is clear to us - the first page in the new history of the arts was turned by us.<sup>30</sup>

Triolet clearly reworks the violent collision of personal and political destinies which destroyed Mayakovsky. The path followed by an exceptionally large number of her protagonists takes them from personal talent through a desire to apply their works to political or historical purposes. They are brought to a confrontation of their personal and political lives, where a Hegelian synthesis of such a dialectic is proved impossible by the particular situation facing the protagonist.<sup>31</sup> The characters express this failure through suicide or vagabondage,

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28. *Modernism*, p.272.

29. See Triolet's *Souvenirs sur Maiakovski* included in *Maiakovski, vers et proses*. Also Preface to O.C. vol.1.

30. *Poets of Modern Russia*, p.172.

31. See, for example, *Camouflages*, *Mille Regrets*, *Alexis Slavsky*, *Personne ne m'aime*, *Le rendez-vous des étrangers*, *Le Monument*, *Le Grand jamais*. It should be noted that the Hegelian



in the latter case passing into the "dead souls" of modern literature who are excluded from politics and society and who live a sort of existential paralysis on the very frontier between being and non-being.

The paradigm of Mayakovsky is striking. The collision of artistic destiny and politics came in the 1920s when the increasingly trenchant demands of the Union of Proletarian Writers, R.A.P.P, forced him to revise his Modernist-Futurist origins. As the Soviet Writers' Union sank into interminable discussions about the nature of "proletarian" writings, both Futurists and Formalists strove to demonstrate the scientific and realistic aspects of their work. Christopher Pike underlines the poignant futility of these revisions:

The new "formo-sociological" Shklovsky allied himself with the concept of "factographic literature" espoused by Brik and Mayakovsky in their painful transition from LEF to NOVY LEF. But for every step of adaptation Shklovsky took, his increasingly aggressive Marxist critics required two more.<sup>32</sup>

The desire to please was sterile, as Roman Jakobson's seminal essay, "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets" so eloquently maintains:

...suddenly these songs are no longer part of the dynamic of history, but have been transformed into historico-literary facts. When singers have been killed and their song has been dragged into a museum and pinned to the wall of the past, the generation they represent is even more desolate, orphaned, and lost - impoverished in the most real sense of the word.<sup>33</sup>

The other personal devastation in Mayakovsky's tragedy was his relationship with Triolet's sister, Lili Brik, where:

Le canot de l'amour  
s'est brisé à la vie quotidienne.<sup>34</sup>

Even more than the conflicting forces of Modernist Futurism and committed socialism, or the conflicting paths of personal and political destinies, Mayakovsky's posthumous life preoccupies and invigorates Triolet's texts.

concept of dialectical synthesis was applied by Lenin to the theory of spontaneity being brought to consciousness in a communist society. Spontaneity and consciousness can be compared fully with the conflict of the personal and political preoccupying Triolet's texts.

32. *The Futurists, The Formalists and The Marxist Critique*, p.21.

33. Quoted in E.J.Brown, *Major Soviet Writers*, p.32.

34. Mayakovsky, "Fragments d'une lettre d'adieu", in *Maïakovski, vers et proses*, p.328.



Mayakovsky's example and Triolet's texts provide a powerful illustration of Tsvetaeva's statement:

Poètes, poètes, plus encore que la gloire de votre vivant, craignez les monuments posthumes et les anthologies.<sup>35</sup>

Following his death, Mayakovsky was exposed to a virulent and prolix debate concerning the nature of his suicide. In an era where suicide was tantamount to expressing counter-revolutionary sympathies, critics were anxious to point out the exclusively personal nature of Mayakovsky's act. Jakobson sardonically underlines the strategic departure from Marxist dogma:

It's very strange that on this occasion such terms as "accidental, personal" and so forth are used precisely by those who have always preached a strict social determinism.<sup>36</sup>

Excessive anti-communists identified in his suicide a purely political declaration of despair.

In view of the vast popular support that Mayakovsky had enjoyed, great pains were taken to invent a convincing, moving fable that inculpated nobody. Once his generation had faded into the background of political activity, the inactivity of exile, or worse, Mayakovsky was resurrected as the great people's poet, with his more challenging or provocative works conveniently overlooked so as not to weaken a figure launched as a new model-hero.

Ayant perdu la bataille contre sa poésie de son vivant, les détracteurs de Maïakovski ont inventé de l'annexer, fabriquant avec le grand pouvoir de la presse à gros tirage et toute l'édition entre les mains, un Maïakovski sur mesure. (vol.35, p.19)

Until greater attention began to be paid to the neglected love poems, personal reflections or epic poetry, Mayakovsky remained the mythical figure of yellow blouses and fervent propogandistic poetry.

Ce fondateur du futurisme russe, cet "épateur de bourgeois" (...) ce géant de génie qui a bouleversé la poésie russe de fond de comble(...) ce bagarreur forcené pour l'art de l'avant-garde, devient sous la plume de ses biographes

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35. Tsvetaeva, *Le poète et le temps*, p.12.

36. E.J.Brown, *Major Soviet Writers*, p.29.



et nombreux mémorialistes, un doux agneau, un sage élève de patronage, un victime de son entourage fait de bandits d'avant-garde. (vol.35, p.19)

In addition to the posthumous ravages of the poet by historians writing their histories, Mayakovsky's other essential representation in Triolet's works concerns his preoccupation with an art of the future, with the positive forces of science and with the energy of a principled artist having an almost messianic role to play in the redemption of mankind. From his earliest poetry, Mayakovsky was not reluctant to portray himself with Lermontov and Pushkin in his recurrent theme of the poet's persecution and death. In his *A Cloud in Trousers* (1913) and *About That* (1923), he portrays himself as a second Christ, sacrificed in the name of the suffering people in the hope that his offering will help redeem the present in the future:

Mayakovsky's earliest and most characteristic image is the one in which he "goes out through the city leaving his soul on the spears of houses, shred by shred." The hopelessness of his lonely struggle with the way things are became clearer to him at every turn. The brand of martyrdom is burned into him. There's no way to win an early victory. The poet is doomed "outcast of the present."<sup>37</sup>

Structural and thematic elements of Mayakovsky's work can be heard throughout Triolet's prose. The exiled poet, the death and posthumous re-evaluation of the poet, and the unquestionable value and hope that the poet's words offers to the future of humanity are reworked constantly. Even on a semantic level, the question of the poet's subjectivity, I, conflicting with the *we* of those making history and the "*we*" of the unhappy people for or against whom history is being made, is an essential theme that offers a wealth of intertextual voices between the two writers.

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37. E.J.Brown, *Major Soviet Writers*, p.23.



## Chapter Two

### France

One should appreciate, after all, the advantages of one's origin. Its worth lies in the power it gives one to detach oneself from the present moment.<sup>1</sup>

#### Questions of Socialist Realism.

The question of socialist realism and Triolet's literary practice is particularly tendentious. Socialist realism was the avant-garde school with which Triolet aligned herself if asked to define her own writings. For the various personal reasons defined earlier, socialist realism was also the French school that adopted Triolet; the political nature of the Triolet-Aragon couple meant her works were unquestioningly associated with socialist messages. Moreover, there is the vital difference between the origins of socialist art as formulated in the early Soviet Union and the stridently partisan edicts of High Stalinism. This also points to the important difference between Soviet socialist art, where the school was therefore state-sponsored and controlled, and French socialist realism which was always a more experimental, avant-garde school in a "pre" revolutionary country. As Adamov stated in the debate following the publication of Triolet's *Le Monument*:

Les questions posées par l'art dans ses rapports avec l'Etat ne peuvent être graves que dans un pays socialiste.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, there is the question of the quality and ethics of Soviet socialist realism in practice. If we can understand the appeal for certain French writers of

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1. Czeslaw Milosz, *Native Realm: A search for self-definition*, p.35.
  2. Adamov, *Entretien sur l'avant-garde en art et Le Monument d'Elsa Triolet*. Debate between Triolet, Adamov, Cornu, Daix, Guillevic, Pozner, Taslitzky and others held on the 29th March, 1958 and recorded by *La Nouvelle critique*, no.96, May, 1958. Extracts from the debate are included as the postface to O.C. vol.14.



the intellectual mission of socialist realism, it is more difficult to accept from a Russian who could read the generally bland tales of industrial effort and glorious youths on tractors.

On the other hand, Triolet's alignment with socialist realism was not only hesitant but also dependent on her own conceptualisation of the school.

En fait, cet angle de vue sur le monde n'impose ni un contenu ni une forme ni des moyens particuliers...il ne s'impose que lui-même, laissant à l'artiste toute liberté de créer, pourvu que son oeuvre adopte et propage cet angle de vue. Du moins est-ce ainsi que je comprends le réalisme socialiste.(vol.14, p.196)

It is most remarkable that Triolet's definition of her conception of socialist realism included in the opening speech to the debate on the 29th March 1958 bears more persistently on the link between socialist realism and the avant-garde in France. Consequently, she aligns her approach with the avant-garde perspectives of Futurism, Le Corbusier, Apollinaire, Maiakovsky and the "nouveaux romanciers" Robbe-Grillet and Butor. The appeal particularly of the latter's work will be considered later in this chapter:

Ce qu'il y a de nouveau dans cet intérêt particulier pour l'objet, tel qu'il se présente chez Butor, c'est que cette nouveauté ne porte ni sur la forme ni sur le contenu, mais sur les moyens d'obtenir un reflet de la réalité: le moyen inédit, qui est d'atteindre l'humain à travers le monde inanimé qui l'entoure.(p.196)

Moreover, the "angle de vue" is only ever present in her theorising. Only two novels could be suggested as cohering to certain features of the socialist realist genre - *Le Monument* and *Le Rendez-Vous des étrangers*. Part Two demonstrates that *Le Monument* can also be read as a trial of the genre, in which the conflict of art and political allegiance leads to the defeat of the artist and not his integration within the structures of the revolutionary society. Both *Le Rendez-Vous des étrangers* and *Le Monument*, demonstrate the despair and isolation of individuals too resonantly for the novels to aspire to the positive aspirations of socialist heroes:



Lost illusions, broken hopes, unfulfilled dreams, so characteristic of literature of other eras and systems, are contrary to socialist realism.<sup>3</sup>

Let us consider the character of Soviet socialist realism, its application in France, and Triolet's definition of the genre. The original revolutionary socialism of the Futurists and Formalists was rapidly questioned by politicians and "proletarian" writers. Lenin and Trotsky were suspicious and sceptical of the avant-garde schools, and launched prescriptives of the necessary "angle" of literature, condemning the artists. This is the origin of the irony whereby revolutionary artists in the Soviet Union were condemned for a counter-revolutionary ideology while their counterparts in the West were always categorised as anti-establishment theorists. The Soviet distrust of modernist democratic literature has been consolidated by Lukacs:

Curiosity, a delight in novelty for novelty's sake, a romantic anti-capitalism may lead an extreme modernist to accept socialism. He may even believe his "revolution of forms" is identical with socialist revolution, even its true expression. (...) During the early years of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia such beliefs were rampant. The more level-headed communist theoreticians, Lenin in the lead, saw through these futile and anti-socialist ventures.<sup>4</sup>

The liberalising intentions of the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934 were summarised by the optimistic declaration by Vladimir Kirpotin:

La création artistique est compliquée et variée. On ne peut transformer le mot d'ordre du réalisme socialiste en recette schématique.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the rigorous school of proletarian writing and socialist realism grew up quite differently in the late twenties and thirties. The school was stridently reasserted in the high-Stalinist era after the Second World War. It asserted the principles of ideology and party-mindedness as well as an obvious inclination towards the people. It had to follow the classical Leninist path where spontaneity, representative of boorish, individualistic traits from the disinherited past should be brought to consciousness, a social harmony that is the final goal of Marxist

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3. Tertz, *On Socialist Realism*, p.168.

4. Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p.105

5. Quoted in J.Flower, *Literature and the Left in France*, p.99.



dialectics. According to Katerina Clark, conforming to this "master-plot" was a greater requisite than the traditional respect of people, party and ideology.<sup>6</sup> If the mandate on writers was "realism", it was a manipulated, progressive realism rather than the recording of external actuality. This stipulation was indeed at the origin of what has since been diagnosed as the irresolvably hybrid character of Soviet socialist realism. As Tertz wrote in his *samizdat* text, smuggled from the Soviet Union and published noticeably with the help and intervention of the Triolet - Aragon couple:

The demand "to represent life truthfully in its revolutionary development" is really nothing but a summons to view truth in the light of the ideal.(...) socialist realism should really be called socialist classicism.<sup>7</sup>

The trenchant demands for literary conformity resulted in texts that could speak of little other than collective farms or positive heroes, as classics and secondary works from the era illustrate.<sup>8</sup>

There is little dispute over the consequences for literature and creative potential in the era of strict socialist realism. The application of a single, political message is surely anathema to the very nature of art, which depends precisely on ambiguity, interpretation and play. In Kundera's terms:

Totalitarian truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accomodate what I would call "the spirit of the novel".<sup>9</sup>

As Pike confirms:

This monolithism was to result in the banishing of any aesthetic that conflicted with the ground rules laid down once and for all: one could even say, in the last analysis, that it contrived to freeze all literary and artistic life, almost totally stifling critical and creative activity.<sup>10</sup>

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6. Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p.6.

7. Tertz, *On Socialist Realism*, p.200-201. This text was first published in France in 1959 under the name of this unknown author who was later revealed to be Andrei Sinyavsky. In the consequent debates about and threats to Sinyavsky, Aragon and Triolet spoke out actively in his defence.

8. See Gladkov, *Cement*; Kollontsai, *The Loves of Worker Bees*; Babaevsky, *Cavalier of the Gold Star* (Stalin prize for literature, 1947).

9. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.14.

10. Pike, *The Futurists, the Formalists and the Marxist Critique*, p.254.



It must be borne in mind that this Soviet model differs from the literature of the Left in France. The theoreticians of socialist realism, particularly in the 1950s, certainly conceptualised an art form other than that applied in the Soviet Union:

un pluralisme fécond de styles, des écoles (...) Le réalisme, c'est donc une attitude à l'égard de la réalité et non pas une méthode. La méthode dépend à chaque époque, du pouvoir de l'homme sur la nature... (...) Réduire l'oeuvre d'art à ses ingrédients idéologiques, c'est non seulement perdre de vue sa spécificité, mais aussi ne pas tenir compte de son autonomie relative et du développement inégal de la société et de l'art.<sup>11</sup>

The foremost texts from the French literary Left - Aragon's *Les Cloches de Bâle*, Nizan's *Antoine Bloyé*, for example - are also written by authors who are unmistakably artists experimenting in a new genre rather than applying what Skvorecky qualifies as "cautious, utilitarian games" and "winsome, tranquilising little plots."<sup>12</sup>

Triolet's socialist realism is even less rigorous than Garaudy's prescription:

Pour moi, le réalisme socialiste crée le devoir de ne point reculer devant une réalité qui trouble notre confort intellectuel. (vol.14, p.198)

It is more a concept of literature that embraces the construction of the future than the revelation of the present. Rather than establishing a norm of form or content, the work's reception is considered. Triolet's position recalls that of Picasso rather than that of a fellow traveller:

In art, intentions are not sufficient and, as we say in Spanish, love must be proved by the deeds and not by reasons. What one does is what counts and not what one had the intention of doing.<sup>13</sup>

Bref, lorsqu'il s'agit d'oeuvres d'art, il n'y a pas de règles, il n'y a que des cas d'espèce. Et si je suis aujourd'hui pour une méthode, celle du réalisme socialiste, je ne crois pas qu'elle suppose une forme ou un contenu précis. Elle ne suppose qu'un résultat.

(...)

Je dis bien, il n'y a que le résultat qui compte. A brève ou longue échéance.<sup>14</sup>

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11. Roger Garaudy, "Le Réalisme socialiste", *Cahiers du Communisme*, nos. 5-6, pp. 19 and 17.

12. Skvorecky, *The Engineer of Human Souls*, p.131.

13. Picasso, in Fry, *Cubism*, article 45,(1923).

14. Triolet, "A quoi servez-vous?", *La Nouvelle critique*, no.120, p.102.



In a more analytical essay written in the same year, Triolet alludes to Gorky's "revolutionary romanticism" as she defines her own vision of a literature committed to the future, rather than to an ideology. Her "romantisme lunaire" points to a closer association of her literary theories with the ideas of Apollinaire and the "esprit nouveau". Similarly, her classical themes, Hoffmannesque imagination and sense of the future are reminiscent of the pre-revolutionary Futurists rather than any Soviet socialist model, or the committed genre in France:

Une littérature est née où les faits de la vie réelle sont liés à l'imagination créatrice.

(..)

Le clair de lune ne s'est pas éteint parce que les hommes ont marché dessus. Il éclaire la vie réelle. A mon avis, le romantisme lunaire va naître.<sup>15</sup>

This concept of revealing new form in new realities, and of new realities being discovered in innovative form is comparable to Butor's literary research:

Des formes nouvelles révéleront dans la réalité des choses nouvelles  
(..)Inversement, à des réalités différentes correspondent des formes de récits différentes.<sup>16</sup>

The duty of the artist to make visible a world lost beneath habitual recognition recalls the defamiliarising devices of Shklovsky rather than a socialist realist technique:

L'art éduque, il suscite, il entraîne.(...) Il ne s'agit pas dans ma pensée d'un art de discussion. Il s'agit moins pour l'art d'enseigner que de donner à voir. Si, dans ma jeunesse, je n'avais pas lu Tolstoi ou Tchekhov, j'aurais été en contact uniquement avec la réalité immédiate, avec ce que je voyais dans la vie. Alors que par eux, j'ai accédé à ce qui m'était fermé.(...) Les grands écrivains vous font voir ce qui est invisible à l'oeil nu.<sup>17</sup>

Triolet was perhaps mistaken in allying herself, albeit hesitantly, to a school whose application in the Soviet Union was detrimental to the development of literary writings for over thirty years. Perhaps she pursued the easier path of a school embraced and, in theory, practised by Aragon. Outside the Soviet Union, the association of avant-garde experimentalism and committed realism must also

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15. "Un Romantisme lunaire", *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, pp.376 and 381.

16. Butor, *Essais sur le roman*, p.10.

17. Triolet, "A quoi servez-vous?", *La Nouvelle critique*, no.120, p.100



be considered, so that it had the inevitable appeal of the provocative. As Robin Skelton said of British fellow travellers in the 1930s:

The new-style laurel wreath is worn self-consciously and with a fashionable tilt to the left.<sup>18</sup>

There is the possibility too that, in purely personal terms, her allegiance bore in mind the safety of the family living in the Soviet Union. Rather than speculating on this, however, the textual analysis of her works offered here identifies only the narration of the impracticability of socialist methods, and not their apologia. In the words of Kundera:

Not only is the novelist nobody's spokesman, but I would go so far as to say that he is not only the spokesman for his own novels.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, let us recall that the very "points de départ" for socialist realism and the principled mission of Futurism was a desire to educate and democratise art, based on the ideal of a freer, more democratic future. Triolet's art remains one of principles, which, by refusing to submit to the stagnating and acquiescing tendencies of a society in the face of threat, maintained the visionary and moral hope of a better future. As Todorov has said:

Propagandistic literature or the *roman à thèse* by no means exhaust the possible relationships between works and values; they may even be said to represent only an aberrant form of such a relationship.<sup>20</sup>

Leaving aside, therefore, Triolet's self-diagnosis, her texts clearly demonstrate that, in the confrontation of politics and art, her protagonist may hesitate but will unquestioningly choose art.

Et si leur vie leur est rendu invivable, ils choisissent de ne plus vivre, plutôt que de faillir devant l'art tel qu'ils le conçoivent, en leur âme et conscience. (vol.5, p.21)

Only in the short story "Henri Castella" does an artist altogether renounce his creativity for the bland alternative of security. His choice is portrayed uncompromisingly.

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18. Introduction to *Poetry of the Thirties*, p.30.

19. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.158.

20. Todorov, *A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism*, p.164.



L'art se venge et lui échappe. Lache dans l'art, il est lache dans la vie.  
(vol.5, p.19)

Otherwise, her texts narrate a similar recognition of incompatible artistic and political destinies that we find expressed by Shklovsky, Mayakovsky and Tsvetaeva:

I'm thinking that I should have probably let the revolution go past me in the same way. When you fall like a stone, you do not need to think; when you think, you do not need to fall. I confused two occupations.<sup>21</sup>

If I remained in the party, I would have become an outlaw. To be an outlaw meant I could not study. The alternative was writing leaflets all my life, uttering ideas from books which were correct but not expressed by me.<sup>22</sup>

Lorsqu'à treize ans j'ai demandé à un vieux révolutionnaire: - Peut-on être poète et être au Parti? sans hésiter, il m'a répondu: - Non.  
Moi aussi je répondrai: - Non.<sup>23</sup>

The recurrent confrontation of conscience and creativity demonstrates that Triolet, like these other Russian writers condemned to periods of exile, misunderstanding and silence, tried both personally and through her works and artist-protagonists to resolve the unforgiving conflict. It is the problematic expressed by Trigorin in *The Seagull*, which Triolet translated for the *Pléiade* edition of Chékhov's plays:

J'aime cette eau, ces arbres, ce ciel, je sens la nature, elle excite chez moi la passion, un désir irrésistible d'écrire. Mais je ne suis pas seulement un paysagiste, je suis aussi un citoyen, j'aime ma patrie, le peuple, je sens que, puisque je suis écrivain, c'est mon devoir de parler du peuple, de ses souffrances, de son avenir, de parler de la science, des droits de l'homme, etc.<sup>24</sup>

We can question the ethics and honesty of Triolet's decision to ally herself with a movement which she only supported in accordance with her own, idealistic conceptualisation. But if we take her novels rather than her statements to trial, we can only see works that aspire constantly to a better and fairer future, and which,

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21. Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, p.133.

22. Mayakovsky, quoted in Barooshian, p.41.

23. Tsvetaeva, *L'Art à la lumière de la conscience*, p.73.

24. Trigorine in *La Mouette*, p.330. The divisions of the artist caught between lyrical impulses and political conscience is expressed very similarly in the foreword to *Alexis Slavsky ou la vie privée*



rather than offer a model of what "socialist realism" should be, put contemporary reality into question and challenge the reader's relation to his or her environment.

The situation again recalls Chekhov:

En exigeant de l'artiste d'être conscient par rap<sup>P</sup>ort à son travail, vous avez raison, mais vous confondez deux concepts: la solution d'une question et la façon de la poser. Pour l'artiste, il n'est indispensable que de la poser.<sup>25</sup>

Triolet similarly reminds the reader in her preface to the 1965 re-edition of *Le*

*Monument*:

Quant aux questions qui en forment le centre (de ce roman), elles existent toujours à l'état de questions, et j'ai l'étrange sentiment que le destin de ce roman ne s'est pas encore entièrement accompli.

### French Literary Modernisms

Aesthetic self-conscious, introversion and formal innovation are typical of modernist innovations in literature and are plentiful throughout French twentieth-century fictions. Sartre, in his famous review of Sarraute's *Portrait d'un inconnu*, (1947), revived the seventeenth-century concept of the *anti-roman* which provides perhaps the clearest definition of the characteristics we can classify as the avant-garde harbingers of the "nouveau roman". Sartre's earlier review of *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, however, in 1939, identifies characteristics in Triolet's prose which anticipate the interior monologue and stream of consciousness often linked with Nathalie Sarraute and Virginia Woolf, and associated primarily with the "nouveau roman":

On dirait le bavardage aimable et un peu halluciné d'une conscience qui s'endort, où les pensées naissent toutes seules, un bavardage tout proche, quelquefois, de l'écriture automatique.<sup>26</sup>

The genre Sartre defines as *anti-roman* is self-questioning, discarding the traditional features of character, environment and plot to meditate on the very coming-into-being of the work itself.

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25. Letter to Souvarine (literary critic and editor of the journal *Novoye Vremya*) quoted in *Histoire d'Anton Tchekhov*, p.71

26. Sartre, "E.Triolet- Bonsoir, Thérèse," *Europe*, no.194, p.282.



Ces oeuvres étranges et difficilement classables ne témoignent pas de la faiblesse du genre romanesque, elles marquent seulement que nous vivons à une époque de réflexion et que le roman est en train de réfléchir sur lui-même.<sup>27</sup>

Ricardou similarly illustrates the difference between the nineteenth-century, representative tradition and the innovative, modernist genre as follows:

Est traditionnel tout ce qui tend à faire du roman le récit d'une aventure; est moderne tout ce qui tend à faire du roman l'aventure du récit.<sup>28</sup>

An essential aspect of the modernist perspective in fictional writing is the constructive, ordering function of writing. Developing from a world that lacks objective essence or order, writing becomes an exemplary activity that brings sense and structure to chaos and meaningless<sup>ness</sup>. Asserting an autonomous and vital role for the writer who reveals and organises what will be presented as reality, self-conscious and modernist literature secures a functional and ethical purpose for the writer's fictions. In John Cruickshank's words:

In order to fulfil its task of creating order, of building a "world" about it, the human mind cannot hope to rely on knowledge alone, in the sense of verifiable facts. The imagination will also be required, perhaps to project more "facts" beyond those that are verifiable or simply to posit connections between them. Thus fictions are born.<sup>29</sup>

There is a clear intellectual overlapping of the committed writers wishing to reveal the unseen realities of their epochs in their fictions, and the "nouveaux romanciers" confirming the phenomenological aspect of fictional creation which is a parallel activity to constructing a present and future. For example, Butor's self-definition shows a clear rapprochement with the creative purpose verbalised by Triolet and Shklovsky quoted earlier:

Le romancier est celui qui vous rend capable de raconter votre propre vie et celle des autres. C'est grâce à lui qu'il devient possible de dire ce que l'on ne savait pas dire auparavant.<sup>30</sup>

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27. Sartre, review of *Portrait d'un inconnu*, quoted by Cruickshank in *French Literature and its Background*, 6, p.284.

28. *Actes du colloque de Strasbourg, 1971*, in *Le roman contemporain*, p.143.

29. *French Literature and its Background*, vol. 6, p.286.

30. Butor, "A quoi servez-vous?", *La Nouvelle critique*, no.120, p.13.



Nathalie Sarraute draws an explicit parallel between the principled aspect of fiction and the revealing and presentational nature of fictional discourse:

Je crois que toute oeuvre littéraire sincère est nécessairement engagée, mais que l'engagement ne peut s'y trouver que par surcroît.

(...)

son but véritable...c'est pour moi le dévoilement, la mise en jour d'une parcelle de réalité inconnue et la découverte d'une forme dans laquelle elle puisse être captée.<sup>31</sup>

In the French avant-garde tradition, the frontiers of the novel are presented as the very meeting between the real and the invented. Recognising the imagination as a key to the surrounding reality, the novel no longer weaves a huge and convincing fiction in which the reader is encouraged by the mass of representative and psychological detail to believe. To the contrary it foregrounds its fictions so that it may continue to tell lies, but should also be seen to be lying. This has the ethical purpose that Brecht sought by "alienation" on the stage, itself a technique that he developed from insights and understanding he inherited from Shklovsky. The juxtaposition of "real" and "representative" planes in Brecht's theatrical practice is conversely reminiscent of Cubism, or an anticipation of Aragon's "mentir-vrai":

The Dramaturg: There's no A-effect (alienation) when the actor adopts another's facial expression at the cost of effacing his own. What he should do is to show the two faces over-lapping.<sup>32</sup>

This exploitation of the truth and falsity of fictions is explored at great length by Aragon in his theory of the *mentir-vrai* where there are no concrete or abstract forms of lies, only more or less credible and obvious ones. Modernist "portraits of the artist" can be seen as extended examinations of the processes and implications of creativity, exploring within the novel's structures the ambiguous dividing line between fabrication and external referentiality. They offer the possibility for a modernist-symbolist synthesis for art, illustrating the dynamic interaction of work and epoch by the presence of the artist in the novel. The

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31. Sarraute, "A quoi servez-vous?", *La Nouvelle critique*, no.120, p.85.

32. Brecht, *The Messingkaupf Dialogues*, p.76.



metatextual examination of the text within the boundaries of the fictional work likewise illustrates the novelist's relation to the text.

The theme of the portrayed artist is a recurrent one in the Modernist novel, and one of the means by which the aesthetic self-consciousness of the species develops through the great classics of Modernism.(...) The modern artist, often an exile, takes on shape as a spirit, a voyager into the unknown arts, and an embodiment of the difficulties in the form which surrounds him, taking his place in the complex perspectives of the writing itself.<sup>33</sup>

The device is equally a prominent feature of the New American Novel, of which Nabakov is considered representative. He too is noticeably another bi-cultural, bilingual author taking root in a foreign culture yet inevitably weaving into his texts themes, preoccupations and particularly acute sensations of alterity that offer themselves fittingly to the modernist aesthetic.

The *tableau-objet* of the Cubists, best illustrated by Braque's *Pitcher and Violin* (1911) which depicts also the nail that would seem to be attaching the work to the wall, offers a visual equivalent to Triolet's collage technique in the novel. Collages and factographic works portray reality as a montage of externally referential elements that are juxtaposed to produce an innovatory presentation that refers as much to its own construction and artificiality as it does to its origins and structures. In theatrical terms, we may recall Pirandello's achievement on stage of the destruction of the fourth wall. In the words of the father in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*:

Producer: And where's the script?

Father: It's in us, sir. The play is in us: we are the play.<sup>34</sup>

The former credibility of the aesthetic illusion is exploded into myriad impressions that are both real and illusory, factual and fictional. As Triolet explains:

Une seule force - le néant et, pourtant, l'humanité vaincue d'avance, joue gagnant et ose créer *comme si*. Dans l'illusion, faisant semblant.

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33. "The Introverted Novel", in *Modernism*, p.404.

34. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p.80



Prestidigitateurs! à vous la parole, vous êtes dans le vrai. Jouons sur ce qui n'est pas, parions si vous voulez!<sup>35</sup>

In his study of self-conscious fictions and the plastic arts, Sypher defines the modern novel as follows:

research into the emergent nature of reality, which is constantly itself and multiple appearances, at once fact and fiction.<sup>36</sup>

Whilst asserting the novel as a key to an otherwise impenetrable, dense and chaotic reality, it is important for the principled writer to situate the value of fiction as a potential reality. If the artistic illusion is the only reality, if the human condition is portrayed as eternally meaningless apart from a few lies which distract us temporarily from abysmal futility, the outlook is too bleak and opaque to merit either construction or morality. Literature consequently becomes too narcissistic to claim any purpose other than the decorative. As Anna Balakian said:

What can be the utter and outer limits of the pessimism of the more distinguished writers of today? Silence or suicide, both literary dead-ends.<sup>37</sup>

Against this despair, Triolet's novelistic universe offers perspicacity and principles. According to Todorov, himself writing with a bilingual, bi-cultural approach to the literary text, the foreign writer perhaps finds in the very duality of his or her existence a key to the seeming aporia of the labyrinth of meaning and purpose:

A double belonging, an interiority and an exteriority: it can be experienced as a lack or a privilege (...) but in any event, it sensitises one to the problems of cultural alterity and the perception of this "other".<sup>38</sup>

Writing becomes a means of shaping and creating both literary and human potential, indeed it is the most vital creativity we possess:

L'écriture, la plus noble conquête de l'homme. Le roman, intermédiaire entre l'homme et la vie.<sup>39</sup>

In the modern refusal of the absolutism and purpose of history, the novel replaces the myths of history with a new understanding of humanity's path towards

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35. *La Mise en mots*, p.14.

36. Sypher, *From Rococco to Cubism in Art and Literature*, p.270.

37. Anna Balakian, *Yale French Studies*, vol.2, no.2, p.90.

38. Todorov, *A Personal view of Twentieth Century Criticism*, p.159.

39. *La Mise en mots*, p.102.



civilisation. It offers a *mentir-vrai* myth as an equivalent to the processes of historical recording. Triolet's attitude to her fictions' relation to the disinherited truths of history is comparable to that expressed by Kundera:

The path of the novel emerges as a parallel history of the modern era.<sup>40</sup>

Mon sentier est parallèle au chemin de l'histoire.<sup>41</sup>

Les romans les moins historiques sont, sans doute, les romans historiques, mensongers comme l'histoire.<sup>42</sup>

The relevance of the creative world in the understanding and revealing of history is a concept pursued to its logical conclusion by Aragon. In his committed period, his socialist realist approach defined the former strongholds of external reality and the real world, seen in his series *Les Communistes* and *Le Monde réel*. In his later fictions, however, marked particularly by *La Mise à mort* and *Le Mentir-vrai*, the reality of the created, "romanesque" world takes precedence to the extent that reality becomes an aspect of the novel. The titles of his later works demonstrate this clearly: *Le Roman inachevé* (a collection of poems and unclassified writings); *Henri Matisse, roman*; he even classified his *Les Incipits; ou je n'ai jamais appris à écrire* as a "roman".

From Triolet's first novel in French, *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, through the problematic "socialist realist" texts, to the self-conscious and largely structurally determined texts at the end of her career we shall see that the novels never cease to pose the essential questions of the novel in relation to the epoch. Fiction operates as a revelation of the externally referential world, the artist functions as both aesthetic isolate and essential, representative voice in a particular era. The movement of text, character and interior monologue point towards one end which is always in the future. The flux of modern reality and modern philosophy are bound together in a novelistic world which inseparably binds movement and the

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40. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.9.

41. *La Mise en mots*, p.27.

42. *La Mise en mots*, p.29.



construction of the future. Ethical and aesthetic purpose are combined to make writing the pursuit and achievement of freedom:

The modern novel is the freer novel, and its freedom is the freedom not only to be more poetic but also to be truer to the feel of life.<sup>43</sup>

Créer est aussi difficile que d'être libre.<sup>44</sup>

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43. *Modernism*, p.408.

44. *La Mise en mots*, p.18.



## **Part Two**

### **The Artist as Protagonist**



# Introduction

In the process of history, "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" dialectically change places, and, of course, do not remain unchanged as they do so. That which is extrinsic to literature today, is an extra-literary reality, can enter literature as an intrinsic, constructive factor tomorrow. And that which is literary today can turn out to be an extra-literary reality tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>

The study of "Art and the Artist" begins by analysing the artist in the novel. Here, he functions entirely as a fictional protagonist, in texts selected specifically as representative of Triolet's most traditionally *narrative*. They share a mostly absent, omniscient author, with a chronologically and thematically straightforward subject, and demonstrate a most traditional use of time, tense and place. Close readings of both *La Vie Privée, ou Alexis Slavsky* and *Le Monument* aim to show how the artist comes to terms with his historical environment and is brought from an escapism which is aesthetically sensitive but apolitical to meet his epoch with a clear understanding of how the artist should be both serving and leading it.<sup>2</sup> This movement from spontaneity to consciousness both compares to, and remains abstracted from, the tenets of socialist realism. The dialectical conflict developed from confrontation to synthesis within the thematic structure can be seen illustrated in the meeting of private and political destinies. This "prise de conscience" will be illustrated by the study of commissioned and committed art where a certain responsibility towards his era can be expected from the artist but where in return he must expect a certain freedom to create from his society.

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1. P.N.Medvedev and M.M.Bakhtin, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, p.154.
  2. "He" and "him" are not being used with the half-hearted excuse of gender-neutral language but because both the artist-protagonists in this section are male.



The meeting of artist and epoch leads to an analysis of the artist's work. I shall show how it stands as a metaphor for human will and potential against the totalitarian impulses threatening it from outside. It must be noted that both works were conceived and published during, and perhaps in spite of, particularly acute political circumstances: during the Resistance and following the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956. The works of art produced by both Slavsky and Lewka can be demonstrated to represent the results of assuming their dual roles of artist and citizen. The works themselves also stand as metaphors for a truth of which perhaps even their creators were not aware. It must be recalled that for Triolet the orthodox Formalist approach to art was untenable for she was unable to suppress the romantic notion that art could transcend the artist and express a truth and reality of which s/he was initially ignorant. Her approach can be likened to that taken by Bakhtin. Whilst firmly critical of the materialist aspects of Formalism, he adopted their tenet of dynamic form, or "architectonics" in his own neo-romantic understanding of "pure" Formalism. I shall discuss Triolet's conceptualisation of creativity and inspiration more closely in the following chapters. Its relevance here lies in her view of the premonitory or visionary character of art. From this perspective, both Lewka's monument and *Le Monument* are interrelated after the novel's publication. That is to say that the misunderstanding provoked by Lewka's sculpture *within* the novel anticipates the novel's publication in 1957. This perspective also puts into question the possibility of achieving a purely socialist realist work in view of the political realities and artistic consequences of Soviet literary theories.

Chapter Five considers the artist himself as a metaphor and shows how these works introduce thematic and textual preoccupations that are to be fundamental to Triolet's work. This will include a study of the art/reality dialectic that is examined by both the text and the metatext. This is exemplified particularly in Triolet's use of an almost imperceptible supernatural plane within her novelistic reality, and is extended by the presentation of an art which incarnates a reality



"more real than the real". The artist is presented as both a creative prophet and a social outsider. This duality is analysed in relation to Mayakovsky, so that each artist who moves from engagement to personal failure and, invariably, suicide can be seen to re-enact the tragedy of the poet's irresolvable political and personal conflict.<sup>3</sup> They make dominant Triolet's romantic vision of the artist as well as textually enacting her own sense of alienation that is not only socio-cultural and aesthetic but also linguistic. This chapter closes with an example of Triolet's conviction in the paradoxical eternity achieved by the work of art and its artist when the latter has engaged precisely in a historical era; so that the artist is both caught in time and committed to art as the means to personal, temporal and political redemption.

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3. See Triolet's *Maïakovski, vers et proses*. Her *Souvenirs*, included in this volume, were first published in 1938 but the edition was censored and destroyed by the Daladier government in the first months of the war.



## Chapter Three

### The Meeting of Artist and Epoch

The time was past when man had only the monster of his soul to grapple with, the peaceful time of Joyce and Proust. In the novels of Kafka, Hasek, Musil, Broch, the monster comes from outside and it is called History; it no longer has anything to do with trains the adventurers used to ride; it is impersonal, uncontrollable, incalculable, incomprehensible - and it is inescapable.<sup>1</sup>

The trivialities of private life and the paradoxes of history are inescapably conflated. This is the essential but painfully-learned truth which forms the leitmotif to Triolet's work: "il a fallu que je prenne le tramway ce jour-là" explains the anonymous narrator of *Bonsoir, Thérèse*. The short novel *Les Manigances* similarly considers the equivocal importance of banal details and external actuality. History is no longer a question of adventure, order and signification, but a brutal intrusive force that has more in common with the ancients' *ananké* and *fatum* than it does <sup>with</sup> the reassuring process of teleology in which more recent historians propelled us to believe. It achieves part of its brutality from the triviality it imposes upon human activities.

Political awareness is not immediately inherent in Triolet's heroes; rather political contingencies insidiously or brutally intrude upon their lives and force them into an interaction with their era. For this reason, both *La Vie Privée, ou Alexis Slavsky* and *Le Monument* can be seen as modern *bildungsroman* where the protagonists are shaken by extreme political actuality. The seemingly innocent events of their childhood, education and even genealogy are implicated in their present states of crisis and have to be re-examined on their paths to self-

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1. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.11.

understanding. In the case of Alexis Slavsky, for example, the presentation and tone of the opening paragraphs indicate why, as a result of his grandmother's origins:

C'était elle qui pouvait à l'heure qu'il était se trouver à l'origine des malheurs d'Alexis. (p.120)

Despite his being "Français de naissance, de coeur, de culture et de carte d'identité", his Jewish heritage commits him to a political position at the outbreak of the war:

Et Alexis était le vaincu. Les autres pouvaient essayer de changer leur fusil d'épaule, si jamais fusil il y avait, lui pas, la guerre avait été faite contre lui. (p.124)

It is important to note that the political defeat is textually linked to his creative life:

Il semblait être abandonné même par sa passion, il avait beau ch<sup>u</sup>sser les bottes de sept lieues, frotter la lampe d'Aladin, elles avaient perdu leur vertus magiques... Tout restait plat, ordinaire, et à la lumière crue du jour que rien ne colorait, il était obligé de voir les ruines. C'était la défaite. (p.123)

The narrative can indeed be read as the important sub-type of the *bildungsroman*, that of the *Kunstlerroman* which represents the development of the artist into a stage of maturity signalling the recognition of artistic destiny and the mastery of the artistic craft. This is accomplished in the texts studied here when the artist, seeking artistic inspiration and confronting political contingencies, finds the synthesis of the personal and political by engaging in the era.

Both Alexis and Lewka come to recognise the political struggles of their epochs, recognising that their art has an essential political voice within their eras, or at least that it cannot be hermetically separated from it. This "prise de conscience" is notably one that has been experienced first by the author of *Alexis Slavsky* as the foreword demonstrates:

J'ai envie de parler de la rose et du rossignol, d'une belle nuit...Mais la vie me tient par le poignet et je tombe, je tombe comme si j'avais une pierre au cou, jusqu'au fond de la réalité. (p.117)



But in the narrated conflict of private and political destinies, the *bildungs* pattern is not strong enough to protect them from the situations of unusual political gravity. As characters built upon the tragedy of Mayakovsky, they are destined to follow perhaps the most striking example of political and personal destinies colliding rather than coinciding:

Le canot de l'amour  
s'est brisé contre la vie courante.<sup>2</sup>

The poet is then exposed to the worst threat of all: that of posthumous re-evaluation and political manipulation.

### **From Isolation to Integration**

If "la politique, c'est le destin" is a key to the protagonists' path to self-understanding and political maturity, it is only so paradoxically. In Triolet's prose, there is an equally persistent sense that "as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods...". This is not because she is romantically inclined to see fate purely as some external and malevolent force but because a character's destiny is seen to be formed as much in spite of history, or during the "moments creux" which she situates outside of time and politics. And while history forces itself upon the artist-protagonist's world, it is never an all-pervasive force that entirely negates the strength of the individual. If the voluntarist/determinist dichotomy has always been problematical for classical Marxists, it is very much more so for Triolet and her creative world. In the traditionally disputed role of art as acquired craft, (according to the most materialist Formalists), "engineering of the soul" (Stalin's terms), or inspiration, she opts unashamedly for the latter. At the same time, however she recognises reality as being the essential starting point for art, echoing Matisse's statement that "La réalité, c'est le tremplin du rêve":

Une littérature est née où les faits de la vie réelle sont liés à l'imagination créatrice.<sup>3</sup>

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2. *Maïakovski, vers et proses*, p.70.

3. "Un Romantisme lunaire", *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, p.376.



For art to be aesthetically valuable in her opinion, it must also be conscious of the epoch which created it and which it will dialectically create and shape in its turn.

As Malraux remarked:

Si "les artistes sont les ingénieurs des âmes" n'oubliez pas que la plus haute fonction d'un ingénieur, c'est d'inventer. L'art n'est pas une soumission, c'est une conquête.<sup>4</sup>

The thematic move from aesthetic isolate to commitment is textually woven into the narrative providing a powerful account of individual self-assessment within an epoch. Before this, however, it should be emphasised that if Triolet's protagonists in the two texts initially purport very romantic conceptions of their aesthetic independence, it is from ignorance and not cowardice. Triolet's narrative follows a discovery from idealism to responsibility but neither Alexis nor Lewka have resisted the political role out of moral weakness. Indeed, upon finding themselves politically implicated both have fought alongside their compatriots; Alexis in the war preceding the French capitulation and Lewka in the country's civil war. We are not here dealing with moral laxity as is the case in "Henri Castellat", but with artists clinging to the outdated notion that their art exists for art's sake. They are forced by an extreme political climate to recognise that in countries where there is a ban on thought:

fiction, poetry and literary criticism(...) acquire unusual political gravity, insofar as they give a voice to all those who are deprived of one.<sup>5</sup>

The gradual disintegration of his "vie privée" provides the thematic structure of *Alexis Slavsky*. This path from solipsism to collective awareness is precipitated in direct terms by the exchange between Louise and Alexis which culminates in her letter expressing all the difference between them:

Je pars, écrivait-elle, un Américain m'emmène dans son pays. Il ne sert à rien de vouloir être loyale et propre. J'avais voulu souffrir avec mon pays et pour toi...(p.203)

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4. Quoted by J.L.Houdebine, "Jdanov ou Joyce", *Tel Quel*, no.69, p.38.

5. Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine*, p.96.



This evolution of consciousness which Catherine escapes and Alexis embraces is maintained throughout the sub-text, both stylistically and metaphorically. Great attention is paid to his and Henriette's persistent efforts to secure themselves a closed, hermetically sealed interior<sup>6</sup> in which they can take refuge from the unpleasant intrusion of political actuality and therefore ensure the emotional stability that Alexis needs to work.

Heureux sont ceux qui peuvent habiter un monde qu'ils portent en eux-mêmes... (p.144)

Their "monde intérieur" has its objective representation in their tiny alcove bedroom, and more metonymically in the iron bed. The heavy gobelin curtains and the bed's heavy protective frame initially offer them a sense of protection. Once Mizzi's commercial propositions and the police raid disturb the couple, the "univers intérieur" becomes stifling and unbearable. The first intrusion of historical actuality, however, forces Alexis to make an ethical judgement about his art. He had not previously considered his creativity as anything but pure art, merely because he had not been compelled to valorise it in other terms. To the contrary, refusing to sell independently of Morot was:

... la dernière possibilité que j'aie de me prouver que je suis un homme libre. (p.138)

The metaphorical significance of the bedframe is sustained by the recurring "S" shaped pattern in his sketches conceived while he still believed they had achieved some isolation from the outside world:

ce poêle fascinait Alexis presque autant que son lit de fer qui revenait dans ses gouaches comme une obsession: la mince tige noire du lit s'enroulait, formant des S majuscules, des spirales, et à travers cette grille légère on pouvait voir le sommier rayé...(..) Les rideaux en faux Gobelins, écartés pour laisser apparaître le lit (...) Mais Alexis n'avait pas épuisé l'intérêt qu'il portait à son lit de fer, et la tige noire s'enroulait dans un coin ou un autre de ses tableaux. (p.146)

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6. This is a characteristic typical of most of Triolet's protagonists, particularly the artists and single women: I shall be emphasising it frequently throughout the study.



This allegorical significance becomes clearer once Alexis' work has been interrupted and he escapes from the now stifling hermetic interior and wanders outside. In each "traboule" in the area, he discovers abandoned beds:

Pourquoi y avait-il des lits dans presque toutes les cours du quartier Saint-Jean? Et ce qu'il y avait de troublant, c'est que tous ces lits étaient la réplique de son lit à lui, avec ses spirales et ses S majuscules formés par la mince tige noire, son lit à lui qui hantait sa peinture...D'abord il les trouva beaux, les lits noirs sortant de ses tableaux, puis il commença à sentir de l'inquiétude: pourquoi descendait-on des lits dans les cours, pourquoi étaient-ils tous pareils au sien, pourquoi lui mettait-on ainsi sous le nez son propre lit, sa propre intimité? (p.195)

The narration of this persistent exposure of his "vie privée", the relentless intrusion of public life into his "univers intérieur" is semantically maintained through the text. The streets of the quartier Saint-Jean that had offered them security also become signs that a "vie privée" is not merely threatened by the political situation but an illusion that they can no longer maintain:

Il y avait en face de la pente vide, des maisons écroulées ou, peut-être, en démolition, de ces ruines qui font frémir Alexis, montrant dans une coupe verticale, les papiers peints et les vestiges d'une vie privée. Il n'est guère solide, le mur de la vie privée. (p.194)

The "traboules" where Alexis had believed himself to be protected also function as areas of resistance activity, a feature metaphorically maintained both in this story and in "Les Amants d'Avignon" and "Cahiers", the two other principal texts in *Le Premier accroc coûte deux cents francs*. Similarly, the letter-boxes that had signified for Alexis the brief perpetuation of his love affair with Catherine, are likewise revealed to sustain the network of Resistance communication, a revelation that Triolet makes explicit in the text:

Il était un peu ému: la boîte-aux-lettres, ça lui rappelait des choses. Voilà à quoi servaient maintenant les petites boîtes des traboules. (p.272)

The "papier peint de la vie privée" exposed to the ravages of contingent actuality is narrated metonymically by the trains which intrude into the Slavskys' "monde intérieur". This confrontation of the personal and political, of passivity and



motion is reminiscent of *Anna Karenina*. In their last place of refuge, their "monde intérieur" is shattered by the noise of the trains:

Et aussitôt les trains se mirent à défiler, longuement,  
interminablement...Les freins...Les démarrages...Les cris et les sifflets  
stridents et lugubres...(p.230)

These trains are shown stylistically to signify the destructive movement of the political situation. When Alexis is left with Louise's notebooks and the terrifying realisation that she has been arrested for her resistance activities, he tries to sleep but "les trains grinçaient des dents et gémissaient quand il s'endormit et quand il se réveilla".(p.264) This is presented not merely as a list of causal facts but as a symbolic demonstration of the intrusion of political facts into his increasingly fragile "vie privée". He is awoken by the young boy Jean who has escaped from the "trains de relève" and is seeking refuge. It is this provision of refuge and escape into the *maquis* that allows Alexis to discover that he can make his own freedom. In this light, the painting that he is completing at the end of the story acquires particular significance: he has found the inspiration that has eluded him throughout the text by engaging in his era. He discovers that artistic freedom is not just a matter of isolation and individualistic refuge in the reflective, imaginative power of the mind, but achieves fulfillment as Sartre says "en le donnant à voir tel qu'il est, mais comme s'il avait sa source dans la liberté humaine."<sup>7</sup>

### **From Political Commitment to Alienation**

In *Alexis Slavsky* the artist-protagonist is brought to a point of enlightenment, reconciling his personal crisis by recognising his implication in the external political crisis. The fate of Lewka in *Le Monument* demonstrates that political engagement is not the facile answer to personal doubt. Rather, political art can become aesthetically stultifying and, by its perpetual ambiguity, politically treacherous.

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7. J.P.Sartre, *Qu'est ce que la littérature?*, p.64.



Lewka finds his political commitment betrayed by history's re-evaluation of Stalin. His personal devotion to his art is undermined by the irreconcilable goals of aesthetic value, political commission and public taste. The tragedy of his private life conflicting with his political destiny and that of his country is instigated by the newly formed popular democracy. Although Lewka wholly maintains its politics, the new state's political fervour exposes his childhood and education to historical re-evaluation. The state prize he receives as a young student that allows him to study in Paris becomes, in the new country, a sign of bourgeois aestheticism. The Cubist influences that put him at the avant-garde of art in Paris are seen to be reactionary, tendentious and privileged. The situation is a striking literary re-working of that of the Cubo-Futurists and Formalists whose pre-revolutionary manifestoes celebrated an art for the people and anti-aesthetic "slaps in the face of public taste". These were quickly labelled bourgeois and decadent, the very qualities against which they had reacted, in the post-revolutionary State adoption of art. Lewka illustrates the paradoxical importance and capriciousness of history in that his state-sponsored education becomes anathema and even treasonable in the new state.

Like Slavsky, Lewka's path to enlightenment requires him to recognise the inevitable commitment in the work of art, and the self-deluding fallacy of aesthetics existing autonomously, outside of ethics. Equally, he is not politically indifferent, for he turns down the proposal to sculpt a monument to King Aguir III:

Non pas que Lewka eût des idées politiques bien arrêtées, mais les Aguir avaient toujours été également haïs et méprisés dans leur pays. Et, avant d'être une question artistique, ce monument était simplement une question qui ne se posait pas. Cubisme ou pas. (p.42)

This first commission provides a distorted and prophetically ironic reflection on the second monument he is commissioned to sculpt. The first time his refusal has political consequences in that his grant is suspended. He is compelled to accept the second monument, or at least he is made to understand that his freedom depends upon it:



On m'a trop souvent répété ces derniers temps (dit Torsch) que tu étais à moitié Français, que ton art était un art décadent, et que tu étais la honte de l'Union des Arts Plastiques. Quand on commence à me sériner certaines choses, je sais ce que cela veut dire. Nous allons donc comploter ensemble, Lewka...Je ne tiens pas à ce que tu ailles moisir dans la prison, je la connais...(p.85)

Tragically, the commission can be seen to represent too great a political statement and therefore to lack the freedom essential to any work of art and it is destined to failure both politically and personally. I shall treat the symbolic significance of this failure and its implications for a commissioned, socialist art in the second section.

Lewka's situation also becomes a painful indictment of the hypertrophising effects of education in art. Like Hesse's *The Prodigy*, his talent is undermined by theory and training so that he no longer feels capable of creativity:

Je ne peux pas me résoudre à être un sculpteur passe-partout. Ce qu'il me faudrait, c'est retrouver ma naïveté, oublier tout ce que j'ai appris. J'ai perdu certaines limites, pour en trouver d'autres. Et une partie des anciennes, je les ai enfouies dans mon savoir-faire, elles y sont. Aujourd'hui je pense que mes anciennes limites, c'était mon talent. Il aurait fallu m'y cramponner, je serais peut-être devenu un Douanier-Rousseau de la sculpture. J'aurais dû conserver l'inconscience de mes limites. Je suis devenu un artiste pour orchestre de café. (p.48)

Again, he is reminiscent of Mayakovsky in the introduction to his long poem *At the Top of my Voice*, a poem left incomplete when he shot himself in 1930. Like Lewka's desperate soliloquy at the end of the novel, the poem can be read as a testament and a summing-up of his achievement, written at a time when he was feeling isolated and oppressed by the political pressures of Soviet literary life, particularly the increasingly truculent disputes between "Novy LEF" and the "RAPP":

Me too  
     I'm fed up  
         with propaganda verse,  
 me too  
     I could churn out  
         your romances (...)  
 But I  
     took hold  
         of my lyrical fancies



and trod  
on the throat of my own song.<sup>8</sup>

The novel demonstrates that while it may be necessary for an artist to accept his or her political responsibility even in artistic creation, for art to expound a single, commissioned message, it demands the skills of craftsman not creator. The moral being preached against commissioned work is reminiscent of that in Gogol's *Le Portrait*, significantly a work that Triolet translated into French and whose thematic influence is emphasised by a quotation from the novel figuring as one of the rare chapter headings in *Le Monument*:

...la seconde même où le fruit tombe à l'artiste, cette seconde à laquelle toute sa vie ne sert que de préparation. (p.96)

In Gogol's story the artist becomes enslaved by the desire to make money. He enters into a semi-diabolical pact, only painting portraits of the local bourgeoisie who seek flattering, artistically indifferent images. The destruction of both art and truth is narrated in the artist's gradual loss of talent. He falls victim to a devastating jealousy and folly which pushes him to lavish his new fortune on the acquisition of fine works of art which he destroys with a meticulous avidity. In Triolet's works likewise, the artist who stifles his or her creative imagination to produce the commissioned piece that reproduces biological likeness by stifling art, is perpetrating the worst of crimes and produces a mutant work:

C'est l'art que j'ai assassiné(...) Torsch ne pouvait pas comprendre, il lui manquait un organe, celui qui fait l'artiste, il lui manquait le sixième sens, celui du créateur... Pour lui, l'essentiel dans le monument, c'était Staline, pour moi, c'est l'art. L'art absent, le monument n'était plus qu'un objet inanimé. La force vivante d'une oeuvre d'art est dans sa valeur esthétique. L'échec esthétique en fait un objet inanimé. J'ai fabriqué un objet inanimé, inutile, impuissant, muet. (p.176)

It is significant to note here that both Alexis and Lewka, confronting artistic crises regret their destinies as artists and admit the tempting solace of craftsman rather than creator. Triolet says in the introduction to *Le Monument* that she is thematising her conviction that:

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8. Poets of Modern Russia, p.160.



L'importance de l'art dans la vie d'un artiste dépasse l'entendement de la plupart des gens. On comprend la passion chez un savant, chez un révolutionnaire dans le domaine social, mais on l'admet mal chez l'artiste.(...) Le thème de la gravité de l'art qui ne plaisante pas avec l'artiste, qui lui demande sa vie, morale et physique, ce thème est celui de mes romans.

(Author's preface, vol.5, p.21)

In both cases the extreme political climate makes the role of artist one Alexis and Lewka would almost rather not assume. It is precisely his awareness of the non-communicative inertia of his monument that confirms to Lewka that his monument has failed. This confirms Camus' words:

Si au contraire, l'artiste choisit, pour des raisons souvent extérieures à l'art, d'exalter la réalité brute, nous avons le réalisme.(...) Dans (ce) cas, l'artiste prétend donner au monde son unité en lui retirant toute perspective privilégiée. En ce sens, il avoue son besoin d'unité, même dégradée. Mais il renonce aussi à l'exigence première de la création artistique.<sup>9</sup>

Lewka's inevitable failure before the uncompromising demands of art and political commission demonstrates the aporia separating artistic practice from the liberalising intentions of the Soviet writers who first adopted the school of socialist realism:

La création artistique est compliquée et variée. On ne peut pas transformer le mot d'ordre du réalisme socialiste en recette schématique.<sup>10</sup>

This mission seems to be destined to failure considering the didactic consequences or paradoxical demands on the artist - those of combining strict realism with mythicisation. This fine departure from realistic art so that it becomes sycophantic and classical is expressed by Tsetaeva thus:

Le thème de la révolution est une commande du temps.

Le thème de la glorification de la révolution est une commande du parti.<sup>11</sup>

The point at which political commission becomes irreconcilable with creativity never justifies escapist art. Triolet's protagonists are brought to a confrontation with their epoch, to a realisation of themselves as interacting social forces. This is

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9. Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté*, p.335.

10. Vladimir Kirpotin, speech presented to the Union of Soviet Writers, 1933, quoted by J.E.Flower, *Literature and the Left in France*, p.99.

11. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Le Poète et le Temps*, p.35.



very well illustrated when Lewka discovers the social consequences for his wife when he fails to satisfy the popular demands of his art, a discovery of moral involvement and political responsibility reminiscent of that made by Blomart in de Beauvoir's *Le Sang des autres*.

The personal and political implications of Lewka's monument which he finds lifeless and disfiguring, have, like the personal and political formation of Alexis Slavsky, been woven into the sub-text of the novel. Lewka's childhood games and formative years spent in the crypt of the old church and the winding streets of the old town are precisely evoked in the opening chapter, where the streets are inhabited by the statues animating every street and street corner. It is such indications that will help explain the desolating sense of tragedy and despair that destroys Lewka:

La vieille ville leur était familière comme l'intérieur de leur *chambre à coucher*.<sup>12</sup> (p.32)

Et il s'en allait ainsi dans toute la vieille ville: elle était entièrement habitée par un peuple de statues. Partout, des statues vous regardaient du haut des murs, du fond des jardins et des cours, elles s'élevaient au milieu des places, ornaient fontaines et portes cochères, les unes vous frôlaient au passage des plis de leur vêtements soulevés comme par un vent...(p.31)

sauf pour leur fraîcheur, les deux enfants auraient pu faire partie du retable, tant ils ressemblaient à ces saints et saintes, ces guerriers, ces citoyens. (p.33)

If *Alexis Slavsky* and *Le Monument* can be seen as *bildungsroman*, they can both be read as embryonic forms of its politicised variant, the socialist realist novel. However, in the socialist realist novel, as Katerina Clark has pointed out:

... the novel is so highly ritualised that the hero's progress is neither individual or self-valuable.<sup>13</sup>

The question of how far they correspond to the socialist realist model is however particularly significant since Triolet herself considered *Le Monument* as a move towards the introduction of this genre in France.

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12. The italics appearing here and elsewhere, unless indicated otherwise, serve to bring the reader's attention to stylistic details without unnecessary additional explanations.

13. *The Soviet Novel, History as Ritual*, p.17.



Le Monument décrit la naissance difficile d'une avant-garde qui porte le nom de réalisme socialiste.(vol.14, p.194)

As we saw in Chapter Two, however, if strict socialist realism conforms to the master plot of spontaneity being brought to consciousness, Lewka can be seen to represent no more than the very beginning of this evolution. The novel's failure in this genre is blatant: the novel implicitly evokes a situation wherein the individual can only be destroyed by the commands of the party, and where art, if denied its multifarious symbolic interpretations, ceases to exist:

...it is based on the glorification of the state by the writer and artist, whose task it is to portray the power of the state as the greatest good and to scorn the sufferings of the individual.<sup>14</sup>

The novel closes with a bleak vision of human blindness and social despair, features of course anathema to the glorifying Socialist model.

This unbearable paradox and historical myopia is evoked in the two meetings of the "Union des Arts Plastiques". Lewka's simplistic, atheoretical posture is received as flagrant treason in the excessively politicised state. Lewka has the biographical traits of the model hero, that is a son of the people, who fought in the civil war and who participated in the first People's Government. Because of the insidious rejection of aesthetics in the new state, however, it becomes inevitable that Lewka is faced with the choice of suicide or escape to the underground (the fate which faces all of Triolet's major protagonists) and we are left with the desolating awareness that it is not just the destruction of one character that we have witnessed but the corrupting degradation of a political system and the annihilation of a country's past and customs. This is implicit in the myth of Ivanotchka the Simple and the Closed Casket which recurs through the text:

L'histoire est terminée, puisque son héros n'existe plus. Il n'a pas attrapé l'oiseau de feu. Et le coffret non plus ne s'ouvre pas si facilement...(p.183)

Moreover, Torsch, the other "héros du peuple" is acknowledged implicitly as a political pawn who has acquiesced in the political distortion of his country. He has to face his private sense of submission whilst accepting politically to maintain a

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14. Czeslaw Milosz, in the introduction to *On Socialist Realism* by Abhram Tertz, p.134.



regime that has, like Lewka's monument, proved a monster and not the idyll they had cherished:

Mais pourquoi, pourquoi a-t-il fait cela?...la situation du pays? l'affreux tourment...Mais est-ce qu'il se tue, lui, Torsch, et n'était-ce pas pour lui, pour tous les dirigeants du pays, autrement atroce?(p.181)

The irreconcilable gulf between this desolating ending and the socialist realist master plot is flagrant. As Tertz said in his seminal text:

Lost illusions, broken hopes, unfulfilled dreams, so characteristic of literature of other eras and systems, are contrary to socialist realism.<sup>15</sup>

The only genealogical link that *Le Monument* has with socialist realism, as I showed in Chapter Two, was the tenuous definition that the author formed for herself:

En fait, cet angle de vue n'impose ni un contenu ni une forme ni des moyens particuliers...il ne s'impose que lui-même, laissant à l'artiste toute liberté de créer, pourvu que son oeuvre adopte et propage cet angle de vue. *Du moins est-ce ainsi que je comprends le réalisme socialiste.* (Appendix II, vol.14, p.196)

Similarly, the earlier *Alexis Slavsky* despite being more optimistic<sup>16</sup>, hardly has a positive ending, and Alexis is far from embodying the positive hero. He does come to participate in the political actualities around him but the reader can hardly envisage him afterwards as an enlightened and new-born activist, the type of character scathingly personified by Tertz:

The socialist realist, armed with the doctrine of Marx and enriched by the experience of struggles and victories, is inspired by the vigilant attention of his friend and teacher, the Communist Party.<sup>17</sup>

For Alexis, his participation is a reaction to a human appeal for help rather than engagement in resistance activities. This action allows him to assert his own freedom and individual right to reclaim his calm, aesthetically creative universe once the extreme contingencies of history have passed. This lesson is taught to him by Louise before she is arrested:

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15. *On Socialist Realism*, p.168.

16. Triolet indeed regretted in the Preface, O.C. vol.5, not having made Alexis commit suicide.

17. *On Socialist Realism*, p.149.



Vous comptez sortir de votre retraite le jour de la victoire et compter les scalps? Vous voulez satisfaire votre goût de vengeance sans aucun danger? que d'autres au prix de leur vie vous auront donné la possibilité d'exercer? Taisez-vous donc, vous n'avez pas droit à la vengeance! A vous entendre, on croirait que toute cette guerre n'a été faite que pour vous être personnellement désagréable! Toutes les mesures n'ont été prises que contre vous!...Ridicule! Affreux! Que savez-vous des malheurs de la guerre...(p.248)

Louise's speech can be understood as much as an implicit challenge to those readers who, like Slavsky, or perhaps the Crispins, had been satisfied to endure if not benefit from the Nazi presence until such times miraculously changed. Freedom, both Louise and the text are asserting, is not necessarily given nor constant. As Jenny demonstrates in *Personne ne m'aime*:

Rien n'est jamais accompli ni tout à fait ni pour toujours. (vol.9, p.58)

Resistance within art and resistance through art become synonymous. From this implication of the interface linking the historical era to the art which is produced within it, I shall go on to analyse the works of art with which the artist-protagonists are involved during the textual duration of the narrative. From here, I shall consider the works themselves as metaphors highly representative of Triolet's ideas and craft.



## Chapter Four

# The Work of Art as Metaphor

At certain periods of history it is only poetry that is capable of dealing with reality by condensing it into something that otherwise couldn't be retained by the mind.<sup>1</sup>

In *La vie privée, ou Alexis Slavsky* and *Le Monument* there is a pronounced textual and metatextual analysis of creativity which demonstrates Triolet's clearly neo-romantic conception of art. It contains and expresses the morality and truth of a certain era; it can possess and speak through the artist-protagonist. It transcends by far the conception of partisan craftsmanship according to the rigid requisitions of socialist realism as it was practised by the late 1930's in the Soviet Union. The romanticism of Triolet's realism does not have to imply an immediate contradiction of Soviet socialist realism or interpretations of socialist realism in France. Scholars still dispute bitterly the question of how much realism and romanticism a socialist realist work should imply. The conflicting interpretations of the school are implicit in the apologists' rhetoric from the earliest, pre-revolutionary and embryonic formulations of the genre:

A socialist-biased novel fully achieves its purpose...if by consciously describing the real mutual relations, breaking down conventional illusions about them, it shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, instills doubt as to the eternal character of the existing order, although the author does not offer any definite solution or does not even line up openly on any particular side.<sup>2</sup>

I think that a mixture of realism and romanticism is necessary. Not a realist, not a romantic, but a realist and a romantic - they are like two facets of a single being.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One*, p.52.

2. Friedrich Engels, letter to Minna Kautsky, November 26, 1885. *The Modern Tradition*, p.483.

4. Gorky, *The Modern tradition*, p.487.



The truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the task of the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. This method in *belles lettres* and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism.<sup>5</sup>

The much disputed role and definition of romanticism in the socialist novel would therefore hardly be an anachronistic or illogical concern in Triolet's fiction. Her fiction adheres most closely only to that definition given by Engels in 1885, that is long before the school was adopted, theorised and rigidly enforced. My aim here, however, is not to contrast the evolving theories of a particular school but, by considering the textual evidence in Triolet's work, to demonstrate to what extent she displays what Todorov has termed a "dialogic" conception of the artist and his/her art.<sup>5</sup> According to Todorov's definition, the artist's *work* refuses firm categorising in terms of genre, and art is at once realist and romantic, concerned with aesthetic values and historicity, artistic construction and social interaction so that whilst wholly integrated in her era the artist is at once prophet, and a tool via which art speaks. Triolet's position is reminiscent of the definition of the artist's modernity given by Tsvetaeva:

Etre moderne - c'est créer son époque et non la refléter. Et si, pourtant, la refléter, mais pas comme un miroir - comme un bouclier. Etre moderne - c'est créer son époque, c'est à dire lutter contre les neuf-dixièmes de ce qu'elle représente, comme on lutte contre les neuf dixièmes de son premier brouillon.<sup>6</sup>

The metaphorical significance of art implies immediately that Triolet's works transcend the practical application of socialist realism in the 1930s onwards, described by Katerina Clark as a "canonical doctrine defined by its patristic texts". As Clark, Tertz and Bakhtin amongst others have pointed out, it is a school notable for its marginalising effect on the the aesthetic function, and for what Clark defines as its "modal schizophrenia". This chapter will demonstrate that the school's hybrid

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5. A.A.Zhdanov at the First All-Soviet Congress of Writers, August 17, 1934, *Soviet Writers' Congress*, p.21.

5. *A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism*, pp.155-168.

6. *Le poète et le temps*, p.45. Tsvetaeva's ideas here largely coincide with Triolet's notion of the "condensé" of the novel. She first discusses this in her "Preface à la *Clandestinité*", the introduction to *Le Premier Accroc* written for the *Oeuvres Croisées*, (1960). The notion becomes increasingly important in her later fiction and will be developed below.



character is narrated, perhaps not deliberately, by the role and function of art in Triolet's novels. The allegorical function of art in resistance fiction is well-known and well-documented and can be illustrated here both as a thematic feature and a novelistic function in relation to *Alexis Slavsky*. The allegorical role of the monument and *Le Monument* is more convoluted in terms of the novel's relation to the historical background. Its paradoxical textual multiplicity has exposed it to interpretations as both socialist realism and the impracticability of socialist realism.

### Art and Morality

The first metaphorical role of art in *Alexis Slavsky* is that of morality and truth, not in the strictly theurgical implications of the terms, but as refusals of the unbearable totalitarianism in politics and mentality in occupied France. The morality of art is narrated on two levels; firstly that of maintaining aesthetic values in a society given to speculation and financial corruption and secondly where a character's understanding of and reaction to art and artistic creation can be read as illustrative of their political allegiances. In the latter case, political is not meant in its broadly party political application but in the general sense of their reaction to and, in some cases against, the German presence. And bigotry, intolerance and speculation in art are evocative in both texts of a totalitarian society and the attitudes of those who tacitly or actively participate in and uphold its values. Such a society is shown to be one in which art is no longer valued, artistic creation no longer possible and aesthetic values ridiculed or persecuted. As Kundera has said:

the novel is incompatible with the totalitarian universe.<sup>7</sup>

Triolet's aesthetic practice can be compared to the theories of Benjamin and Adorno, for example, where art represents the possibility of redemption, the refusal of an omnipresent and humanitarian-destroying historical process and a yardstick by which the value and morality of a society can be judged. A significant and revealing comparison can be drawn particularly between the aesthetic theory of

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7. *The Art of the Novel*, p.9.



Adorno and the later works of Triolet. Adorno precisely combines socialist vision with a romantic sense of aesthetic isolation, notions which will be discussed below. What should be emphasised here is the committed romanticism of her works where she is entirely committed to art as a dialectical light upon and guiding light for society. This position can be compared to that expressed by T.S.Eliot:

The people which ceases to care for its literary inheritance becomes barbaric; the people which ceases to produce literature ceases to move in thought and sensibility. The poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it; and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility.<sup>8</sup>

The redemptive and moral position of art in Triolet's novels is greatly removed from the practice of partisan fiction with which she has been unhesitatingly associated.

The implication of art versus collaboration is narrated throughout *Alexis Slavsky*. I referred earlier to the ethical judgement Alexis makes when refusing to sell to the bombastic Crispin family. They are anxious to return to Paris and prepared to "ignore" the Nazi presence. They are characterised by their trifling concerns and political indifference signalling their collaborating potential:

Grandjean est encore en retard, remarqua Alain en s'asseyant. On n'était pas de bonne humeur aujourd'hui. La conversation languissait à travers le poulet, les haricots verts, le fromage blanc, les confitures. (p.124)

Tout le monde va rentrer à Paris à la fin des vacances, cette idée! Quand on n'est ni émigré allemand ni Polonais, je ne vois pas pourquoi on ne rentrerait pas chez soi. (p.127)

The petty-minded simplicity of the family is reflected in their literary habits:

Marie-Louise lisait un roman policier par jour. (p.126)

This vapid consumerism is reflected likewise in their aesthetic judgements:

- Je lui aurais bien acheté un tableau, - Alain attachait ses sandales, - j'aime ce qu'il fait et c'est un bon placement. (p.126)

This insinuated criticism becomes more overt when the Slavskys meet Mizzi whose German friend is anxious to purchase a painting, noticeably without even

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8. Introduction, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p.13.



having seen one first. From this point, interest in the purely commercial and speculative value of paintings becomes synonymous with collaboration and cowardice.

Un mécène est un mécène, ça n'a rien à voir avec la charité, un mécène fait sa fortune en soutenant les artistes...(p.153)

Mais M. Morot n'est plus en France, il a fichu le camp comme tous les bons patriotes! Ha-ha-ha! C'est une chance pour des petits collectionneurs comme moi.(p.157)

Aesthetic philistinism signifying collaboration is equally implied in the brief portrait of Monsieur Roux:

M.Roux aux palmes académiques, celui qui était si content de ce que les Allemands allaient nous dresser, l'entreprit sur la peinture moderne, le sommant d'avouer que ce n'était que de la fumisterie. (p.169)

Alexis's visit to the Lyon art gallery inexorably associates commercial values with political dishonesty or collaboration. There are only imitation paintings for sale and, when Alexis asks to know the artist of a certain picture:

La demoiselle du magasin (...) revint avec une liste, pour dire: "C'est cinq mille, Monsieur..." Sur sa liste, il n'y avait que les numéros et les prix.(p.213)

The portrait of Alexis's grandmother Esther can be understood as a reflection of a chosen moral position. Esther's importance is constructed textually from the very opening paragraphs. To appreciate fully the portrait as a signifier of a chosen ethical position, it is necessary to notice how frequently we are reminded that Alexis *chooses not* to allow his past to recede into the uncommented background. If he is French and sufficiently separated from Esther to avoid incrimination and persecution for her nationality and religion, he chooses by his discussions of the painting to remain on the side of the persecuted. Triolet's insistence that he has inherited from her nothing but "les reflets rouquins dans les cheveux et ses yeux d'or" signals his *choice* of moral/political position. This is indeed understood as pure perversion by the Crispin family who are content to live



oblivious to the Nazi presence and indeed profit from the situation if the possibility arises:

Alexis m'embête, - dit Alain, enlevant ses souliers pour mettre des sandales (...) Il m'embête, il est là comme un moribond (...) Est-ce que c'est de notre faute s'il a un nom étranger et du sang juif...D'ailleurs on nous dit que les Allemands sont antisémites, mais ce n'est peut-être même pas vrai! (...) Marie-Louise baïlla encore. - Pourquoi est-ce qu'Alexis ne peut s'appeler comme tout le monde?...Et ces histoires qu'il raconte sur la belle Esther! Personne n'aurait rien su. (p.126)

The importance of Esther as security and identity is also narrated in the "ceremony" of exhibiting the portrait once they settle into a new home:

C'était surtout le portrait d'Esther qui donnait aux Slavsky l'impression d'un chez-soi, tant ils étaient habitués d'avoir çette grande tache verte et or devant les yeux. (p.142)

The work which Alexis is shown periodically to be painting likewise provides a textual assertion of the dialectical role of a work of art and epoch, and the truth to which creative art aspires. A café provides the main subject for the picture, but throughout the text Alexis is dissatisfied with his achievement, constantly scraping clean his canvas and recommencing, with the increasingly despairing sense that art is both demanding his strength from him and evading him:

Alexis manquait totalement de sérénité. Il y avait des jours ou cela allait si mal qu'il sentait sa passion le lâcher, et aussitôt apparaissait le monde avec ses "informations", la guerre, la guerre, la guerre et le vieillard bien propre qui charmait la population avec ses nobles cheveux blancs. (p.147)

But we may read here both the immanent political moral in the text and the aesthetic myth that is fundamental to Triolet's work. That Alexis is a realistic artist of sorts is implied in his outings armed with easel, canvas and oils to find subjects for his paintings. And the theme recurrently attracting him is that of the café, "Au Bon Coin". The semantic importance depicted here is that an artist who wishes to capture a moment of the reality surrounding him cannot persist in conceiving his art as hermetic and the political situation as an independent reality. In Alexis' case, this initially makes him hostile to the war simply because it interferes with his artistic activities. Triolet would seem to be maintaining that the inspiration of his



art is to be found by engaging in his era, not to produce a photographic reproduction of it nor necessarily by suspending his artistic activities to engage in purely political action. Rather, he should exist as a voice for that which has no voice, an ear beyond politics and a perspective which takes both artist and his dialectical correlative, the viewer (reader, spectator...) "from a vision of solitary individualism to discoveries of collective awareness". This suggestion of the artist's task is developed succinctly by Calvino:

The ability to impose patterns of language, of vision, of imagination, of mental effort, of the correlation of facts and in short the creation (and by creation I mean selection and organisation) of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action, especially in political life. <sup>9</sup>

Slavsky is not brought to a moment of conscious realisation of the artist's role, and we certainly do not expect him to be imminently launched into a career as a committed artist. His painting indeed evokes his absurd understanding of the historical period that has permeated his consciousness and thus his work:

La toile représentait un "café-hôtel", devant le "café-hôtel un soldat allemand tricotait une chaussette orange, une putain gardait le pont, le tout sur un fond de pêcheurs parsemés de petites balles hautes en couleurs, gaies comme des confetti. (p.277)

The importance of his perhaps subconscious aesthetic enlightenment is precisely that the multiplicity of art is maintained. The role of art is not to provide a monolithic commentary on a particular era or situation. At such a point, it ceases to be art, as the novels proceed to demonstrate. The aim of art, according to the textual evidence, is to express what only art can say, to achieve both modernity and eternity by expressing its relation to time and the historical epoch and also to be accessible to the variety of aesthetic interpretations which critical dialogue will maintain.

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9. *The Literature Machine*, p.99.



## Political Expediency, Artistic Ethics

Lewka's monument illustrates the rich diversity of interpretations in the artistic work. It must be borne in mind that Triolet had a particularly dialogic attitude to her art, in terms of the artist being spoken to by an idea that transcended his or her immediate comprehension. Her conceptualisation of the dialogic work concerns also the reader or receiver of the created work whose presence is not only necessary to maintain the existence of the work but who justifies and animates it. This notion will be developed in the following chapters. A work that does not pose questions and provoke reactions is a declaration not an inquiry:

Interpretations are mistaken that seek at the novel's core not an inquiry but a moral position.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism).<sup>11</sup>

If Triolet's critical writings hint at a theoretical position in sympathy with the above statements, her novels situate themselves almost unanimously with them. In addition, dialogue is achieved by the artist's position being that of an inquiry and not a politically motivated pronouncement. The artistic work, founded on a complex play of implications and interpretative potential, is a seemingly eternal play of ambiguity and dialogue. It is generally presumed as self-evident now that the relationship between sign and meaning is not fixed but dynamic, so when language and images are used symbolically, their significative potential is extended. Clark demonstrates this quoting the political anthropologist Abner Cohen who shows why a political symbol cannot be a mechanical reflection of the power structure it is meant to support:

Symbols ... stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of disparate meanings and the same symbol can thus be used in different contexts to mean the same thing.<sup>12</sup>

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10. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.7.

11. Bakhtin, quoted in *A Personal View*, p.87.

12. *The Soviet Novel*, pp.11-12.



If the artist's first allegiance is to art, it is significant that it is actually Torsch, the political figure whose destiny provides a mordant accompaniment to Lewka's artistic-political destiny, who reminds the latter of the error he is making by prioritising restoration. Torsch is, however, acting according to his political conscience and following state objectives rather than showing concern for the artist's creativity:

J'ai toujours été, et je suis resté, tout d'abord un militant, un homme politique. Toi, tu t'es toujours occupé d'art, tu as toujours été un créateur. D'autre part, tu oublies que tu n'es pas un entrepreneur de travaux publics, mais le ministre des Beaux-Arts.(p.63)

Unfortunately, if the politician expresses the necessary distance existing in the relation between art and politics, he proves by his following words that he conceptualises the relationship in terms not of dialectics but of a hierarchy where art should be reinforcing national objectives:

Tu ne t'occupes absolument pas des questions d'esthétique ni de ce qui se passe à l'Union des Arts Plastiques. Nos peintres et sculpteurs sont en train de sombrer dans l'art pour l'art le plus abstrait. Cela aussi a assez duré: il faudrait les réunir, leur parler, leur expliquer les choses...(p.63)

Lewka and Torsch's exchanges result in Lewka's acceptance of the commissioned monument. His agreement must be understood as his recognition of the political menace (therefore a commission he dares hardly to refuse). He is also answering a friend's appeal - Lewka has the greatest respect for Torsch and understands his jeopardised position. He also accepts, of course, through political inspiration since there is never any doubt in Lewka's mind as to the value of a monument to a leader he loves and admires. The doubt he expresses is linked to his artistic capacity to produce a statue worthy of the revered Soviet leader. The doubt the *monument* is to evoke is whether attempting to produce a graven image of a human being can be considered art. Once the work has been undertaken, it challenges the possibility of a single political declaration being achieved unequivocally without art necessarily being stifled:



Je suis là, l'homme qui toujours pense à vous, veille sur vous, imagine les pas à faire pour le bonheur de l'homme. (p.99)

The intrusion of an inevitable ambiguity that will expose the monument to differing interpretations troubles Lewka from the first sketches to the model presented for the competition:

Lewka aurait aimé faire un Staline jeune. Les Georgiens sont beaux, fins. Fallait-il absolument qu'il eût une moustache? Lewka l'aurait préféré sans moustache. Et il crayonnait des têtes, un jeune homme romantique, dans lequel, se disait-il, personne n'aurait pu reconnaître Staline. Pourtant, lui, Lewka trouvait que c'était cela, le vrai Staline, avec ses yeux de rêve. Il n'était pas idéalisé...(p.99)

Equally inevitably, the imagination of the artist combined with a commissioned meaning produces a work displeasing to the artist, who has found the true expression of neither his political fervour nor his aesthetic energy. Equally disappointed are those seeking the message they expected the monument to embody. The most searing judgement is that from the "ministère des Beaux-Arts" who, during the chronological unfolding of the novel, falls victim to the political momentum:

Vous devriez, camarade Lewka, vous décider pour une chose ou une autre : l'art populaire ou l'art monumental ...Sainte Barbe ou la statue équestre d'Aguir Premier, par exemple...ou Brancusi, dont vous semblez vous inspirer aussi bien, - ajouta-t-il en souriant, - votre oeuvre est hybride. (p.107)

The realisation of the monument is accompanied by an undercurrent of criticism. Lewka is also offered methodological advice and judgement, each time underlining the arbitrary nature of truth:

- Avec ce Staline-là, dit le dessinateur à la large veste, - vous risquez des ennuis. Fermez-lui donc un peu ses yeux écarquillés, ajoutez quelques rides et étudiez la forme de la moustache (...) L'image de Staline est actuellement ossifiée, on ne voudra tolérer aucune interprétation artistique, aucune vision personnelle. Méfiez-vous du crime de lèse-majesté. (p.115)

The most memorable commentaries are the prophetic allusions of doom. Already, the reflection cited above is from an unknown artist who climbs up the ladder, delivers his prognostication and disappears rather like a deus ex machina or the words of the oracle. (The allusion to Greek tragedy is not gratuitous and I shall be



returning to this point). The student sculptors allude perhaps unintentionally to the auspicious environment and tragic role the monument is committed to:

- Tant qu'à comparer...J'aime mieux le Sphinx. C'est encore plus énorme, et plus monstrueux...que la *Bavaria*. Il y a l'énigme. Le danger des devinettes. (p.112)

Moreover, the monument's creation takes place against a back-cloth of political speculation and arrest. As an artist, Lewka ceases to believe in his monument long before he has completed it, and tries to express his unbearable paradoxical role of citizen and artist to Torsch. The monument's completion is therefore carried out in keeping with the most classical rules of tragedy:

Lewka continuait à travailler sur le monument comme un galérien, un condamné à mort qui traîne au pied son boulet: *il ne pouvait pas ne pas continuer*. (p.116)

The didactic intentions of the monument which intend that it should have a single, unmistakable message are not met because it is surely impossible for the monument to say the same one thing to each citizen in the country, and equally to please the higher soviet hierarchy politically present in the subtextual background. Its semantic multiplicity is the object of the most belligerent criticism, where each critic attacks the monument for not incarnating what he expected it to say, or, equally mistakenly in Lewka's view, praises it for the same reasons.<sup>13</sup> Lewka attends the meeting of judgement like Camus's "étranger", Meursault in the trials preempting his condemnation: never denying his crime but hopelessly aware that the act for which he is being judged is vastly removed from the crime he committed. He is impotently conscious of the lacuna separating his own vision from that of a courtroom happy to give voice to its own visions and interpretations of another's acts. It is a striking textual condemnation of the blind adherence to the stifling laws of historicity. Also on trial, perhaps, is the theory of socialist realism which Lewka had wanted to espouse. In this respect the monument is a symbol of

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13. The resemblance between this episode and Triolet's depiction of the trials of Mayakovsky is striking. See *Maïakovski, vers et proses*, p.47.



the inevitable contradictions within the genre. The fault is not only his own, despite Lewka's self-incrimination:

La théorie est bonne, c'est l'artiste qui est mauvais: moi. (p.155)

If the school produced contemptible results the fault cannot rest purely with the theory:

For the contradiction between socialist realism and literary quality, the blame must fall on literature, i.e. on the writers who accepted the rules of socialist realism but did not have sufficient artistic consistency to embody them in deathless images.<sup>14</sup>

Primarily, however, the failure of the genre, and thus the monument, lies in its "modal schizophrenia", the very hybrid character diagnosed in Lewka's monument. Classical realism could not be brought satisfactorily to include a justification and narration of the triumphant march of mankind towards the all-benevolent goal of Communism, *and* a song of all-consuming praise for the present government. These were certainly the demands on literature in the period of high-Stalinism. As Tertz explains:

A socialist i.e. a purposeful, religious art cannot be produced with the literary method of the nineteenth century called "realism". And a really faithful representation of life cannot be achieved in a language based on teleological concepts.<sup>15</sup>

Lewka does not come to this level of theoretical understanding. The crime he recognises is that he had tried to speak to the people and the people rejected his monument; he had tried to honour the great Soviet father but found his image hideous; he had wanted to honour his city and instead produced a monument that overshadowed and disfigured it. Essentially, he had tried to fulfill his artistic destiny and his work proves "un objet inanimé(...) inutile, impuissant, muet...". Whereas the artist could usually destroy the work with which he was dissatisfied, Lewka's has been commissioned and appropriated by the state, thereby suspending an essential aspect of the artist's freedom. It also occupies a site whose foundations

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14. *On Socialist Realism*, p.213.

15. *On Socialist Realism*, p.215.



effect those of the old town. Since the work has a directly political significance, to destroy a monument to Stalin would be tantamount to disfiguring the man himself:

On ne peut pas toucher à ce monument parce que c'est une effigie de Staline. (p.134)

At this point it should be clear to what extent the matter in question assumes a religious nature, where an action against the monument is comparable to the blasphemy implied in damage to religious symbols. This was already suggested by Lewka's initial projects for the monument for which his restoration work on the old church has given him immediate experience. Lewka's enthusiasm for the monument leads him to compare Stalin and Christ:

Le plus humain des hommes (...) Bref, un phénomène. Par là, s'expliquaient tous ces portraits, innombrables, en vérité... Sans attendre des siècles, comme pour le Christ ou la Sainte-Vierge. (p.99)

Pourquoi Staline serait-il seul sur le monument, dans la vie il n'était pas seul, c'était l'homme le moins seul du monde, il avait à côté de lui cette grande famille, le prolétariat de partout...Est-ce que, sur le retable, le Christ était seul? (p.100)

However, Lewka subconsciously recognises the political fault in promoting a human being to the pedestal of the saviour of mankind; and the paradoxical impossibility of producing a graven image of the man whilst paying tribute to his superhuman and legendary renown:

Mais, est-ce que les noirs, quand ils sont catholiques, ne représentent pas la Sainte Vierge en négresse? (p.99)

The role of deity and immortal benefactor to which Stalin was promoted by the phenomenal cult of personality had the singular fault of not being able to render Stalin immortal. No-one was capable of arranging a glorious and divine assumption to deify him posthumously. When Lewka denounces his own crime towards art, therefore, we should question whether his attribution of guilt is quite justified:

J'ai créé une chose hideuse. Ce n'est pas tout à fait de ma faute...Moi, je savais que je n'avais ni le talent ni le savoir-faire, le métier ni le coffre pour créer un tel monument! Vous l'avez voulu...Et moi, je me suis gargarisé de



mots, j'ai marché, j'ai obéi, pauvre de moi... Cette chose immense, cette Bavarie, ce Sphinx...(p.113)

The monument questions whether anyone could have had the talent considering the exceptional political and historical circumstances. The monument can thus be understood like Wilde's portrait of Dorian Grey, a work of art that preempts the reality to which it is related by expressing the truth and the evil of its subject. It demands the onlooker <sup>to judge</sup> whether a successful monument to Stalin could have been achieved, and if so if its instant success could have endured the posthumous denunciations of Stalinist crimes and the evil exposed, perpetrated in the name of social good and national security. A beautiful and glorious monument to Stalin during his life-time would surely have seemed a japing sneer from tyrant to duped public. It is admittedly as easy to be vehemently critical of the atrocities of Stalinism post-1956 as it is to promote oneself to courageous resistant in post-war France. Nevertheless, the monument that Lewka creates must be read also as an indictment of the political leader embodied in the monument even before the veneer of the former god-head began to be suspected. It is surely not gratuitous that the site for the monument is chosen to be the hillside overlooking and *dominating* the old town. This notion horrifies Lewka with his almost religious devotion to its art and ancient beauty, and who would have sought a background in keeping with the leader's modern vision of progress:

Staline aurait été à sa place dans le voisinage des pylônes, de l'immense antenne de radio, des édifices blancs, quadrillés et rayés de vitres luisantes, du stade pour cent mille personnes, du barrage qui allait électrifier tout le pays...(p.101)

The choice of site provides a commentary on the cult of personality, and perhaps the politicians who cultivated it, mythicising that which was only human, forcibly permeating the very physical and historical structures of their country with the legend of Stalin. Art's poignant advance on history in this text is shown when the destruction Stalinism imposed and justified in the name of the final purpose is signalled by the statue's strategic position. When Lewka asks for it to be destroyed in the name of his crime - "C'est une expérience trop voyante, camarade...J'ai



defiguré notre ville" - the monument itself proves that no amount of individual self-denunciation will be sufficient to deflect the extent of, or the responsibility for the crime. The destruction of the monument, and therefore all that it metaphorically signifies, entails catastrophic consequences:

Imaginez-vous la quantité de dynamite qu'il faudrait pour démolir, ne serait-ce que le fondement? Mais vous feriez sauter en même temps toute la vieille ville. (p.135)

The monument's potential destruction of the old town has been, as was seen earlier, signalled in the traditional Russian folk legends which are "destroyed" by the events of the novel.

If the monument has a role of metaphorical significance present throughout the text it is interesting to examine the metaphorical role of *Le Monument* and particularly the striking prolepsis that the statue has in relation to Triolet's novel. The interwoven themes taken from historical actuality and her imagination will be examined in Chapter Five. Here I shall consider the striking resemblance between the public outrage, theoretical exchange and differing and contradictory interpretations provoked by Lewka's monument and the reactions to Triolet's *Le Monument*.<sup>16</sup> The novel becomes almost a metaphor preempting the tale it allegorises. The debate maintained over several weeks in *Les Lettres françaises*, resumed in public meetings including the much documented meeting of the "Union des Etudiants Communistes on the 29th of March, 1958, bears a striking similarity to the meetings narrated in *Le Monument*. Both the novel and its aftermath demonstrate the same misunderstandings and political narrow-mindedness. The novel's reception displays the homogeneity of interpretation shown by speakers in the meetings of the "Union des Arts Plastiques", where their theoretical observations seem to demonstrate a singular misunderstanding of the text.

The newspaper and public debates demonstrated the greatest possible reluctance to confront the most poignant question raised by the novel. In all the

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16. See for example the judgements passed on Lewka's monument, p.153, and Triolet's description of the judgements passed on her novel, p.191.



published documentation there is but one reference to the role of the figure of Stalin and the cult of personality, and the importance this should have on our understanding of Lewka's mission and his seemingly inevitable failure:

Lewka a tenté de faire un chef-d'oeuvre, un chef-d'oeuvre d'avant-garde, et cette avant-garde il la situe dans le réalisme socialiste. Or il aboutit à un échec. Est-ce que cet échec n'est pas lié à un autre échec - du moins aux erreurs de l'avant-garde politique, sociale, aux erreurs qu'a pu provoquer le culte de la personnalité, etc.? Est-ce que *Le Monument* ne montre pas justement que ces erreurs, artistiques et politiques, sont liées entre elles? (vol.14, p.208)

This question raised by an unnamed "auditeur" remained uncommented and discussion passed to the aesthetically perhaps more fascinating and ethically less incriminating question of the possible comparisons to be drawn between *Le Monument* and Shostakovitch's Tenth Symphony. This simple incident itself is reminiscent of the political white-washing and self-exculpations that were to follow the revelations of the real nature of the Stalinist era.

The work of art can thus be read as a metaphor for underlying political truth as well as a metaphor for the necessary freedom and importance of art. It reinforces humanitarian and dialogic values in a world threatened by the crushing onslaught of totalitarianism and historical progress. Similarly, the artist in Triolet's work, both through his work and as an individual marking out his life between his destinies of human being and artist can be read as important and recurrent signifiers in and beyond her fiction and it is to this question that I now turn.



## Chapter Five

### The Artist as Metaphor

Penser et écrire sur le créateur pris dans son temps, en ce que son temps à un moment précis, daté, a de plus aigu, m'est habituel: penser et écrire sur la mort volontaire d'un créateur, sur ce qui a pu l'y mener est, chez moi, une sorte d'obsession.<sup>1</sup>

As this section has already shown, the dialectical meeting between the individual and the epoch, between the creative work and the contingencies of history are sustained throughout the two texts. Likewise, Triolet's conceptualisation of the fine, transcendent truth which a work of art aspires to and can incarnate is offered to the reader as a morality in a world threatened by totalitarianism and philistinism. While coming to terms with their moral involvement with other people, none of Triolet's protagonists ever moves towards the teleological reductionism of situating the individual into a predetermined and thus almost irresponsible social role. In the godless universe of Triolet's fiction, the alienation of the human condition does not justify despair or meaningless social intercourse. On the contrary, reminiscent of Pierre in de Beauvoir's *L'Invitée*, Triolet asserts that "ce que l'homme est et ce qu'il fait ne font qu'un" so that even if we do not meet reality on our own terms we can and should shape the reality with which we are faced. Whilst situating art against a philistine world, Triolet's artist-protagonists do not retreat into the finer world of their imagination but discover that this world can only achieve fulfillment when they place their art within a social context to define and guide the society to which their art is directed.

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1. Elsa Triolet, *La Lutte avec l'ange*, essay published in *Les Lettres françaises*, 5.9.57. Extracts included in the preface to O.C. vol.14.



The artist can be considered as a torch-bearer for a fairer society, a harbinger of a potential future for humanity, fulfilling the immediate, textual and metaphoric roles of a creator with a prophetic vision that can bring *light* to a hostile and uncomprehending world. Her characters are not socially integrated heroes of Marxist utilitarianism with precise ideas of human good and the mechanism of social cause and effect. Nor are they full-blooded romantic heroes who believe in the reality and importance of their personal struggle. In this vision of the artist, both subjective identity and collective goals are brought together. The extent and impersonality of the destructive forces of the society they face however often bear sufficiently heavily upon the artists to cause their voices to be suffocated. Frequently, this impulse towards the social integration of both art and their craft is destroyed. Such is the case of Lewka, or Jenny in *Personne ne m'aime*, where like so many of Triolet's protagonists, and in the footsteps of Mayakovsky:

The poet catches the music of the future in an insatiable ear but he is not destined to enter the Promised Land.<sup>2</sup>

Through the examination of the artist's role in society, Triolet also considers the relationship between reality and the art which meets it dialectically. The textually narrated *prise de conscience* and political engagement of the artist can be read as metaphors for an art which co-exists within reality and creates the very reality it considers. Similarly, the excluded protagonist can be seen as a neo-romantic hero, a inheritor of the artistic-political crisis of Mayakovsky and his generation. He has a mythical and recurrent role seeking and creating the light which could guide towards a better future.

### **The Metaphor of the Outsider**

The artist's relation to society is narrated on both an immediate level (Alexis participates in the resistance activities in the village, Lewka seeks to capture the political fervour of his era in a monument aiming to glorify both the

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2. Roman Jakobson, "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets", in *Modern Soviet Writers*, p.13.



people of a popular democracy and the Soviet leader) and a more abstract and metatextual level. Whilst Triolet's artists all seek an aesthetic synthesis within their epoch, they are portrayed as victims of their art, seeking to serve this finer artistic purpose first. On account of their ambiguous roles and visions of society, they are prone to alienation and a romantic exclusion on the outskirts of history where they occupy a sort of underground that is at the same time proleptic and isolating. When their sense of social reality is eroded by this additional historical and ahistorical paradox, the artist-protagonists seek then to find refuge in their art and assume this social alienation according to the rules of existential psychology, becoming vagrants. The existence of the artist as an "étranger" in relation to a particular society is surely also Triolet's way of analysing her own position in France. The exclusion of the artist assumes a textual and metatextual role extended to created and creative personalities.

In this context, even the resistance activities and engagement of the two heroes have a second, metaphorical role. They evoke the artist in opposition to the causal succession of events in a world of reductionism, and mark out the independence and reality of the world of imagination and fantasy. This is not the contradiction of realist art but is conceptualised here as its very essence. For example, the underground world of the resistance to which attention was drawn earlier exists first as the world of those who refuse the historically pre-determined present to uphold an alternative vision of reality. It is also the world where the monolithic enslavement of empirical fact is challenged by fantasy and imagination. This metaphorical underworld is allusively maintained in the "traboules" of Lyon but is far more immediate in the textual development of *Le Monument*. The latter is intrinsically a realistic work set on the boundaries of realistic fiction. The author seeks to place it in the timelessness of the imagination as well as within the recognisable unfolding of events in mid-century political history:



Mêlant paysages et styles, l'auteur a situé en Europe centrale une démocratie populaire qu'il a essayé de rendre vraisemblable mais qui n'existe sur aucune carte, sauf sur celle de l'imagination. (p.27)

These fictional illustrations of fact make the directly referential and historical judgements that later critics of the novel were to pass on Lewka particularly contradictory. Both the sculpter Lobo, and Pignon reproach Lewka for having not been aware of Picasso's *Guernica*, or the Spanish Civil War. They thus impose an astonishing slavery on the novel that should submit to every event and contingency of historical actuality. Within the novels, the author suspends both pure fact and pure fiction in a play between the interwoven worlds of fact and fiction. In the words of the anonymous heroine of *Bonsoir, Thérèse*:

Où est la ligne du partage des eaux du vrai de l'inventé? (vol.1, p.156)

This surely creates one of the strongest aspects of the appeal of Triolet's creative art. The illusion of a frontier dividing imagination and history is dispelled in the episode where Lewka discovers a real underworld in the town which he thought he knew so intimately. The phantasmagoria sustained within the very subject of the novel is one to which no substantial critical attention would seem to have been paid. The textually and thematically maintained underworld is reminiscent more of Dostoevsky and Gogol than of the contemporary (socialist) realist writers. This real and metaphorical underworld should be recognised as a fundamental characteristic underlying all her work. Lewka's first descent into the underworld is instigated by his meeting with Frère Ignace. He is a figure of both worlds in that as a monk in an atheistic state he is condemned to the exclusion of life on the outskirts by his faith:

Notre gouvernement n'aime pas les inadaptés comme moi; il n'est pas pour la religion non plus. (p.125)

His exclusion also echoes that of the artist whose commitment to his function as an artist preempts that of citizen. This renders him treasonable in the eyes of the state. It also reinforces the comparison between an artist's passion and religious faith.

The passage from reality into phantasmagoria is narrated in the stylistic presentation of the episode. When they meet, Lewka is struck by Ignace's complete



isolation from the recent political events. They embark at the suggestion of Ignace on a visit of the town by which Ignace wishes to prove to Lewka that his vision of reality is limited, thus incomplete. The reader is confronted by a sub-textual nightmare echoing through the factual visit:

on aurait dit que Frère Ignace était aspiré dans les boyaux des rues étroites devant eux...(p.128)

C'était hallucinant(...) Ils degingolèrent tous les deux au fond du noir.(...) Lewka ressentait la peur inextricable du cauchemar. (p.129)

The narration of this descent into the nightmarish unreal city is sustained in its delirious ambiguity:

Lewka nageait entre le rêve et la réalité (...) Lewka voulait parler, mais la voix ne sortait pas de sa poitrine écrasée par la pierre. Un rat, assis au pied du matelas, regardait Lewka avec des yeux luisants. Les yeux d'Ignace. "Hein, disait Ignace ou le rat, qu'est-ce que je te disais? Tu l'as perdu, le pari! Tu es en mon pouvoir!" Et Lewka entendit sa propre voix - d'où sortait elle? - qui disait: "Erreur, erreur..."(p.130)

The episode's immediate function is to make Lewka aware of the existence of an underground world. This is later to be associated with the political resistance forming to oppose the cultural suffocation imposed by the power-struggles within the people's government. It has the equally important function of situating the artist in the imaginative reality of the dream and the nightmare, thereby liberating textual reality from the crushing imposition of historical laws. The impressionistic nightmare closes with an equally powerful evocation of both the horrors of reality and the grotesque, imagistic distortions of a dream:

Un piétinement traversait son sommeil vertigineux, les yeux ouverts...au niveau de sa tête, autour du matelas par terre, tournaient des pieds, puants, sales... des voix, étouffées par la pierre, par la fumée de tabac toujours plus épaisse...Il semblait à Lewka qu'il était couché par terre, dans une gare, et qu'autour de sa tête s'agitait et courait une foule dense. On transportait des caisses, des sacs...Un rideau de cheveux noirs, une bouche, la nuit profonde, éternelle. (p.131)

The realistic and phantasmagoric aspects of the night haunt Lewka equally. The event's reality is never put into question, and Lewka later renews his contact with this underworld. The implication however is that imagination and reality occupy



co-existing, interweaving realities where an artistic reality is no less real or fabricated than its historical counterpart. These two aspects are underlined separately: the realistic and prophetic significance of the episode is emphasised after Lewka has met Leon and the resistance poets and he realises the equivocal meaning of Ignace's wager:

C'était comme s'il avait appris que sa mère avait eu un amant. Toute chose se présentait à lui sous un autre aspect. Le sens qu'il avait donné jusque-là aux événements, aux mots n'était plus le même. Frère Ignace, tapi dans le bas quartier de la ville faisait partie d'une organisation clandestine...(...) Mais Ignace avait gagné le pari: il y avait des coins qu'il ne connaissait pas. (p.164)

The nightmarish qualities of the episode are foregrounded when Lewka returns to the church having decided to commit suicide. As he falls down the stairs he recalls the well down which he fell following Ignace, and which brought him into the underworld. As he loses consciousness in a semi-delirious stupor, the episode's dreamlike impressions return:

Sa tête brouillée par l'alcool le transporta aussitôt dans la salle souterraine, où l'avait emmené Frère Ignace. Il se crut encore une fois entraîné parmi une foule invisible...il se crut couché par terre avec les pieds sales qui le piétinaient..on transportait des caisses de dynamite...et on allait y mettre le feu pour faire sauter tout le pays! Lewka entendit remuer à côté...on allait se saisir de lui...Il sentit ses cheveux bouger, pousser un hurlement de dément et tomba raide, la tête en avant. (pp.170-1)

The interwoven images of art and reality are skilfully maintained in the passages preceding Lewka's suicide. In the above-quoted paragraph he dreams of dynamite being transported, linked initially to his desire to destroy the monument to Stalin. This is extended in the following section to the metaphors of creativity and inspiration that have recurred throughout the text:

Le coffret ne s'ouvre pas toujours si facilement. Ce n'est pas une solution que de le faire sauter à la dynamite. (p.178)

The truth and immortality of the work of art remain unaffected by the use of power and destruction just as in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, "Manuscripts don't burn". This brings the artist into direct confrontation with his aesthetic responsibility narrated both directly and via myths, giving the text an



additional allegorical dimension which will be considered below. The advance and truth incarnated in the created work is maintained in the use of the church echo that has fascinated and amused Lewka throughout the text. He considers his potential loss to the state, asking the question in the very environment where he has grown up, to which he has devoted his professional and artistic visions and where he sought sanctuary from the unbearable vision of the art and town he had massacred. The echo provides him not with a repeat but an answer and as if satisfied with this judgement from the art he has most revered, Lewka finds solace and serenity in his decision to kill himself:

Au passage. Lewka demanda fortement à l'écho: "L'humanité n'y perdra rien?" - "Rien, rien, rien..." répondit l'écho avec ampleur. (p.178)

Throughout the text and Triolet's later assessments and interpretations of the text, there is a constant play of actuality and imagination. The two worlds are not just conflated on a narrative level but are extended to the role of the novel in its social environment and the clairvoyance of the events of the novel in relation to the passage of history. The meeting of created personality and textual reality is thus extended to the creative personality. The prophetic vision of the artist within the text is maintained by the novel's anticipation of referential history. It is clear that the novel's immediate historical environment is that of the Twentieth Party Congress. The most fascinating characteristics of the novel's anticipation of external reality are found first in the figure of the monument itself. Triolet admittedly based her story on the factual account of the Czech sculptor Svec, who committed suicide after creating a hideous monument to Stalin which portrayed the Soviet leader on a background of people representing the new strata of socialist society. The text nevertheless has a striking advance on the later unfolding of events. Svec's monument likewise dominated the town as well as providing an unintentionally ironic commentary on the leader and his role by being situated in a part of the town whose very foundations would be threatened by the later attempt to destroy the monument. The monument's destruction was of course not conceived



until the full horrors of the Stalinist era had been exposed, that is posterior to the novel's composition. Triolet also remarks on the staggering "mimétisme de la réalité par rapport à la chose écrite" when she first saw the monument in 1962, the year of its eventual destruction. The visual similarities between the Prague monument and Lewka's sculpture are reinforced by the underground resemblances the monuments shared. Triolet points to the uncanny discovery, once the monument had been razed, of its former, illicit use as a meeting place of the city's delinquent youth:

...dans la cave aménagée sous l'énorme socle, on y aurait découvert qu'elle était devenue le lieu de rendez-vous des mauvais garçons, mauvaises filles, trafiquants, bandits... la lie de la capitale. Comme cela est décrit dans *Le Monument* où un repère semblable est situé dans les sous-sols d'une partie désaffectée de la ville. (Preface, p.22)

A more striking advance of art and reality is the parallel between these underground hiding-places and that of Jean le Moel in *Bonsoir, Thérèse* (1938).

Equally interesting is the "posthumous re-evaluation" of the novel's genesis by its author who was so interested and repelled by the reinterpretation of artistic works that this became the thematic structure of a later novel (*Le Grand jamais*). In the debate following the publication of the novel maintained over four months in *Les Lettres françaises*, Triolet defends her subject-matter by showing its thematic roots in her works which pre-date by as much as eighteen years the cataclysmic events of 1956. Her study in novel form of the destruction of an artist caught in the paradoxes of history and the artistic imagination can be traced back to Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930. She was, however, accused of manipulating to her own advantage the revelations of Krushchev's leaked speech once the courageous move of revelation had been undertaken by another. The much debated and ultimately irresolvable question of Triolet's awareness of the realities of Stalinist rule is less significant here, however, than the later explanation she gives for the direct historical environment which provided the catalyst for the novel.



In the publication of *Le Monument* in the *Oeuvres Croisées* in 1965, Triolet's introduction refers the reader straight away to the scandal caused by the portrait of Stalin drawn by Picasso for the cover of *Les Lettres françaises* on Stalin's death. The semi-idealised portrait caused a radical crisis in the political and intellectual circles of the Left, almost precipitating both Aragon and Picasso's downfall. Aragon, in particular, was not only held responsible for allowing the portrait to be published but scorned for displaying by his support for the picture the untenability of his position as a realistic writer. The affair provides a striking commentary on the treacherous relationship between art and politics:

Le parti a parfaitement le droit d'intervenir dans les affaires de l'art à condition de ne jamais se tromper.<sup>3</sup>

The portrait also remains an indictment of those who pass philistine judgements on art in the name of political values where these values are not only short-lived but also corruptive. The genealogical link between the 1953 portrait crisis and the subject matter of *Le Monument* is obvious. The most interesting thing to speculate on, however is why Triolet never refers to it before 1965. Perhaps the events of the Twentieth Party Congress and the furore provoked by the book were already painful enough without reviving other reminders of the mutually accepted and perpetuated political blindness. Or perhaps it was only when she came to reassess the novel that Triolet, with sufficient temporal distance to be able to consider her novel more objectively, recognised another example of the mimetic and symbiotic subconsciousness uniting creative art and political actuality.

### **Myths and Mayakovsky**

If my methodological approach here is based on avoiding pure biographical determinism, there is a clear paradigmatic framework underlying Triolet's analysis of art and the artist's role in society which is that of Mayakovsky as an avant-garde

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3. Aragon, remarking on this event just after Thorez's intervention from the U.S.S.R, and the leader's rebuke to the P.C.F. for their reaction to the portrait when it had been received enthusiastically in the Soviet Union. Quoted in O.C. vol.14, p.14.



artist in the new Soviet State. This is of course the model behind her own analysis of her work as quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

Triolet's works can be read as fictional reworkings of the poet who tries to unite his destinies of social being and artist, but who when *forced*, would rather choose the life-asserting morality of art than accept the death-in-life alternative of a philistine society.

Et si leur vie leur est rendu invivable, ils choisissent de ne plus vivre, plutôt que faillir devant l'art tel qu'ils le conçoivent, en leur âme et conscience.  
(Preface, vol.5, p.20)

And as Tsvetaeva explained:

Pendant douze ans, Maïakovski homme a cherché à tuer Maïakovski poète; à la treizième année le poète s'est levé et a tué l'homme(...) Il a vécu comme un homme et est mort comme un poète.<sup>4</sup>

In the re-workings of the literary myth, Triolet seems to come to the increasingly regular conclusion that in a society that fails or refuses to progress and be enlightened by the truth and morality of art, there is but one possible destiny for the artist. This is the death-in-life of non-creativity and cowardice. The only alternative is the death of the artist with the full understanding that this is an individual and uncomprehended act, not one of sacrifice and martyrdom. As Lewka recognises:

"Ce n'est pas dans tes moyens d'assassiner l'art" (...) disait Torsch. Pauvre Torsch! il ne comprendrait jamais cette manie des grandeurs chez l'artiste, l'importance absolue que leur oeuvre a pour eux. Jamais il ne comprendrait pourquoi Lewka s'est tué... "il n'y a pas mort d'homme..." disait Torsch. Eh bien, il verra s'il n'y a pas mort d'homme! Si cela pouvait l'aider à comprendre...Alors je me tuerais pour me venger de Torsch, parce qu'il ne comprend pas l'importance de l'art pour l'artiste? (p.176)

The particular genealogical link between Mayakovsky and Triolet's protagonists is most explicitly recognised in Alexis Slavsky, Jenny in *Personne ne m'aime*, Lewka, Clarisse in *Les Manigances*, Frank Mosso in *Le Rendez-Vous des Etrangers* and Regis Lalande in *Le Grand Jamais*. Each character shares not only the collision of private and political destinies but also the particularly prophetic role which Mayakovsky attributed to himself and Triolet attributed to art and

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4. Marina Tsvetaeva, *L'Art à la lumière de la conscience*, p.92.



artists. Mayakovsky was never reluctant to assert the futuristic vision and salvatory capacity of art which he situated in opposition to the petty bourgeois mindlessness of the philistine public.

If the myth of Mayakovsky is recurrent to the point of being obsessive in Triolet's literary works, there is an important use of myths which deserves more particular attention. The recurrent use particularly of the Oedipal legend, Pygmalion and the Golem of Prague rescues the reader from the seeming hopelessness of the historical present:

...j'ai voulu, ici comme ailleurs, prendre la situation, le moment le plus aigu, l'étape la plus difficile pour le pays et l'artiste.(...) Le problème central est celui de la création dans un monde où tout est à l'état de désagrégation de l'atome, de mutation de l'espèce, dans un monde où sciences et doctrines avancent, se trompent, reviennent sur leurs pas, font des bonds dans l'avenir, avec l'exaltation de la découverte et les tâtonnements de l'erreur...un monde où l'homme lui-même ne porte encore que les embryons de l'homme à venir.<sup>5</sup>

They objectify humanity's collective existence, beginnings and goals, to rouse the individual against submission and surrender to a mindless determinism and impersonality. In *Le Monument*, the leitmotif of Oedipus demonstrates Triolet's challenge to the monstrous, mythical collective of her era: that of totalitarianism and its implicit pessimism expressed towards human potential and individual worth.

The tragic links between Lewka and Oedipus were noticed by several contemporary critics reacting to the novel's publication. Cocteau brought attention to the "machine infernale" that seems to suspend the protagonist in the hands of destiny. Guillevic remarked, "Lewka marche à son destin comme Oedipe, comme Phèdre".<sup>6</sup> The Belgian critic, André Claude wrote:

Personnellement, je trouve *Le Monument* proche de la tragédie grecque. Les dieux poussaient Oedipe vers le plus affreux malheur.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Elsa Triolet, *La Lutte avec l'Ange* published in *Les Lettres Françaises*, 5.9.57.  
 6. Guillevic, in a letter cited by Triolet in the Appendix 1, O.C. vol.14, p.189.  
 7. Letter quoted as above in O.C. vol.14, p.189.



This metaphorical allusion can be extended further. Like Oedipus, Lewka is unable to stand the sight of the misfortunes he had wrought by ignorance. He therefore chooses not to pluck out his eyes but to leave the money awarded to him by the Stalin prize "à l'Institut des Jeunes Aveugles, à ceux qui ne verront jamais comment Lewka a deshonoré sa ville et la camarade Staline". In both stories the most searing rhetorical question is the same. Is ignorance the same as innocence? Can we judge by the purity of intention if the realisation of our acts proves corrupt or damning? This provocative use of the Oedipus legend is recurrent in the literature of the war and the post-Stalinist years. There is a particularly strong link between Triolet's reworking of the myth and that found in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* which aims equally at reminding those who seek to exculpate themselves that they are perhaps approaching the question from an already distorted angle:

Anyone who thinks that the Communist regimes of Central Europe are exclusively the works of criminals is obviously overlooking a basic truth: the criminal regimes were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise. They defended the road so valiantly that they were forced to execute many people. Later it became clear that there was no paradise, that the enthusiasts were therefore murderers.<sup>8</sup>

Kundera's hero Tomas points out that it is not sufficient to claim that the accused did not know the crimes latent within the regime they were enforcing. In his opinion, the question is not whether they really did not know or whether they did not believe. We can never know in advance, Tomas argues, since the human condition is such that there is no eternal return, immortal saviour or veritable historical hindsight. We should therefore reconsider our responsibility faced with our errors, misjudgements and crimes.

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8. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p.176. Kundera was befriended by Triolet and Aragon immediately after his exile to Paris and indeed recognises Aragon's support in bringing literary attention to his first novel. Aragon wrote the introduction to *The Joke* which was published with the text until Kundera asked for it to be removed following Aragon's change of heart towards Brezhnev's government. His introduction to *The Joke* includes a rare searing criticism of the Soviet interventionist policies in Central Europe and Kundera quotes Aragon as saying that he would never again set foot in the country. Three years later, however, he was in Moscow to receive a medal from Brezhnev.



The same moral is underlined skilfully throughout Triolet's narrative. The reader is allowed to see the historical pressures upon Lewka, as s/he can also see the well-intentioned political activities of certain members of the government, for example the "Ministre des Beaux Arts" and Torsch. There can be no doubt that the artistic moral being preached by the portrait of Lewka and his monument should be extended to that of the metaphorical monument and its perpetrator:

Torsch! Mon pauvre ami Torsch(...) Maintenant que vont commencer les années les plus dures. Toi aussi, tu as ton monument... Et tout le monde te tombera dessus. On te vomira. Pour de mauvaises raisons, si on peut s'exprimer ainsi. (p.176)

Lewka accepts his tragic destiny, adding thus an additional possible interpretation to Jean-Claude Chabrol's qualification of Lewka as "Ce Hamlet moderne"<sup>9</sup>. He acts according to the morality of the tragic hero, recognising his guilt in terms of his understanding of the crime against art, not seeking self-excuse in the pretext of a commissioned monument to a disinherited autocrat. The comparison with Meursault and the refusal to reconsider an action from a self-exculpating perspective is again striking. Torsch on the contrary recognises the parallel of artist and politician but justifies human error in the name of the final cause and the linear blindness of the human condition:

Lui aussi, Torsch, il avait créé un monument visible de partout...Et il ne se tuerait pas, ah non, il dépasserait le mal...C'était une étape. La plus difficile, peut-être, car déjà on croyait pouvoir réussir, et même avoir réussi. Tant de choses ont déjà été faites, qui pourrait nier qu'elles aient été faites? Quand le mal sera surmonté, dépassé, ces choses apparaîtront, splendides, utiles. Aujourd'hui, il s'agissait de surmonter. Lui, n'avait pas mis que sa vie...(p.182)

Torsch recognises the absurdity and innocence of a one-way human existence:

La vie est irréversible, mais il faut dépasser le mal. (p.182)

Lewka recognises the demands of art and the responsibility of the individual, and in his case, the artist. He therefore cedes before the powerful awareness that in an ethics without God, freedom of choice imparts the most complete awareness of

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9. Chabrol, "Le Monument d'Elsa", *Les Lettres françaises*, no.638.



human responsibility, a moral recognised by Dostoevsky in *The Devils* and cited by Simone de Beauvoir as the forenote to *Le Sang des Autres*:

Chacun est responsable de tout devant tous.

This is summarised by Tomas thus:

I am not saying they should pluck out their eyes. I am only saying that morality is not what it was.<sup>10</sup>

The responsibility inherent in ignorance or failed intentions discussed and narrated within the novel was scarcely touched upon in the vitriolic debates following the publication of *Le Monument*. Jacques Madaule does refer explicitly to the symbolic link between the failed artistic monument and Torsch's social-political monument:

Le monument de Torsch est moins désespérant que celui de Lewka parce que, en politique, on peut redresser une ligne, mais qu'un chef-d'oeuvre ne devient pas. Il est ou il n'est pas.<sup>11</sup>

Not only can Madaule be criticised for his remarkable political magnanimity which strikes somewhat casual in terms of human life, but he also seems to forget the immense period of time needed for a work of art to come of age. Frequently a work of avant-garde experimentalism will not be appreciated or aesthetically justified until the avant-garde itself has achieved respectability or canonisation. But this question, like that of whether the communist enthusiasts were misled or intentionally corrupt, misses the real ethical question that Triolet's novel foregrounds. Literary or other creative arts are shown to be threatened and perverted in a society preaching too rigid a relativism to other modes of human activity. This reduces the problems of creativity to technical trivia and diminishes the broader frame of reference to a rigid monistic scheme into which art has to be forced whatever the cost. Triolet's novel refuses the crude sociological dogmatism of Lewka's environment and demonstrates the dialectical role of the artist and the creative work. The moral involvement of the artist, whose work is not peripheral or

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10. Tomas in Kundera's film-script for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

11. Jacques Madaule, "Livres nouveaux", *Le Monde*, 20.6.57.



decorative but as essential as science or agriculture is reminiscent of Tsevetseva's assertion:

L'artiste n'est coupable que dans deux cas: dans le cas, déjà mentionné, où il renonce à l'oeuvre (au bénéfice de n'importe qui) et lorsqu'il crée une oeuvre qui n'est pas artistique. C'est là que s'arrête sa faible responsabilité et que commence son immense responsabilité d'être humain.<sup>12</sup>

The guilt of Lewka's artless work is the question raised by the monument itself. The question of whether or not "le jeu était faussé" is subordinate to the artist's responsibility to art. The fault lies also within the strategic decision to create the work of art according to a school - in this case creating a work according to the tenets of socialist realism. Not only was the game a false one to begin with, but, as Mayakovsky maintained in his essay, *Comment faire les vers*:

Il n'existe pas de règle qui ferait d'un homme un poète; c'est justement l'homme qui crée les règles poétiques qui s'appelle poète.<sup>13</sup>

Lewka can also be metaphorically associated with Icarus, and as such, genealogically linked to Blanche in *Luna-Park* in that his imagination like that of so many prophetic, even clairvoyant artists is too greatly separated from the collective imagination of his era:

Je vais leur montrer si l'art est une chose grave, aussi grave que la technique, l'agriculture et l'électricité! L'homme-oiseau que les ailes refusent de tenir dans l'air, se tue...L'homme-oiseau n'a pas assassiné la science, ce n'était pas dans son pouvoir, mais il s'est tué lui-même. (p.175)

Triolet confirms the thematic link between her hero and the mythological Icarus whose imagination was too far in advance of the imagination of his era:

En acceptant et exécutant la commande, il ne trahit point son art, bien au contraire, il le cherche, il est Icare, il veut voler au-delà de son art, il a ce courage insensé.(p.192)

But the writings of Triolet, both here and elsewhere confirm that an artist must exist and create within his or her epoch and that excessive clairvoyance, even if borne out by the eventual direction taken by society, will leave the creative artist excluded and isolated from the very era into which s/he hopes to be interrelated:

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12. Tsevetseva, *L'Art à la lumière de la conscience*, p.29.

13. *Maïakovski, vers et proses*, p.335.



The poet is not a free agent and in order to survive, to make his work count, the imaginative writer must fulfill the literary demands of his epoch.<sup>14</sup>

The almost paradoxical burden upon Lewka is that to create art and aspire to the truth that art can incarnate, the artist must not seek merely to flatter or serve the society within which he exists, a notion Triolet shares with both Tsvetaeva and Nizan:

C'est pourquoi si tu veux servir Dieu ou les hommes, si tu veux servir en général, faire une oeuvre de bien, inscris-toi a l'armée du Salut, que sais-je encore, et *renonce à la poésie*.<sup>15</sup>

C'est Platon qui distinguait dans la classification des arts, ceux de la flatterie. Il y a beaucoup d'écrivains qui ont pour ambition d'être simplement des flatteurs et il me plaît que Platon ait associé dans la même catégorie intellectuelle les cuisiniers et ce genre d'écrivains.<sup>16</sup>

The metaphorical allusions to both aspirations to freedom by flight and the burden of the hero's tragic destiny is well-expressed by David d'Anger:

L'artiste dont les inspirations demeurent soumises aux exigences du pouvoir me fait songer à l'oiseau retenu par une patte et que l'enfant permet de voler de toute la longueur du lien.<sup>17</sup>

*Le Monument* can be read as a moral far beyond that which Triolet claimed for it. She claims that Lewka was too far in advance of his society but that his courage impelled him to "voler au-delà de son art". The development of the text and the moral that is maintained throughout and beyond the text is rather that Lewka was trapped - and indeed trapped himself - to extend the simile of d'Anger. He recognises his double punishment for sacrificing his personal view of art, even if compelled to do so by the violent propagandist methods of the government : he has killed his art and completes his tragic destiny by killing himself.

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14. The basic premise of the *Opoyaz* theoreticians, here summarised by Erlich, in *Russian Formalism*, p.253.

15. Tsvetaeva, *L'Art à la lumière de la conscience*, p.91.

16. Nizan, *Intellectuel communiste*, p.104

17. Quoted by Aragon in his article, "David d'Anger et l'art national" *La Nouvelle critique*, May 1956, p.173.



## The Linguistic Metaphor

The aporia separating the artist's vision from the aims and motivations of the society in which s/he works is often such that it destroys the artist. Despite this anachronic destructiveness, Triolet maintains a firmly expressed hope in the future which should see art rising as an equal to science, and where the artist receives recognition for his/her craft and vision. In the artists' metaphorical underground of resistance and humanism, there is the hope that this underground will prove truer than the society which forced it into exile and that this truth will outlive the collective lies of historicity and determinism. The next chapter will consider the truth of art and the theories of "Le Mentir-vrai". Here, the clairvoyance of art is beginning to consolidate the truth of art conflicting with the distorted untruths of the society in which it is trying to survive. This supports Triolet's formative link with the early Futurist and experimental writers, in particular the Serapion Brothers. They share a recurrent move to unite the visions of the artist as outsider with the needs of those of the mass of unhappy or betrayed people. Barooshian expresses a certain scepticism as to the aims other than pragmatic of these artists who believed they could assert an original, integrated role for the artist in the new structures of society.<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding, there is still a protracted and constantly maintained theme in much of their work that we can see also borne out in the stylistic structures in Triolet's fiction.

Her characters in the metaphorical labyrinthine world seek active and *verbal* participation in the society in which they need to be dialectically involved to achieve their artistic and visionary purposes. The significance of the personal meeting the political can therefore be extended to the conception of an artist's aesthetic vision having both function and importance in an era of historical upheaval. This question is narrated in *Alexis Slavsky*, when Alexis feels a novel sense of elation following the meeting with his neighbour at the announcement of

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18. Barooshian, *The Cubo-Futurists, 1910-1930*, p.16.



Mussolini's defeat. It brings him to realise the humanitarian sense of purpose and collective destiny:

A la sortie du pays, il rencontra le grand-père Vallier qui lui dit: "Salut!", et sa petite-fille, encore plus douce et dorée dans l'air matinale que la nuit dernière, s'arrêta pour lui dire: "Il est rendu, votre cousin, Monsieur... Mais il n'aura plus à attendre longtemps, avec les événements! Pour des gens comme vous et comme nous, c'est un beau jour que le jour d'aujourd'hui". "Pour des gens comme vous et comme nous..." chantonnait Alexis...(pp.276-77)

This example of the created personality finding solace when his personal identity is subsumed into the greater communal identity is more fully developed in the conflicting visions of "nous" and "vous" in *Le Monument*. This can be seen when Lewka becomes aware of the extensive gulf dividing the newly formed People's Government from the people. The visions and purposes of the government become as separated from the principles of its democratic beginnings as the autocratic leaders do from the figure of the artist and the values he metaphorically subsumes. This is narrated not only thematically but in the grammatical divisions that separate the artist and the political leaders:

Torsch vida son verre, le posa, et dit tout bas:  
 - comment cela se fait-il, Lewka, que tu ne veuilles pas nous aider?  
 - Comment? - Lewka se leva d'un bond, les deux bras en l'air. - Moi? Je ne veux pas vous aider? *Vous* aider? Alors, maintenant, il y a *vous* et il y a *nous*? *Vous*, c'est qui - le gouvernement? Et alors, le gouvernement, ce n'est pas *nous*? Et *nous*, c'est qui? (p.83)

The verbal distinction preempting and indicative of the political and social reality is recurrent throughout the text. A subjective identity gradually loses sight of the quality of its own ego as it fails to recognise the receiver of the work who will animate it and give it meaning. This indirectly parallels Lewka's theory of art - it should be a conversation between two speaking parties not a declaration to an unknown other:

Il ne fallait pas que ce fût un monologue. Un monument doit parler aux foules, et elles doivent lui répondre. (p.99)

The notion of creativity depending on the meeting of speaker and addressee will be extended in the next section.



The increasingly anguished sense of alienation and alterity plagues Lewka when he meets his childhood companion. Despite Ignace's words of unity, "ceux de la vieille ville tiendront toujours ensemble"(p.124), Lewka realises he is linked neither to the world of his infancy, nor to that of the government.

Tiens, j'ai dit "nous" songea Lewka. Il était vrai qu'il appartenait au conseil de la ville et qu'Ignace n'y appartenait pas. (p.128)

Neither does he have a place within the "official" political resistance:

- Avec vous? - répéta Lewka, souriant, - qui ça, vous?
- Nous! cria-t-elle, les révolutionnaires épris de la liberté! (p.161)

His foreign education and intellectual role have even alienated him from the political "other", the people:

Le retable, dit Lewka, c'est aussi de la littérature. A cette époque l'imagination de l'artiste correspondait-elle à celle du peuple? Ce qui est déchirant pour moi, c'est que mon imagination à moi ne corresponde pas à celle du peuple. (p.142)

Lewka is brought to express verbally the unbearable paradox between the artistic vision needing inspiration and expression in the society in which it lives and which indeed makes it live, and the inexpressible otherness of the artist's condition that must always leave him or her alienated:

Et pendant que l'artiste erre, la foule se gausse, elle ne voit qu'une oeuvre douteuse, elle n'y voit pas l'étape. Vous, vous me comprenez, continuait Lewka, parce que vous êtes un homme de l'art. D'autres camarades nous considèrent, nous, les artistes, comme des rigolos et des hommes imbus de nous-mêmes. Parce que notre travail est, par définition, un travail individuel (...) Il ne vaudrait pas grand chose, l'artiste qui ne saurait pas se battre pour son oeuvre...Alors vous dites de lui qu'il est suffisant, vaniteux, présomptueux, hypersensible. Et, remarquez, que dans ce cas précis, je dis vous, je ne dis pas nous...(p.143)

This creation of a clear verbal identity, accompanied by a vivid sense of linguistic otherness sets the creative artist against the massive impersonality of the indifferent other, "ils", the miscomprehending crowd, the homogeneous government. In this way, verbal otherness can be linked clearly to the artistic underworld and the desire for synthesis expressed in the fiction of Triolet's formative peers. It also points to an increasingly verbal self-consciousness that



preoccupies her protagonists, to reach its most complete expression in the opening words of *Ecoutez-Voir*:

J'ai déjà existé sur les pages d'un roman. (vol.36, p.13).

The paradigmatic importance of Mayakovsky can therefore be traced also in this leitmotif of created and creative personalities seeking to assert their subjectivity within a greater subjective whole:

All of Mayakovsky's great long poems show him attempting to connect "I" with "we", to associate his own needs with those of the mass of unhappy people.<sup>19</sup>

The "I - we - they" confrontation is perhaps best paralleled in its signification in Zamyatin's *We*, written in 1920:

I shall merely attempt to record what I see, what I think - to be more exact what *we* think (*we*, precisely, and let this *We* serve as the title to the entries I am making).<sup>20</sup>

Like Lewka, the anonymous hero starts with a confident belief in a new future in which he will be integrated within the greater, caring whole. He is suddenly confronted with his own subjectivity becoming objectified by the amorphous, mass identity:

I am in front of a mirror. And for the first time in my life (yes, precisely so: for the first time in my life) I see myself clearly, distinctly, consciously; I see myself with amazement, as if I were somebody else's I.<sup>21</sup>

From this moment, he comes to the gradual, distressing, realisation that the collective anonymous identity and his subjective self are neither serving nor served by same purposes.

I feel ashamed, pained, afraid for their sakes. But then, who are they? And who am I, myself - am I with the they's or the we's? Really, do I know?<sup>22</sup>

Similarly in *We*, the defensive and attacked values of subjective identity and individual value are synonymous with art, morality and truth. These become relegated to the underground resistance, threatened uncompromisingly by the

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19. *Poets of Modern Russia*, p.172.

20. Zamyatin, *We*, p.20.

21. *We*, p.70.

22. *We*, p.145.



monolithism of the political actuality. The devastating loneliness and alienation of this "Us -we- you" disparity is described poignantly by Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness* and *The Joke*. Like other contemporary Eastern European writers, he gives voice to the painful awareness of the false division put up between private and personal destinies, collective and subjective identities:

Imagine having an arm amputated and implanted on someone else. Imagine that person sitting opposite you and gesticulating with it in your face. You would stare at that arm as at a ghost. Even though it was your own personal, beloved arm you would be horrified at the possibility of its touching you.<sup>23</sup>

To conclude this chapter as well as to open critical perspectives towards Part Three, attention can be drawn to the increasingly important sense of time in the works studied. If the artist is being presented "pris dans son temps, en ce que son temps à un moment précis, daté, a de plus aigu" he is seen at the same time as a canary: that is unconsciously providing a commentary and prophecy for his era:

Imaginative writers can sometimes use their intuitive powers to see patterns forming that the common run of their contemporaries have not detected; in this sense they may be compared with canaries that miners used to take down shafts with them to give them early warning of toxic gases.<sup>24</sup>

But the artist is also consciously defending the purity and value of his art and seeks by coinciding artistic vision and historical awareness to achieve a synthesis of two parallel visions of time: that contemporary with the work's conception and realisation and that captured and immortalised within the work itself. The artist is equally vulnerable to these demands of time. If he fails the voice of his time, or if he confuses time and political contingencies, he will fail also to achieve the particular time pertinent to aesthetics. His work will be trapped within a limited epoch and will therefore be destined to perish within it. Thus when Lewka realises his monument is lifeless and does not even incarnate the vision of

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23. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p.216.

24. "The Writer as Canary", *Journal of Contemporary History*, p.18. This example is most appropriate when one recalls that the canary (and thus to maintain the given analogy, the writer as canary), does not *consciously* give warning of toxic gases by purposely dying but gives the signal in spite of itself. This is not emphasised sufficiently by Lehmann, who gives the impression that unlike canaries, imaginative writers are using their special gifts *knowingly*. I would suggest his metaphor is more successful than the literal explanation he offers.



his epoch let alone his vision of the artistic work, he turns from the sight of art betrayed in a timeless, lifeless monument to considering his own life. The failure to understand a political era, and to express the timeless value of an era in art leads him to question the value of his own time as a human being:

Il sortit dans la rue...Où aller? Que faire? Comment tuer le temps? Lui, dont la vie a été pleine comme un oeuf frais, le voilà réduit à se battre avec le temps. Le temps est devenu son pire ennemi. Comment tuer le temps sans se tuer...Se tuer? Lewka s'arrêta, stupéfait: il n'y avait jamais songé. (p.137)

The narrative presentation of his suicide achieves a perfect formal and artistic whole for he returns to the church, the site of his childhood games and the symbol of his devotion to art. The setting evokes the quasi-religious and artistic impulses of its epoch. It also shows the transcending of historical immediacy through poetical unity and artistic vision. This place of exile was portrayed in the introductory chapter:

dans l'ombre teintée de toutes les couleurs des vitraux, le rouge, le bleu, le vert, le jaune, avec l'intensité à jamais perdue au fond de la vie. (p.34)

At the novel's conclusion, it becomes the point of synthesis between the artist and his imagination, art and life, life and death:

Rubis, émeraudes et saphirs emplissaient la petite pièce voûtée. Ils étincelaient dans l'unique vitrail, et de là roulaient sur les dalles, par terre. Une terrible odeur de mort, mélangée à celle de l'encens. Lewka était couché sur le lit, les yeux grands ouverts, dans la position du cadavre mis en bière. (p.180)

The conflicting visions of modernity and actuality captured in his death are narrated equally well by Tsvetaeva commenting on the death of Essenin:

Voilà pourquoi une commande politique adressée à un poète, n'est pas une commande sans intermédiaires. C'est une commande d'actualité et non de modernité. C'est à l'actualité que nous devons la mort d'Essénine.<sup>25</sup>

The novel's particular relation to time as a truth, and its existence as a condensed reality outside the passage of everyday time enters only referentially into the two texts. But the peculiar relation of art to time, and artistic time to duration, and the redemption of time through art are already embryonic within these pieces. I shall

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25. Tsvetaeva, *Le poète et le temps*, p.36.



now study how these ideas become indivisible from the author and the work's composition until these considerations vie for textual importance with the created characters themselves.

Pourtant, c'est dans les *Cahiers* qu'avait pris naissance ce qui est devenu ensuite une de mes préoccupations littéraires majeures: le condensé du roman (...) Les bonds du roman par-dessus le temps, l'espace, les sentiments, les idées, me donnent le vertige du vide. Ce vertige est le cœur du roman que je m'appête à écrire aujourd'hui, en 1964. (Preface, vol.5, p.22.)



## **Part Three**

**Examining Realism :**

**Convention and Ambiguity**



# Introduction

"...the quick comedians  
extemporally will stage us, and present  
Our Alexandrian revels. Anthony  
shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see  
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness  
I'the posture of a whore."<sup>1</sup>

Italo Calvino, discussing the temporal and referential planes meeting in the above quotation, describes the effect as a "dizzying piece of mental acrobatics"<sup>2</sup>. The queen, Cleopatra, refers bitterly to the parody future theatrical performances will make of their "real" tragedy, when her female and regal greatness will be grotesquely "acted" by another. And these words of course are spoken precisely by an actor already figuring in the role of Cleopatra and representing her according to a playwright's interpretation. By manipulating the traditionally separated notions of art and reality, both become aspects of each other, co-existing in a complex web that challenges our very comprehension of what is, and what we have accepted as, "real". With a similar approach to Calvino's in reference to *Anthony and Cleopatra*, my analysis of the chosen works for this chapter will draw on the construction of a specifically novelistic reality.

Moving beyond the thematic portrayal of the artist as traditional protagonist, I shall consider how Triolet analyses the conventional and experimental aspects of novelistic realism. This analysis begins in the very narration of the texts, each of the novels presenting the theme of artistic creation within its narrative fabric. Triolet's original contribution to the mixed-media architectonics of modern fiction, a subject to be considered more completely in

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1. Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Act II, sc. II, ls. 216-221.  
2. Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine*, p.103.



Part Four, can be seen to emerge from the direction of these texts. For example, *Bonsoir, Thérèse* develops into a study of novel writing; *Luna-Park* can be read as a film director's search for the material to construct his film, called *Luna-Park*; *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* respects the strictest demands of classical theatre, in terms of its structure. Its theme of an aged artist reviewing her life before her approaching death seems to unite in one work the preoccupations common to all of Triolet's novels. Each study of the artist and his or her work can refer us back to the author working within a bilingual, bi-cultural context, considering her own, often fragile relationship with her raw materials through her artist-protagonists. Despite these self-conscious leitmotifs within the text, the narrative code is only ever explored but not entirely exploded, as we shall see to be the case in Part Four. Reality and novelistic realism are considered by juxtaposing traditional narration and self-analytical metatext. The very consistent but often simple "story", however, means that critical readings of these texts have often recognised only the author's pleasant respect of narrative traditionalism. Refusing such limitations, I shall read beyond the theme of art and the artist as narrated by the immediate subject matter of the novels in question, to show how the novels surpass their thematic structure. They offer an idiosyncratic, spatial and temporal discourse which is a complex interaction between the time of writing and the time written about. The novel becomes a play between the intersecting subjectivities and discourse of "je" and the indefinable other whom "je" is addressing. Indeed, as the preceding chapter showed, the novel, and indeed any work of art, evokes an ambiguity that transcends its typology as a purely realistic text. The play of its structure, the presence of historical, biographical and literary voices, internal and referential reality, ambiguity and allegory, all propel the text beyond its immediate and intentional object to say more than the author set out to say. As Camus stated:

Comme les grandes oeuvres, les sentiments profonds signifient toujours plus qu'ils ont conscience de le dire.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p.26.



While Triolet continues to write novels with a clearly narrated subject-matter, the works themselves demonstrate that she ceases to think of the novelist as "Dieu le père"<sup>4</sup> but as a tool through which her personal preoccupations, personal and subconscious selves, her epoch and assimilation of other art will seek a means of expression and find this in words. As Brodsky has said:

Art is not a better but an alternative existence; it is not an attempt to escape reality but the opposite, an attempt to animate it. It is a spirit seeking flesh but finding words.<sup>5</sup>

Triolet's works rotate increasingly around the nature of inspiration, creation, invention and imagination. Rather than inaugurating a quest that should *find* a definition for this art in which she is prepared to believe to the extent of treating a work of art as a finer and purer path to truth than the traditionally posited truths of science and history, Triolet's works seem to seek expression and satisfaction in the quest itself. She examines the entrancing paradox that something a person deliberately creates can assume an autonomous existence and draw the author into this very created universe:

Les oeuvres d'art se détachent du monde empirique et en engendrent un autre qui possède son essence propre, opposé au premier comme s'il était également une réalité.<sup>6</sup>

I shall go on to trace the deliberate construction of an alternative, linguistic reality that we can only feel and believe to be true. This aporia is almost religious. Not being able to step outside our linguistic selves, we have only our impulsion to truth in which we can believe, and the certitude that once the linguists, teleologists, sociologists, political theorists, historians and stylisticians have exhausted their interpretations of the text, its *art* remains untouchable and indefinable.

Et pourtant la littérature *est*, c'est là son plus grand paradoxe.<sup>7</sup>

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4. Triolet herself remarked "je suis Dieu le Père" in reference to the characters she creates and animates in the Postface, O.C.vol.32, p.249. However, her critical self-analysis elsewhere, particularly in her theoretical work, *La Mise en mots* would seem to imply her self-consciousness as a novelist was not that of God creating but of artist listening and being found. See *La Mise en mots*, p.17-18.
  5. Josef Brodsky, *Less than One*, p.123.
  6. Adorno, *Théorie Esthétique*, pp.215-216.
  7. Tsvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, p.184.



The questions of fabrication and authenticity can be seen as structural extensions of the premises considered thematically in Part Two. Here, art was examined as the refusal of a totalitarian society and as the ultimate faith in the value of the individual in a world where determinism and the impersonal forces of historicism would seem to create and impose an externally dictated existence. Creativity was presented as the incarnation of the truth of an era and as the light of illumination on the level of human morality and value in that particular epoch. Accepting the social necessity of art, and the principled aspect of aesthetics, we will now consider Triolet's textual investigation of the essence of art. The duality and ambiguity at the very heart of this quest offers an interesting parallel with Nathalie Sarraute's fictional world which demonstrates:

le besoin et l'impossibilité de saisir dans une oeuvre d'art une valeur absolue.<sup>8</sup>

If the search for that "pribovotchnii element" as it was classified by the Formalists, for that "something" which the artistic work contains but that neither conceptual nor linguistic apparatus permit us to define, is one which by definition we are not to solve, this is only the beginning not the dead-end of the investigation. As Todorov's reading of *The Holy Grail* has shown, the quest itself is both the motivation for and the subject of the very tale being told. As he has confirmed in more than one of his works "Le secret, c'est l'existence du secret."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, I shall consider how Triolet-as-author examines within her novels their thematic and structural framework which assures their classification as "art". The following chapters investigate the boundaries of fictionality, where, for example, a historical event achieves a fictional existence once it enters the boundaries of fictional discourse, as a bathroom sink achieved classification as a work of art once Duchamp had signed it. This novelistic investigation is an original extension of the premises of the Cubists and Futurists who sought to launch a new realism that gave

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8. Sarraute, "Les secrets de la création", *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 1.5.1968.

9. See for example Tsvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose*, p.114-5.



as much credence to the reality of the conceptual and visionary apparatus as it did to the externally verifiable and tangible evidence of "truth". The comparison of Triolet's aesthetic quest with the works of the Cubists and Formalists is not fortuitous. Their work in terms of both collages and "factography" delighted in challenging preconceived notions of art and reality through their use of dynamic form:

We can go on to imagine an arrangement of living lines in which the object which motivates the lines ceases to play the leading part and becomes merely a pretext. From this stage to conceiving the disappearance of the pretext is only a step. The end has become the means.(...)

What is left? A picture. This picture is nothing but a picture. And the difference between this picture and the decorative arrangement which it threatens to be - and which ill-will sees in it - is the intrinsic life of the forms that compose it.<sup>10</sup>

Cubists and Formalists showed that in the end it was the indefinable "art", not its trenchant, dogmatic counterpart, "reality" that won. In a collage, for example, the montage of "real" objects, such as newspaper cuttings, scissors, violin strings or tree-bark could only emphasise more radically the pictorial, two-dimensional artfulness of the complete work.

Taking as the works of reference three novels written in entirely different social, historical and political circumstances,<sup>11</sup> I shall foreground the aesthetic investigations contained within the semantic structure of the novels. In each, nineteenth-century conventional reality compares and overlaps with the truth of individual apprehension and connotational reality. The meeting of memory, desire and imagination is examined in Chapter Six. Chapter Seven studies the created and creative personalities, analysed in terms of their similarities and differences within the text. The omniscient author is replaced by myriad identities that can be or not

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10. Cocteau, *Picasso*, (1923), in Fry (ed.) *Cubism*, article 44.

11. *Bonsoir, Thérèse* was Triolet's first novel written in French, published in 1938, after a ten-year interval following the publication and immensely unfavourable reception of *Camouflages* in the Soviet Union. *Luna-Park* published in 1957, is the second novel in the three volume *Age de Nylon* series in which she intended to write "for others" rather than herself in view of the impassioned reception of *Le Monument*. *Le Rossignol* was written and published in 1970, the last year of her life.



be the author and her invented characters. Chapter Eight considers the thesis of time as aesthetic definition. The author's ability to create, disturb, interrupt, resume and repeat an artistic reality can be seen almost to define the aesthetic function. This is reminiscent of Tomachevsky's definition of artistic structure as the temporal defamiliarisation achieved between the "sjuzhet" and the "fabula":

Le temps de la fable est celui où les événements exposés sont supposés se dérouler; le temps de la narration est le temps nécessaire à la lecture de l'oeuvre (la durée du spectacle). Ce dernier temps répond à la notion que nous avons de la dimension de l'oeuvre.<sup>12</sup>

Time's "absence" will also be considered, where narration takes place seemingly as an aside from the immediate temporal plane. This has the effect of situating the speaker apart from the linearity and inevitability of the human condition. The greatest aesthetic significance is perhaps contained in this static discourse that would *appear* to contribute nothing to the unfolding of the narrative plot, and yet speaks eloquently within the narrative structure:

l'essentiel dans le roman est aussi bien ce qui ne l'est pas.<sup>13</sup>

This is described by Todorov:

On a aussi le sentiment que le récit a repris ici ses droits, qu'il parvient à émerger, par delà les innombrables grilles fonctionnelles et signifiantes, dans la non-signification qui se trouve aussi être la beauté....(...) Le "détail inutile" est peut-être, de tous, le plus utile.<sup>14</sup>

We have hence moved from the social function of art towards the Suprematist belief in an introverted art that can only express itself, not as an iconoclastic break between realism and modernism but as a logical move forward:

Une recherche autour des formes nouvelles, révélant de nouveaux sujets, révèle de relations nouvelles. A partir d'un certain degré de réflexion, réalisme, formalisme et symbolisme dans le roman apparaissent comme constituant une indissoluble unité.<sup>15</sup>

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12. Tomachevsky, in *Théorie de la littérature*, p.281.

13. *La Mise en mots*, p.119.

14. Todorov, *Poétique de la prose*, p.75.

15. Michel Butor, "Le roman comme recherche", *Essais sur le roman*, p.13.



## Chapter Six

### The Referential Illusion.

Créer, c'est aussi donner une forme à son destin. Pour tous ses personnages, leur oeuvre les définit au moins autant qu'elle en est définie. Le comédien nous l'a appris: il n'y pas de frontière entre le paraître et l'être.<sup>1</sup>

This section develops the idea, introduced in Part Two, of a novelistic reality that exists as a synthesis of empirical history, collective memory, personal biography and imagination. Using the three novels introduced above, I shall examine the varying definitions and achievements of novelistic reality and realism. The traditional codes of verisimilitude, authenticity, and external reference will be juxtaposed with techniques that seek to defamiliarise or subvert the literary conventions. This will be traced in terms of memory, desire and reality in *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, intertextual realities and the supernatural in *Luna-Park* and the dream and the daydream in *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*.

As in a Cubist collage, the implication of truth, memory and fantasy within the work of art has the singular effect of rendering our concept of "reality" inconstant. The only accessible truth becomes the world of art and the artistic invention, defined by Valette as a "réalité livresque". Such theories and challenges to our preconceived ideas have been common to many aesthetic theories of the twentieth century, from the Cubists and Russian Cubo-futurists to the "nouveau romanciers" since the 1950s. Notwithstanding, I would still consider Triolet's novelistic investigation of the question to be highly original in the late 1930's;

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1. Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p. 158.



contemporaneous critical readings of the text indeed pay homage to her striking modernity.<sup>2</sup>

The exploration of reality within the bounds of fiction is a feature that characterises Triolet's work from her earliest fictional writings. The theme provides the structure of *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, announced in the Prologue:

Où est la ligne de partage des eaux du vrai de l'inventé? (p.156)

In "Une Vie Etrangère", the unidentified narrator evokes an event that she admits afterwards to be "le prolongement intérieur d'une vague rencontre". The novel's structure is built around this exploitation of artistic inventiveness and aesthetic investigation:

Une recherche sur l'entour du récit, sur son rapport avec le réel, l'orientation du lecteur vers l'au-delà ou l'à-propos de l'écriture.<sup>3</sup>

The structure of *Bonsoir, Thérèse* is reminiscent of a "continuous novel". This genre, established by Gertrude Stein, drew on Cubist theories in the plastic arts which she innovatively applied to the novel. Defamiliarising and foregrounding the artificial nature of novelistic realism which is structured by a code applied uniquely to the "monde scriptible", Stein brings attention to the presentational character and conventions of writing:

When I first began writing I was completely obsessed by the necessity that writing should go on and if writing should go on, what had colons and semi-colons to do with it, what had commas to do with it?<sup>4</sup>

The techniques she applied within her novels have, of course, been the object of concentrated critical attention. Valette, for example, explains that:

La parole, dans le roman, ne se réduit donc pas à la simple imitation des propos tenus par des personnages et rapportés par un auteur. (...) elle participe au récit et doit l'essentiel de son ambiguïté (et de sa richesse) au fait qu'elle transcrit dans le code de l'écrit le langage oral et qu'elle mêle par conséquent les traits spécifiques du locuteur au style propre à l'auteur. Il se crée ainsi un discours original, à mi-chemin de la langue courante et de la langue littéraire.<sup>5</sup>

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2. See, for example, Sartre, "Elsa Triolet, Bonsoir, Thérèse", *Europe*, no.194, p.282.
  3. Michel Apel-Muller, "La Presence d'Elsa", *La Nouvelle critique*, no.36, p.40.
  4. Gertrude Stein, *Look at me Now and Here I am*, p.130
  5. Valette, p.109.



Todorov foregrounds the essential division between the "real" and the recorded, presented as "realistic":

Le réalisme, on l'a vu, n'est pas seulement un discours aussi particulier et aussi réglé que les autres; l'une de ses règles a un statut bien singulier : elle a pour effet de dissimuler toute règle et de nous donner l'impression que le discours est en lui-même parfaitement transparent, autant dire inexistant, et que nous avons affaire à du vécu brut, à une "tranche de la vie". Le réalisme est un type de discours qui voudrait se faire passer pour un autre; un discours dont l'être et le paraître ne coïncident pas.<sup>6</sup>

In *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, for example, we can find instances of foregrounded recording techniques; that is to say where we are both aware of the verisimilitude of fragments of overheard discourse, and aware of the stylistic or punctuation codes that are recording the fleeting, meaningless extracts from a neighbouring "reality". Continuous monologue suggests echoes of conversation which are integrated into the "descriptions" rather than separated by punctuation. In this way, they form part of the onlooker's perception of the scene rather than a traditionally structured and recorded conversation:

Je me suis trompée. Ce n'est pas possible. C'est possible puisque cela est.  
Oui mais je ne peux pas vivre avec cette idée. Eh bien, ne vivez pas.(p.238)

The silence of uninterrupted solitude is also portrayed by the regular use of ellipses which demonstrate simultaneously the conventional achievement of silence recorded by punctuation, as well as the realistic indication of discontinued exchange. The unclear meandering between inner monologue, diegesis and dialogue can be seen, for example, at the end of "La Femme au diamant", precisely as Anne Favart is becoming aware of the deceiving "other side" to the reality she thought she knew:

Ce sont des histoires, et la preuve... Puisqu'il n'a pas baissé les yeux. Si maintenant elle se met à avoir des hallucinations! Il faudrait qu'elle soignât ses nerfs. Comme le bruit d'une ville se transforme quand un désespoir vous tient... La cruauté des passants...

Extending the comparison between Gertrude Stein's continuous novel and *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, it is also noteworthy that the former considered structured

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6. Todorov, "Introduction", *Littérature et réalité*, p.9.



repetition of phrase and event as constantly changing perspectives, reminiscent of film techniques:

Each time the emphasis is different, just as the cinema has each time a slightly different thing to make it all be moving.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Triolet applied this technique of repetition or "remembering", which she describes in her notebooks as "theme and variations", that is, applying a musical code to a new narrative perspective. Marianne Delranc defines this technique as follows:

...c'est à dire en explorant les diverses possibilités qu'un être réel ou fictif recèle en lui-même et que le temps, l'histoire, les circonstances de la vie, révèlent ou annulent.<sup>8</sup>

The effects of spatialised form can be seen throughout *Bonsoir, Thérèse*.

The novel contains seven separated parts which exist as independent and individually self-sustaining short stories (indeed four out of the seven parts were also published separately). Yet the reading of the whole proves that the individual component parts are also interreferential. An event occurring in one section is taken up and developed in another; a character appearing peripherally in one episode is evoked as protagonist elsewhere. This dynamic structure is achieved by the total interweaving of historical time and the present, the invented and the empirically verifiable, fantasy, art and actuality. An event figures first as imaginary before being projected into the external world, or before its reference to historical actuality is clear. As in the Pygmalion legend, imagination is seen to animate and realise its own inventions, demonstrating the extent to which the ideal forms the real:

research into the emergent nature of reality which is constantly transforming itself into multiple appearances, at once fact and fiction.<sup>9</sup>

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7. Stein, p.106.

8. Delranc, "Le double et l'autre", *Europe*, no.717-8, p.165.

9. Wylie Sypher, *From Rococco to Cubism in Art and Literature*, p.270



## The Reality of Memory and Desire

The alternative realities of interwoven dreams and recollections are introduced by a troubling shift in the narrative sequence in the Prologue of *Bonsoir, Thérèse*. Having evoked her family adopted by chance as a result of the uncanny play of "les manigances" on personal destiny, the narrator turns to address an unknown other, or is herself addressed:

Donnez-moi la main. Elle sera chaude et bonne. J'aurai des kilomètres à faire par des couloirs humides, visqueux et noirs comme les sillons d'un cerveau. (p.154)

This ambiguous offer of friendship or prediction by a fortune teller is equivocally reassuring and troubling. The reader is immediately caught between the reality of the prediction, the desire projected into the future and the seemingly superfluous inclusion of the passing episode. We may note that this obscure *à part* does not have so much a narrative but a structural role. The "couloirs humides et visqueux" bring thematic unity to the work, without their ever being significant to the story's "déroulement". They recur in "La femme au diamant" and the epilogue. This is a firm indication of the achievement of a fantasy world in Triolet's fiction where she passes with apparently absolute ease across the traditional frontiers of "le vrai et l'inventé" and where doubt about the two is left entirely with the reader. Camus perhaps first suggested this characteristic of her work:

Je n'ai lu que lui pendant trois ou quatre jours et j'y ai réfléchi(...) Je crois que d'une certaine façon et malgré des dons éclatants d'observation, vous êtes un écrivain d'imagination, chose rare en France.<sup>10</sup>

No matter how clearly or suggestively Triolet evokes a world that is reminiscent and representative of the external reality we know, she instils into her referential illusion a sense of the fantastic and the "invraisemblable".

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10. Albert Camus in a letter to Triolet 4.8.43. Quoted in *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, p.28. Camus refers specifically to *Le Cheval blanc* but his understanding of this novel is, I believe, pertinent to her entire oeuvre.



The section "Paris qui rêve" is a fine example of how the real world submits to the imaginary world so that the imaginary becomes a complement of the real, and vice versa:

Paris créé par les mains des hommes est devenu une force de la nature (...)  
Vous l'avez voulue, la Galatée, l'image d'un monstre inconnu.(p.181)

The event's manipulation on the boundaries of the real and the invented is achieved by the external contemporaneity of the evocation. The contemporary reader understood that "Paris qui rêve" depicted the night of riots on the 9th February 1934. (Nizan's appreciation of the novel bears witness to this.) Historical accuracy, however, becomes subsumed by the imaginative force of memory. The context of a dream means that its "truth" gives way to effects of oneiric and lyrical presentation. The substantial similarities between this text in the novel and the report Triolet wrote for *Tridtsat' dnei* means that retrospectively an extra dimension is added to the play around report and invention. The same text can be presented as both novelistic prose and journalism according to the contextual medium.<sup>11</sup>

An additional understanding of the world of fantasy intersecting with the reality of the externally verifiable is created by the evocation of the Pygmalion legend. The creative work of an artist assumes a separate and independent existence, again confirming the reality of the artistic illusion. The legends of Pygmalion, the Golem of Prague and Kempelen's Chess Player are leitmotifs throughout Triolet's fictional universe. Their mythical support to the reality of the artistic creation, which assumes a haunting yet unavoidably real existence, puts into question, furthermore, the very importance of the creator.<sup>12</sup>

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11. See "Parij 9 fevralia" in *Tridsat' dnei*, no.4, 1934.

12. Triolet's novel *L'Ame* draws on the legend of Kempelen's chess player as narrated by Edgar Allen Poe in his *Stories of Mystery and Imagination*. This gives an additional perspective to the levels of reality and invention implied within her novel since narrated events are given referential authority by the intertextual voices speaking within them. In the case of *L'Ame*, the illusion of a reality beyond the text is maintained by evoking a nineteenth-century story which itself exploits the boundaries between the fantastic and the realistic.



The descriptive verisimilitude of police brutality and street violence are evoked through clouds of fog so that one may choose not to see them. The perspective of medieval knights or Russian cossacks draws the reader from the actuality of the described episode to images of poetic memory:

Toute la place est entourée d'une couronne d'épines noires. Les casques métalliques noirs, les leggings noirs, durs et brillants, le bruit métallique des fers des chevaux. Les hommes en fonte, avec une cervelle en fonte et des balles d'acier.(p.188)

The section is presented as the dream of an anthropomorphised Paris, so that its truth may be avoided and the dreamer may continue in the gentle delusion that the atrocities do not transcend the nightmarish:

Paris vous serre contre sa poitrine, tendrement à étouffer. Ne réveillez pas les somnambules, vous les feriez tomber du toit au bord duquel ils marchent.(p.178)

Similarly, this effect is reinforced by the deliberately fictional and fantastic passages of description:

Des ambulances passent par les voies lactées de Paris qui murmurent en rêve...Le brouillard vous bouche les oreilles. (p.190)

Temporal defamiliarisation and repetition maintain the play between external truth and fictionality so that an event entering within the frontiers of the narrative is consumed by the truth of the latter. For example, the recurrence of this dream in the fifth section and Epilogue has the structural effect of interweaving the separated sections of the novel into one fictional whole. Thematically, this leitmotif puts into question the truth of the contingent actuality, reinforcing instead the structured "literariness" of the *récit*:

A qui aurait-elle parlé de *ce rêve qu'elle avait fait, toute éveillée* l'autre nuit? Elle dormait, quand l'impression qu'il se passait quelque chose dans la rue la réveilla en sursaut.(...) Non, s'il fallait avoir des peurs pareilles, il valait mieux mourir. Elle se rendormait.(p.272-3)

Repetition in the Epilogue provides an additional play between fictional truth and referential illusion. The Epilogue is presented as a sort of confession or direct address where the narrator admits she is writing or thinking about writing either



about her own life or a novel, projecting us also into the fictional nature of autobiography. Firstly, the historical reference of the event is recalled:

C'est ici que je prenais mon petit déjeuner, que je donnais mes rendez-vous, que j'écrivais.(...) Une certaine nuit...Dans la rue il y avait ce silence particulier d'un foyer de théâtre pendant la représentation. (..) La nuée noire des agents arrivant par-derrière. Cris, stupeur, coups...L'homme couché sur le banc au coin de la rue Campagne Première, une mare de sang autour de la tête. D'autres agents, d'autres coups...(p.285)

Even this semblance of historical reference is subsequently put into question by the fictional tangent the event is given, an effect often achieved by discreet implication rather than obvious breaks in the narrational style. We are reminded of Matisse's dictum, to which Triolet frequently alludes:"la réalité, c'est le tremplin du rêve"<sup>13</sup>:

On avait essayé de retrouver le blessé, mais il ne donna aucun signe de vie. Moi, je l'ai rencontré un jour. Devant la porte du Petit Parquet. J'y étais pour voir quelqu'un qui était arrêté... *Mais ça, c'est une autre histoire.*(p.286)

The fictionality of this "enchassement" is created by the gradual merging of the subjective personality "je", who is narrating in the Epilogue, with the other female characters we had thought she was evoking. The women can be seen as projections of her memories or desires, aspects of her past self, her other possible destinies, or perspectives on her present. In the Epilogue, "je" fades into the imprisoned woman, whom in realistic terms she was visiting in prison. The stylistic presentation of the latter figure associates her with the recurrent and haunting image of semi-existent, semi-vagrant shadows who drift through this novel as they do the fictional world of Triolet's novels. The woman had been arrested for "vagabondage", having spent years selling newspapers on the steps of "la Madeleine". This unreal, yet painfully realistic figure hovers in the death-in-life existence where Triolet's protagonists drift as a result of their alienation from the world of historical reality:

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13. Aragon illustrates this dictum in relation to Triolet's work in his introduction to *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, p.16.



Je connais sa mère, tout le monde la connaît.(...) Elle est là comme un champignon qui aurait poussé sur le mur et qui vendrait des journaux. (...) Tout ça est tout à fait réel.(p.286)

She may be seen both as part of the destiny towards which the Thérèses of this novel move as well as a signifier towards the novelistic destiny for all Triolet's protagonists:

Cela m'arrivera. J'ai essayé de tous les espoirs. Je suis passée par les malheurs et joies, mais je n'ai pas encore été vieille.

(...)

Cette fois, encore, elle me fait irrésistiblement penser à la vieillesse. J'aimerais ne plus la rencontrer. Ce qu'il doit y avoir de plus terrible dans la vieillesse, c'est la solitude.

Despite the open structure that juxtaposes the reality of the work and the surrounding reality of life, historically representative passages only reinforce the perpetual ambiguity between "le vrai et l'inventé". The most "factual" accounts are cloaked in fictional devices. The inclusion within the text of a putative journalistic article (pp.274-75) foregrounds the fictionalising effect on external references included within the novelistic structure. At the end of "La Femme au diamant", the narrator supposedly quotes from the newspaper to conclude the story that she has told. Her tale has equally claimed reference to events she has followed in the press. The truth even of this is, of course, entirely doubtable. Such interweaving *récits*, where one claims to be invention and the other factual, recall the technique used by Aragon in his collection *Le Mentir-vrai* (1960). In the title story for this collection, the *récit* of a schoolboy recounting his games and adventures is interwoven with that of an ageing writer ridiculing his own attempts to recapture his childhood. He recognises that he has lost and cannot recapture his perspective of fifty years before. The frank admissions of invention in his portrayal of the past have the effect of putting into question the "truths" that the writer contrasts with his fictional attempts at autobiography. After all, the whole exists within the physical limits of the short story, hence both monologues should be subjected to the perspective of "le mentir-vrai" where:



there are no concrete or abstract forms in art but only more or less successful lies which occur when actualities are transposed to representation.<sup>14</sup>

In *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, narration and journalism exist within the novelistic whole and are both subject to the notion of truthful illusion, such as Adorno defined it:

La définition de l'art par apparence esthétique est imparfaite; l'art possède la vérité en tant qu'apparence d'une réalité non apparente.<sup>15</sup>

"La femme au diamant" could equally be "le prolongement intérieur d'un vague recontre". The prologue first introduced the anonymous woman later recognised as Anne, an introduction that stylistically draws as much upon her invented existence as it does on her "real" existence:

Deux yeux *invraisemblablement* grands dans un visage bruni par le soleil et la poudre ocre, un diamant d'une grosseur *invraisemblable* sur la main brune.(p.162)

The fictional nature of the supposed report is also achieved by the very close structural and thematic links that "La Femme au diamant" has with other sections of the novel. For example it explains the haunting words which instigate the prolonged interior monologue of "Bonsoir, Thérèse". This building of an entire chapter or short story around an overheard and banal phrase is reminiscent of "de qui médisez-vous?" around which Narrateur Sarraute constructs a chapter of *Portait d'un inconnu* (1948). The interweaving of creation and reportage is achieved stylistically and structurally in passages supposedly taken from the newspaper and typographically distinguished from the first-person narration. Nevertheless, the concluding lines of journalism in "La Femme au diamant" are stylistically reminiscent of the voice of the anonymous "je".(p.275)

The other text separated from the main diegesis is the first "tale within a tale" that appears in "Une Vie étrangère". In a section typographically distinguished from the opening *récit*, a second story is narrated which draws thematically, structurally and stylistically on the primary work, whilst maintaining a coherent inner form which assures its autonomy. We are thus offered a fine

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14. Picasso (1923) quoted in *Cubism*, article 45.

15. Adorno, *Théorie Esthétique*, p.173.



example of the Matrushka technique defined earlier. Such self-conscious architectonics have the striking effect of making the structure the motivation for the tale, dynamically shaping the thematic material. Here, a passing encounter evoked as a memory is transformed into a fantasy recounted by the narrator and subsequently exposed as fabrication:

Cette histoire n'est que le prolongement intérieur d'une vague rencontre. J'imagine que c'est ainsi qu'on les écrit, les histoires. La ligne du partage des eaux du vrai et de l'inventé se perd. C'est simple. (p.178)

This "tale within a tale" is presented as an example of how novels may be written ("J'imagine que c'est ainsi qu'on les écrit, les histoires"). The themes and structure can be seen as "condensed" versions of the whole novel which considers, in its conclusion, the problematic nature of novel writing. ("Si j'étais quelqu'un dont on écrit la biographie, si on notait mes malheurs de Sophie...")

This defamiliarisation of the apparently distinct realities of fact and fiction makes more noticeable the artistic devices that are being manipulated. The novel thematises its own genesis, and the narrative fades into the background as the structures direct the tale:

Les possibles narratifs introduisent finalement, à la place d'une intrigue linéaire, chronologique, calquée sur une hypothétique réalité, la notion de paradigmes textuels: la narration simultanée, par associations lexicales, s'oriente ainsi vers un type d'écriture qui s'éloigne de l'histoire et se referme de plus en plus sur ses propres signes.<sup>16</sup>

### **Intertextuality and the Supernatural**

In *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, the ambiguous divisions between the real and the invented are exploited particularly in terms of the evocation of empirical reality, situating the text on the boundaries of the real without putting into question the novelistic character of the artistic whole. In *Luna-Park*, the textual exploitation of the real and the invented is achieved by extra-referential, intertextual realities. It is also arguably Triolet's most supernatural text. While adhering to a linear, logical

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16. Valette, p.33.



narrative structure, it propels certain events into the equivocal world of the fantastic where the reality proposed conforms sufficiently to our conception of what is real for us to hesitate and feel bewildered by the inexplicable presence of the supernatural. This is entirely faithful to Todorov's classification of the generic and typological characteristics of the "récit fantastique":

L'hésitation est née du fait que l'événement extraordinaire (et donc potentiellement surnaturel) se produit non dans un monde merveilleux mais dans le contexte quotidien, celui qui nous est le plus habituel.<sup>17</sup>

This hesitation is created also by the fact that the three-tiered textual genesis - where three narrative lines are superposed - implies that the truth and power of art is propelling the advance of the narrative line.<sup>18</sup> For example, the "dénouement" of *Trilby* is thematically important to the conclusion of *Luna-Park*. If the formal play around textual and extra-textual reality is not clear, the textual discussions about "les forces surnaturelles de l'art" (p.380) which should be leading and creating empirical reality confirm the novel's affirmation of novelistic truth as the finest accessible truth:

Les oeuvres d'art imitent moins la réalité qu'elle ne lui montrent comment réaliser cette transformation. Ce qu'il faudrait finalement renverser, c'est la théorie de l'imitation. Dans un sens sublimé, la réalité doit imiter les oeuvres d'art. Mais le fait que les oeuvres d'art sont là montre que le non-étant pourrait exister. La réalité des oeuvres d'art témoigne de la possibilité du possible.<sup>19</sup>

A sensation of the preternatural is evoked in the very opening paragraphs of *Luna-Park*. From Justin's entrance in to the house at Pierce, he is aware that another has lived there before him, and, as the textual diegesis is to demonstrate, the textually absent figure of Blanche Hauteville is to dominate and dictate the narrative. Blanche's intrusion into Justin's conscious and emotional life is traced implicitly from his first morning in his new house:

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17. Todorov, *Poétique de la prose*, p.94.

18. The three narrative lines will henceforth be referred to as "the Justin narrative", "the letters narrative" and "the Trilby narrative". The reader of the novel should recognise the extent to which the development of the opening story is shaped and created by the art of the other, anterior narrative lines, thus demonstrating the extent to which "art shapes reality".

19. Adorno, *Théorie Esthétique*, p.174.



Etait-ce bien sa maison? Ce sentiment qu'il avait eu en se réveillant, le premier matin, de s'être introduit chez quelqu'un d'autre, il le retrouvait à tout bout de champ. (p.261)

There is a whole series of events which could always be Justin's over-stimulated imagination but which also suggest a fantastic textual element that defies complete precision.

Une branche de lilas humide et parfumée vint lui frôler le visage.(p.258)

des lilas étaient venus à sa rencontre...(p.259)

The particular effectiveness of such details is appreciated by recalling that Triolet was a writer of extraordinary elliptical skill; details of character, environment and physique are never given gratuitously or in the nineteenth-century tradition of verisimilitude. Triolet's descriptions are never facile anthropomorphism: the textual indications of a supernatural presence are unashamedly encompassed into a textual reality and are maintained stylistically and structurally by the descriptions given in the text. The supernatural is often an elusive atmosphere that is a mere shadow of the textual reality. As Michel Apel-Muller has said of Triolet:

L'inégalable facilité de la romancière à glisser dans un irréel plus vrai que nature se fait sans complaisance, sans un clin d'oeil au lecteur.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, there is a Gogolian touch to the means by which Triolet creates a completely real setting and then adds a phantasmagoric element with the same ease that Gogol allows a nose to appear in Yvan Yakolevitch's breakfast roll.

Both Charles Camproux and Pierre Gamarra paid passing tribute to the magical realism of *Luna-Park* without being any more precise:

Un conte de fées des années soixante .<sup>21</sup>

Merlin...on peut jouer sur le nom.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly Justin's name achieves an additional irony considering the subverted love triangles that are developed in the novel. In *Trilby*, it is Svengali who has the

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20. Michel Apel-Muller, "Elsa Triolet et le réalisme", *La Nouvelle critique*, no.123, p.103.

21. Camproux, *Les Lettre françaises*, no.829..

22. Gamarra, "Livres Nouveaux", *Europe*, 11.59.



magical power to create from a laundry girl who could not sing "Au clair de la lune" in tune, a prima donna who captivates everyone with the beauty of her voice. In the Justin narrative, Justin himself is appropriated by the muse to become the instrument for her voice and feels overwhelmed by the strange supernatural events which happen upon him. Blanche, the absent character in the novel, leads Justin to question everything from his own career to the events he is witnessing to identify and find the missing Blanche.

les miroirs eux-mêmes, lorsque Justin passait devant, semblaient baisser les paupières pour lui cacher le reflet de Blanche.(p.338)

Simple, unexplained mysteries that remain ellipses all reinforce this elusive strangeness that hovers over the text: there is the incident of the secateurs (p.305) or the curious revelations about the letters:

Le lendemain matin il alla tout droit à son bureau pour retrouver les lettres... Mais on aurait dit que quelqu'un s'était amusé à y mettre plus de désordre. (p.298)

Le matin, comme il regagnait la bibliothèque et se mettait à son bureau, il trouva bien du désordre. (...) D'ailleurs, puisque les lettres au milieu du bureau étaient là, il fallait bien que cela fût lui qui les avait mises..(p.342-3)

As these supernatural impressions accumulate, Justin concedes the house to its former owner.

The most impressive supernatural sequence occurs just before Justin's devastating shock at finding Blanche's letters burnt. The sequence is preceded by his musings on the supernatural forces in *Trilby*:

On dirait que l'art ici a gagné sur tout autre sentiment, que le génie de Svengali était plus fort que son aspect terrestre, son âme sinistre... Tout lui était pardonné, puisqu'il possède du génie.(p.380)

He leaves for the deserted campsite where the usually bleak, deserted site of "Les Chevaux morts" seems to have been taken over by the festivities of a diabolical Walpurgis night. He is pursued by running horses; the tents which he had previously likened to tramps' rags have seemingly metamorphosed from his



anthropomorphic descriptions to become witches who pursue him around the hillside:

Les sorcières montant des chevaux morts (...) Il était au niveau des nuages, et des morceaux de brouillard flottaient comme une chevelure défaite de vieilles sorcières, petites femmes se cachant dans leurs cheveux immenses, leurs mèches grises...(p.383)

Des hautes herbes tranchantes, des piquants s'agrippaient à son pantalon(...) n'y va pas, Justin. N'y va pas. (p.384)

The most impressive effect of this passage is that it achieves a grotesque parody of Justin's preoccupations until this moment: he has tried to find Blanche and to picture her but fails, despite his relentless pursuing of clues in the letters and the comparisons that he makes with Trilby. Instead, phantasmagorical women are pursuing *him* but even they are concealed by their "cheveux immenses". Although this sequence has all the distortion of a cinematographic dream sequence, never is it hinted that it is the manifestation of Justin's passion-inspired imagination. Indeed, the very contrary is underlined when he drives away from the deserted campsite, still pursued by the sounds of the horses. As he reaches a cross-roads and feels a little more reassured, he sees a line of driverless lorries and is then overtaken by a van containing perhaps the "chevaux morts"

le grand mur blanc de son frigidaire roulant - VIANDES - doubla la voiture de Justin.(p.386)

The astounding divestment in Triolet's style is most apparent in such scenes. She makes no attempt to incorporate them more logically within the generally realistic structure, nor to expand upon the narrative potential they undoubtedly have. It is by using such elliptical methods that she manages to capture all the diverse and multi-faceted aspects of contemporary reality without ever obfuscating her texts.

During this supernatural scene Justin, feeling overwhelmed by the grotesque events around him, remarks:

"qu'est-ce que c'est? Je ne suis pas à l'intérieur d'une pièce de Lorca..."(p.383)



It is another "dizzying feat" between the interweaving worlds of the real, the invented and the interreferential. A character in a novel reassures himself of his reality by comparing his existence with the fantastic non-reality of an actor performing a role in a play. Similarly, when Justin considers the letters he finds in the "secrétaire", his remark reminds us of the extent to which we are engaged in what Shelley called a "suspension of disbelief":

Le charme des vieilles lettres..Les mêmes mots, sur les pages d'un livre, auraient aussitôt perdu leur secret mélancolique.(p.270)

This technique is particularly interesting in that it hovers on the frontiers of the realistic illusion precisely so as to separate the "real" events within the novel from "invented" fictions.

La négation du caractère littéraire de l'oeuvre dans l'oeuvre elle-même est une expression de la motivation réaliste que nous rencontrons fréquemment. On connaît bien la formule: "Si cela se passait dans un roman...etc" Mais le fait même de s'adresser à la forme littéraire confirme déjà les lois de construction esthétique.<sup>23</sup>

This novelistic play around intertextual realities and imagination is maintained by the textual interweaving of three separate narrative lines. Lengthy quotations from *Trilby* are not just figurative, but actually shape what can be considered as the "main" narrative. This offers an example of the collage effect that Triolet achieves in her fiction when the extra-textual *éléments préfabriqués* become entirely subsumed within the boundaries of the novel but project the temporal arrangement beyond its own structure giving the incidents narrated an additional realistic referentiality.<sup>24</sup> The authenticity that novelistic characters acquire by having figured in other fictional works foregrounds the peculiarly "real" nature of artistic creation. This question will be considered in the following chapter.

*Luna-Park* can be cited as a fine example of "factography", generically established by Shklovsky in his attempts to unite the aesthetic aims of the

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23. Tomachevsky, *Théorie de la littérature*, p.289.

24. See Aragon, *Collages*.



Formalists with the increasingly stringent Marxist appropriations of literature being imposed by RAPP (Union of Proletarian Writers) and the socialist realist theoreticians. It is interesting if not immediately significant to note that the most frequently cited example of factography is Shklovsky's *Zoo, or letters not about love*. The novel bore as its third sub-title *The Third Heloise*, which anagrammatically spells "Elsa Triolet" in Russian. It was the first appearance of Triolet's writings in print, included as the letters from the unknown woman woven into the narrative framework.

In *Luna-Park*, both the letters and the *Trilby* narrative predate the "text" in terms of the internal time covered by the novel - from Justin's arrival in Pierce to the end of the summer - giving the intertextual references a semblance of external, almost empirical authenticity. Moreover, *Trilby* itself functions as a challenge on the boundaries of truth and fiction. Du Maurier adopts the technique used by Defoe in *Moll Flanders* and excuses himself during passages that may affront the sensitive minds of his readers by emphasising the historical truth of his tale. He is thus not responsible for its scandal or tragedy since he is only narrating a tale he has heard. Du Maurier seems to take great delight in manipulating the boundary occupied by his novel: he winds his characters into a portrait of Paris in the 1850's referring to their interactions with real artists of the era, and reinforces this level of truth with authorial intrusions:

One of these sketches (in water-colour by Little Billee) sold the other day at Christies' for a sum so large I hardly dare to mention it.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time he includes elements worthy of Gogolian comparison, from the unlikely past-time activities in the Parisian flat of "Les trois angliches", to the additions to Paris street-names and landed gentry: "la rue du crapeau volant" and the "Baron Rigolo de la Farce", for example.

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25. *Trilby*, p.89.



## The Real, the Day-Dream and the Dream

The imaginary and fantastic aspects of Triolet's conception of reality are brought to a perfect conclusion in *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*. Her preface specifically underlines this novel as a *unité du temps, du lieu et de l'action*, and therefore as the artistic setting in its most classical conformity. Eleven old people and "anciens combattants du front de l'art" have gathered for a final meeting. If the meeting creates a credible novelistic reality into which the dreams of the only woman present will infiltrate, the theatrical references and devices imply that the dinner setting is indeed "on stage" so that the surrounding "reality" is totally shaped by art. The old woman's dreams are unashamedly presented as dreams not simply textually but spatially by the use of colour in the printing of the novel. The intertextual and historical references, (the eighth dream for example evokes experiences in the Spanish Civil War), the interwoven passages of the evening's conversations and the present tense immediacy of the dream sequences destroy the traditionally conceived delineations of art and dreams, as of memory and desire. The spatialising effect of the use of colour has a defamiliarising effect that separates the dream only to make the written text and the artistic nature of the whole more apparent. This impression is achieved fully by the admission in the Spanish dream, for example, where she says, *therefore printed in brown*:

*Je rêve en noir, couleur anthracite, flaques de réverbères, le vide, nous sommes perdus.*(p.176)

The classical artistic setting for the dinner party is consolidated by the artistic careers of the "players". The novel becomes a perfect demonstration of the extent to which the work and the artistic truth consumes the artist.

The intersecting passages of dream appear not as separate accounts but as a complex montage in the finest tradition of Eisenstein. Marianne Delranc has demonstrated this in *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, but in terms that are equally appropriate here:



Les nouvelles qui composent le roman sont "montées" dans un ordre différent de l'ordre des manuscrits de façon qu'elles forment un tout; les séquences de chaque nouvelle sont remises en ordre, rapprochées pour créer un récit - celui-ci n'étant pas déterminé au départ. L'ordre même des paragraphes varie parfois d'une façon extraordinaire du manuscrit au texte définitif. En fin de compte, le sens est produit par tous ces rapprochements, par le hasard des rapprochements.<sup>26</sup>

The beauty of this novel is that it is also a "mise en scène" of the female protagonist's death. Just as the frontiers of art and life interweave so too do those of life and death, leaving behind the artistic truth as the final reality. And it is by drawing on her "real", supposed and dreamt experiences that the dying actress can prepare herself for, and serenely anticipate, the meeting with "la dame osseuse et souriante." This textual and artistic unity can be compared to the chapter, "La Comédie" in Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, a work greatly admired by Triolet, and inspiration in part for her essay *Le Mythe de la Baronne Mélanie* to which I shall return in Chapter 9. Camus's actor is presented in terms reminiscent of "le mentir-vrai". He personifies the particular duality of artistic truth as both invention and theatrical reality. His artistic destiny and its relation to his own life, makes life a rehearsal for eventual death:

Il suffit d'un peu d'imagination pour sentir alors ce que signifie un destin d'acteur. C'est dans le temps qu'il compose et énumère ses personnages. C'est dans le temps aussi qu'il apprend à les dominer. Plus il a vécu de vies différentes, et mieux il se sépare d'elles. Le temps vient où il faut mourir à la scène et au monde. Ce qu'il a vécu est en face de lui. Il voit clair. Il sent ce que cette aventure a de déchirant et d'irremplaçable. Il sait et peut maintenant mourir. Il y a des maisons de retraites pour vieux comédiens.<sup>27</sup>

Within the novel which evokes a credible, external reality at the same time as it fulfils perfectly the unities of the most perfect form of art, we are presented with "un rendez-vous plein de rêves". Faithful to the understanding of the process of death that we have, an old actress reviews her life before dying:

On prétend qu'à l'heure de mourir la mémoire  
Passe la vie en revue...(p.173)

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26. Marianne Delranc, "Un Destin traduit", *Faites entrer l'infini*, p.9, 5.3.1988.

27. Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p.116.



There is no clear boundary between the evening she lives, the memories she relives and the desire that transports these memories into the domain of regret, fantasy and imagination. Again, this can be seen to reinforce Camus's words:

Non, la distance n'est pas si grande qui le (l'acteur) sépare des êtres qu'il fait vivre. Il illustre alors abondamment tous les mois ou tous les jours, cette vérité si féconde qu'il n'y a pas de frontière entre ce qu'un homme veut être et ce qu'il est. A quel point le paraître fait l'être, c'est ce qu'il démontre, toujours occupé de mieux figurer.<sup>28</sup>

The whole is reminiscent of Julien de Vivier's *La Fin du jour*, the artistic realisation of the "maison de retraite des vieux comédiens" for whom the "ligne de partage des eaux du vrai de l'inventé" has always been particularly imprecise and now remains only in the certainty of the artistic works they leave behind. An additional poignancy is added to Triolet's novel by reading the whole as a "mise en scène" of the death of an old artist. It is in the tradition of Chaplin's hero Calvero in *Limelight* where an old artist has endeavoured to trace in the course of the artistic whole the meaning of his own destiny before dying in the wings of the stage in the finest imaginable "real" reliving of a scene he had played in a film.

The uncertainty between "la veille et le rêve" is developed through the novel. The dreams at the beginning are temporally and semantically removed from the evening's diegesis. The first dream, for example, demonstrates an obvious stream of consciousness effect that reinforces the impression of the "dreamt":

Sur le noir du ciel, bleu à force d'être noir, des trainées de lait d'étoiles. A part, de gros brillants solitaires montés en étoiles. Je marche sous ce ciel, je reçois une grêle d'étoiles dans une lumière absente, unie et creuse.(p.133)

The later dreams, however, dissolve into a constant evocation of previous dreams or conversations, where the subject is dreamt about even before it figures in the conversations. For example, the evening where the four friends distribute their money figures first in the third dream and then carries over into the ensuing conversation. Eventually only the typographical distinction remains. The dreams also permit an intertextual evocation of Triolet's work when the reader is

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28. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p.111.



confronted with evoked themes, passages and leitmotifs from other novels which return to shape the diegesis. Consequently, this too reinforces the "reality" of the dreamt world compared to the fading images of the evening's external reality.

There is, for example, the "dream" about the meeting with the American, memorable for the sordid implication in the attempt at seduction, "J'ai des soeurs, Mademoiselle" which figured not only in the sixth dream but is evoked in *Bonsoir, Thérèse* and in *Fraise-des-bois*. There is the episode of her father's death, or the dreams of a black monk, similarly evoked in *Fraise-des-bois*. The professional exclusion of an artist once sought by the public, now shunned, is analysed in *Personne ne m'aime* and re-evoked here in the ninth dream:

Il ne m'a pas donné de rôle dans la pièce qu'il a mise en scène, m'engager aurait été un handicap, le public me boude.(...)Si je lui proposais de jouer masquée et avec un faux nom? (p.184)

A particularly discreet cross-reference is achieved in the seventh dream where a writer empties the contents of the narrator's handbag to analyse her character, a detail that is evoked in passing in *Luna-Park*:

Mais quoi, il avait connu un romancier des plus considérables qui n'aimait rien autant que de faire ouvrir aux femmes leur sac à main et d'en sortir le contenu. Pour lui, c'était plus que le récit détaillé d'une vie, car le récit le plus véridique est encore menteur. (vol.31, p.268)

But the exclusion to which the narrator is gradually becoming exposed in her dreams is expressed in this distortion of metonymy. The woman upon whom this game is being played is reduced to a few pathetic trivia:

une bonbonnière pour quand je vais au théâtre et que je me mets à tousser, des tickets de caisse que j'ai fourrés là-dedans et pas jetés...une carte de teinturière...une lettre de mon mari, vieille si vieille... (p.169)

The intertextual references which establish the text on the borders of the real and the invented are perhaps the nearest that we can approach to a verbal definition of the fundamentally equivocal nature of literature:

Le double caractère de l'art comme autonomie et fait social se répercute constamment sur le champ de son autonomie.<sup>29</sup>

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29. Adorno, *Théorie Esthétique*, p.21.



This paradoxical clarity, which can define art only at the expense of our conception of the real, is maintained thematically throughout *Le Rossignol*. Reinforcing the suggestion that these artists are performing in the final film that is, and is about, their lives, the narrator alludes to this ambiguity both within her dreams and in the text putatively presenting the "real":

Ils entraient dans cette nuit inventée, à reculons, à la recherche de rêves incertains. (p.132)

Et si tout ce n'était pas vrai, si elle était en train de rêver cette nuit, ses anciens amis, le rossignol, le parc, les masses d'arbres et ces parfums?...Si tout cela, cette nuit, n'était que souvenirs devenus rêves? (p.162)

Thus memories become dreams just as reality has dissolved into memories, putting into question the whole question of contingent reality and external truth. We may compare the textual and thematic exploration of dreams to Butor's studies of "real" and "dreamt" dreams and their relation to a "realistic" diegesis:

Tout le monde rêve et tout le monde refoule plus ou moins ce qu'il rêve. Dans ma série "Matière de rêves", j'ai inventé des rêves possibles à partir de motifs qui reviennent souvent dans mes vrais rêves. Il m'est arrivé parfois de rêver sur ces rêves que j'avais inventés. La boucle se refermait.<sup>30</sup>

The artistic reality that takes over from the evening's imprecise temporal and contingent reality is maintained by the phantom-like images of the other friends:

On voyait deux ombres passer et repasser sur le perron devant le mur transparent, au-dehors. (p.141)

La voix appartient à une ombre, l'ombre d'un verre à la main. (p.142)

The apogee of this ambiguity is that the other guests also question their own "real" existence:

Est-ce que nous sommes encore vivants? (p.178)

The growing imprecision and amorphousness of the evening is woven into the passage from dream to wakefulness:

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30. Butor discussing *Matière de rêves III* in *Paris-Match*, 18.5.1979.



Peut-on dire qu'elle se réveille, elle n'a pas dormi, c'était un état de somnolence, coupé de réalités aux contours précis, une demi-veille, une semi-conscience. (p.159)

The "ligne de partage des eaux" between "la veille et le rêve" is narrated in the thematic links that weave the dreams and the surrounding context of reality into one interdependent construct. For example, the sentence leading into the first dream is accompanied by the first trills of the nightingale:

*lorsque le rossignol lança son premier trille, elle aussi partit docilement à la dérive du rêve. (p.132)*

As the dream gives way in turn to the evening's reality so the accompaniment adjusts to the changing scene:

*Ah, que me vienne vite la vieillesse  
et plus pour moi ne chante un rossignol  
me chante le rossignol d'une voix humaine, une vieille romance dont je ne  
croyais pas me souvenir...  
Un transistor chantait dans la nuit. (p.135)*

In a subtle inversion of roles, the dream portrays the purity and clarity of the nightingale's song, with the added significance of human speech, while the neighbouring "reality" has a transmission of pre-recorded "art". The "éléments préfabriqués" and the collage-like constructs that typify Triolet's novelistic world result in a consolidation of the artistic, invented world and demonstrate the extent to which the real world submits to that of art. This is demonstrated equally by the recurring lines of poetry throughout the novel which not only produce an effect of external referentiality but in their turn narrate the reality of artistic experience for the artist whose memories of the past are built as much of aesthetic creations as they are of empirical reality. The novel itself can be seen to demonstrate the fact that:

To possess the world in forms of images is, precisely to re-experience the unreality and remoteness of the real.<sup>31</sup>

Even the woman's death fades into the unclear boundary between memory, dream and desire:

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31. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p.164.



Elle se dit qu'elle est peut-être en train de dormir, qu'elle rêve ces trois marches et cet air divinement frais. (p.205)

Not only do the lines of poetry that accompany the dreams and the interludes of the evening evoke perfectly the events occurring, but also they point to the constancy and truth of art when reality is fading in the semi-light of the night and the semi-consciousness of a dying woman:

*On a perdu le scénario  
Tout le passé par mégarde  
égaré* (p.131)

This exemplifies Brodsky's belief:

As though it is aware of the fragility and treachery of man's faculties and senses, a poem aims at human memory. To that need, it employs a form which is essentially a mnemonic device, allowing one's brain to retain a world - and simplifying the task of retaining it - when the rest of one's frame gives up.<sup>32</sup>

Like the images employed in *Ecoutez-Voir*, the lines of poetry in *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* do not illustrate the text but would seem almost to shape it, to have been born as part of it, where the artistic reality again preempts, creates and confirms contingent experience.

We are left with the inevitability of death where art is left as the final reality, and where "We are such stuff, as dreams are the made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep"<sup>33</sup>:

*Un soir si beau que je vais croire jusqu'au bout  
Dormir du sommeil de tes bras  
Dans le pays sans nom sans éveil et sans rêves.*(p.173)

The death of the old woman who has been presented as the third-person realisation of the narrator's self-portrait would seem to confirm the independence of the work of art. It takes shape from its creator and a surrounding social reality only to assume an autonomy that surpasses both.

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32. Brodsky, *Less Than One*, p.143.

33. *The Tempest*, Act 4, Sc.I. This quotation is taken by Aragon in *La Mise à mort* and developed into a "monologue intérieur" by the protagonist-writer examining his written world.



## Chapter Seven

### The Created and Creative Personalities

"Pauvre gosse dans le miroir. Tu ne me ressembles pas et pourtant tu me ressembles. C'est moi qui parle. Tu n'a plus ta voix d'enfant. Tu n'es plus qu'un souvenir d'homme, plus tard. (...) Je me répète. Cinquante ans plus tard. Ça déforme les mots. Et quand je crois me regarder, je m'imagine. C'est plus fort que moi, je m'ordonne. Je rapproche des faits qui furent, mais séparé. Je crois me souvenir, je m'invente."<sup>1</sup>

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the female protagonist of *Le Rossignol* seemed to have been narrating the novel by recording the dreams which accompanied her interactions with the other characters. However, she dies before the end of the novel thus negating in realistic terms her claim to authorship. But the "I" who is narrating, even if shaded into a character seen from the outside, is of course a mask behind which are speaking a multitude of "I"s from the historically existing Elsa Triolet, through her conception of herself as an artist and creator to her self-conscious laying of pen on paper. And from this moment a whole new aspect of "je" is born: the character who speaks in the first-person; the character who has a privileged vision of the other "players" even if s/he seems immediately to be interacting with them. Within the speaker's discourse are the social, literary and historical voices that will be speaking through the speaking character until we can finally fix some sort of closure on the text. As Todorov says in *Poétique*:

Dans un récit où le narrateur dit "je" un personnage joue parmi tous les autres un rôle à part; (...) Plus exactement, le narrateur ne parle pas, comme font les protagonistes du récit, il raconte.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Aragon, *Le mentir-vrai*, p.9-10.  
2. Todorov, *Poétique*, p.66.



Added to this intriguing interweaving of voices, there is, in the texts studied in this section, a move towards the achievement of the dual-structured novel. The narrative code and the question of novelistic activity are consumed into the textual fabric. Half of the text concerns the semantic narration and the other half fictionalises the metatext. Story-telling becomes a subsidiary process where it thematises its structures and the author herself. It is interesting to note that this dual-structured novel adheres<sup>e</sup> to Ricardou's definition of the "*Premier Nouveau Roman*":

qui opère *une division tendancielle de l'Unité diégétique* et ouvre, de la sorte, une période *contestataire*. Le récit est contesté; (...) toutefois, tant bien que mal, il parvient à sauvegarder une certaine unité.<sup>3</sup>

The final section of the present work will demonstrate the parallels between two of Triolet's final works and the category of the "*Nouveau Nouveau Roman*".

As the last chapter illustrated, the result of including extra-referential material into an artistic whole renders arbitrary the definition of the "real":

Remarquons-le: en leur variété, ces procédures de transmutation du récit sont spécifiques du texte. Ou, si l'on préfère, elles opèrent une parfaite mise en cause de l'illusion référentielle sur laquelle s'édifie, nous le savons, le récit.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the reality of the author can also become subsumed into the text, as if she were sitting before a mirror watching herself write.

Fictionalised within the texts is the complex web of alterity: the "je" who narrates establishes her dependence on another to justify her own discourse just as the narrator recognises her dialectical correlative in the reader. Manipulated differently within the texts but demonstrating the same inversion of traditional authorial-fictional authority, the author meets her own characters by fictionalising herself. Within this eternal "jeu de miroirs", the double-sided "I" allows the narrator to write, be written about and muse on the nature of writing. The novel's relation to traditional diegesis, genre and literariness is seemingly founded on

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3. Ricardou, *Le Nouveau roman*, p.152. His italics.

4. *Le Nouveau roman*, p.133.



ambiguity. My study of Triolet's double-sided literary space has as its starting point Genette's analysis of the opening of a new novelistic space in relation to *A la recherche du temps perdu* :

si la *Recherche du temps perdu* (...) inaugure, avec quelques autres, l'espace sans limites et comme indéterminé de la *littérature* moderne, elle le doit évidemment - et cette fois encore en dépit des "intentions de l'auteur" et par l'effet d'un mouvement d'autant plus irrésistible qu'il fut involontaire - à cette invasion de l'histoire par le commentaire, du roman par l'essai, du récit par son propre discours.<sup>5</sup>

### The Voices of the First Person

The division of the created and creative personality takes place in the opening pages of *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*. If the novel opens with the eleven characters situated "on stage" at the end of their final dinner party meeting, the female protagonist seemingly leaves the cosy social context for the narrative equivalent of a monologic aside:

C'est ce que parmi cette dizaine d'hommes pensait la seule femme...(p.128)

During the spatially separated narrations of the evening, the woman remains in her dual role of actor interacting with the other characters, and commentator. Her voice in the third person is often indistinguishable from the external narrator. The distinction between authorial narration and the woman's thoughts is achieved textually: for example, when her objective identity fades into an externally narrated third-person:

Elle s'abîma dans une rétrospective absorbante, dans l'abîme du passé, ne remarqua pas qu'il avait dégagé sa main doucement, pour ne pas la réveiller. (p.164)

Such indistinct meetings of the narrator and the narrated could be seen in traditional terms as a betrayal of the fictional game. Yet from the perspective of modernist fiction, it reinforces the play that is fundamental to the modern novel which is:

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5. *Figures III*, p.265.



for its part more than willing to leave the lineaments of its characters in shadow.<sup>6</sup>

The subjective identity is realised in the dream sequences. Here, a constant affirmation of the self and of the reassurance of dreams confirms to the dreamer the reality of her existence and her own reality. For example, from a passage of reflection about dreams, "Depuis que la science s'en est mêlée, songeait la femme..." the external narration fades into the oneiric first-person commentary so that "elle" becomes "je", a character becomes the narrator and the external narrator becomes a first-person. Moreover, the past-tense evocation of the present, gives way to the present tense evocation of the past. The woman's autonomous existence has a confirmed reality only in the past.

As the ageing woman descends into her memories and anguish, she gradually puts into question her own reality. Initially, she regards the others from outside:

Elle était à l'écart de toute reprise de vitalité. L'obscurité ne lui cachait rien, elle vit s'approcher d'elle quelques-unes de ses ombres.(p.154)

This exclusion achieved in her dreamed world gives way to a far more searing questioning of first-person identity, reminiscent of Rimbaud's words, "Je est un autre". In the fifth dream, she expects recognition but is passed over by a swarm of people who do not see her:

La foule est passée, emmenant notre vie et nous a laissés sur les genoux de cet escalier de chair blême. (p.158)

For the artist, biographical existence is confirmed only by the regard of the public and losing this the self gradually ceases to exist:

Je suis perdue, je ne peux plus supporter cette souffrance, où es-tu, tends-moi la main, un seul doigt! Je perds l'équilibre, j'agrippe l'air et je m'effondre. (p.159)

The loss of identity for the shunned artist achieves its most powerful narration in the tenth dream. The horror is anticipated in the passing reference to the actress on stage who sees herself:

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6. Calvino, "Cinema and the Novel", *The Literature Machine*, p.76-7.



Un cri...sur scène, Valentine Tessier devant un miroir, elle se regarde longuement, le cri jaillit d'elle entre deux pauses noires. (p.175)

There is in this uncommented terror similar desperation to that of Anthoine in *La Mise à Mort* who, seeking to destroy the created personality for whom he is consumed in impassioned jealousy, stabs the reflection of the detested other in the mirror. He of course plunges the knife into himself. He does not die, but goes mad: another means of becoming indefinitely alienated from himself. We thus have a new understanding of the death for which the old people are inevitably waiting. It is the encounter with themselves in their completeness. To extend the comparison with cinema and theatre introduced earlier, they are waiting for the final scenes of the film, which is their own life, to unfold. This will confirm their existence whilst at the same time negating it:

La mort la séparait d'elle-même. (p.180)

...Et c'est alors qu'elle sentit que, dans ses démêlés avec la mort, ce n'était pas d'elle-même qu'il s'agissait. (p.181)

Becoming reduced to a shadow existing on the periphery of human activity, she is brought to the realisation that even her own death will not confirm her subjective existence. As Bakhtin said, "Dans tous les cimetières, il n'y a que les autres".<sup>7</sup>

The rendez-vous with "une autre" whom you are supposed to recognise without her bearing "une rose à la main" achieves its full signification in the revelation that it is the meeting with all that is left of yourself:

Your shadow in evening rising to meet you.<sup>8</sup>

In the tenth dream she descends into a nightmarish "mise en scène" of self-conscious death. In keeping with Triolet's heroines, she is depicted in her hotel room:

Cette chambre que j'habite reste anonyme, je supprime tout ce qui me dépasse. (p.189)

She tries to take refuge within herself, in the solipsistic reassurance that within her own ego she can achieve subjectivity:

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7. "L'auteur et le personnage dans l'activité esthétique", *Esthétique de la création verbale*, p.99.

8. T.S.Eliot, *The Waste Land*, I - The Burial of the Dead, p.64.



rien ne traverse la carapace de mon crâne, rien n'y pénètre, emmurée en moi-même, je vis désarmée dans mon armure. (p.189-90)

But the falsity of her "refoulement" if she remains sane leads her to recognise the futility of her escape:

Je reste si insaisissable, si humble que je n'existe pas et ça me rend inaccessible, intouchable. Pardon. Je ne sais pas faire autrement.(p.190)

Her recognition of defeat, and her hopeless "pardon" illustrates the inevitable other in the existence of "je". This is explained by Bakhtin as follows:

Le simple fait que j'accorde une signification quand même bien infiniment négative, à ce qui me détermine, et que je la remette en question, autrement dit, que je prenne conscience de moi-même dans l'existence, ce simple fait atteste que je ne suis pas seul dans mon introspection-confession, que mes valeurs sont refractées en quelqu'un, qu'il y a quelqu'un pour qui je présente un intérêt.<sup>9</sup>

Her evocation of the other brings the narrator to discern the self-deluding, fantasy world of retreat. Firstly it is the pathetic intrusion of her dog into her hermetically sealed autonomy which leads her to address an unidentified interlocutor: "Vous n'avez pas d'idée". With the falsity of her inner world revealed, so her dream gives way to the "truth" of the evening's reality:

Elle reprit conscience des choses.(p.190)

The narration of the discovery of her death demonstrates both the ambiguity of authorship and the reality of art:

Quelqu'un l'avait trouvée (...) La nuit était bien finie. Ils la voyaient, ils se voyaient, ils voyaient tout.(p.208)

Thus the narrator and the novel become another's dream, and also part of the other existence needed to confirm the "I". It is interesting to compare this exteriority and alterity with the theory developed by Bakhtin, of "bnenakhodimost" which Todorov translates as *exotopy* but which is most clearly understood by a direct rendering of the Russian neologism "the effect of finding oneself on the outside". Bakhtin concretises this theory as follows:

Cette conscience d'autrui n'est pas encadrée par la conscience de l'auteur, elle se révèle de l'intérieur comme se tenant *au-dehors* et à côté, et l'auteur

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9. Quoted in *Mikhail Bakhtine, Le principe dialogique*, p.152.



entre avec elle en rapport dialogique. L'auteur, comme Prométhée, crée, (plus exactement recrée) des êtres vivants indépendants de lui, avec lesquels il paraît sur un pied d'égalité.<sup>10</sup>

The interactions of the anonymous voices and personalities of "je" become, in these novels, a metatextual development of the I - you dichotomy traced within the textual framework in Part Two.

Here we have a novelistic equivalent of the artist who sits in front of the mirror to paint a self-portrait but whose vision of herself is decorated by the form and shape of the mirror, her dreams, her self-consciousness and the works she has painted and admired in the past. The objective vision of oneself will accede to the definitions of art, whilst the painter will age, wither and decay. The inevitable distance separating the model and the artistic representation is evoked by the narrator in *Le Rossignol*:

Pourquoi, dit-elle, le portrait d'un vieillard peut-il être aussi beau que celui d'une jeune beauté, tandis que le vieux modèle du portrait est laid?(p.161)

### I Writing, I Written

The increasing independence of the work of art, so that it no longer needs either model or artist other than referentially, is part of the aesthetic truth to which Triolet's novels point. The vast intertextual, intergeneric world that lives within them is like the "jeu de miroirs", preoccupying Madeleine in *Le Grand jamais*. Reality seen through the looking glass is part of the "make believe" world of Lewis Carroll and never the simple reflection we thought it to be. Indeed, as Marianne Delranc remarks, "Lewis Carroll n'est jamais loin"<sup>11</sup>. The origins of the looking glass image thematised both in Triolet and Aragon's later work can be traced back to *Bonsoir Thérèse*. Here for the first time in Triolet's work, the narrator is aware that she is being narrated and not narrating.

The prologue of *Bonsoir, Thérèse* introduces the thematised genesis of the novel. In the closing paragraph the narrator recognises that she has "trente-six

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *Mikhail Bakhtine, le principe dialogique*, p.162.

<sup>11</sup> Delranc, *Le double et l'autre*, *Europe*, p.163.



destinées et mille morts", a notion paraphrasing the act of writing as that of creating an alternative self:

A character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being.  
An experimental self.<sup>12</sup>

Undertaken as the escape from her loneliness and poignant "mal du pays", writing becomes a means to create other subjectivities and therefore the dialectical other which will confirm the identity and discourse of "I":

Il vous pousse tout doucement une deuxième nature. (p.156)

In a significant inversion of the other as inevitable accompaniment to "je", the narrator can be seen to create the other to confirm her own existence when she is living in utter isolation:

Dans la solitude étrangère on peut très bien regarder les choses et les gens, les regarder sans fin.(...) Car on n'a pas besoin d'avoir les jambes coupées pour avoir mal à ses moignons...(p.156)

The narrator recognises the potential extension of her own personality in the characters of her novel:

je vis avec les deux frères, je suis une grande fille brune, je rencontre le mendiant aveugle, je tue le fier-à-bras bien-aimé, je marche par les couloirs noirs. (p.156)

This admission has not only the structural purpose of providing a fundamental link between the seven parts of the novel that could have been thought of as autonomous. Thematically, it situates the myriad potential and suggestive personalities that make up the individual. As the narrator has explained, "la ligne de partage des eaux se perd. C'est simple." (p.178) Her identity is divided, part-invented, part-formed by others, part-predetermined. There is no clear division between the beginning of the self and the end of the other.

The effect achieved by the narrator seeing and narrating herself is fictionalised within the text, by the use of the Matrushka structure. Throughout the novel, the fictional texture is maintained in the novelistic structure and the conceptual framework is textualised. This is achieved by the "jeu de miroirs" in

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12. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.34.



which the speaker sees what I would call the "je *du* miroir". This refuge in the "other", the qualifiable, objectified *writer* as a creating and real personality is strikingly reminiscent of Colette's *La Vagabonde*:

J'ai devant moi, de l'autre côté du miroir, dans la mystérieuse chambre des reflets, l'image d'une femme de lettres qui a mal tourné.<sup>13</sup>

"Une Vie étrangère" develops this play between selves and potential selves. For example, the narrator takes refuge at dusk in a café with a recently-made friend:

Nous nous taisions, regardant par les fenêtres dont les vitres commençaient à luire. *Quand elles furent des miroirs*, nous sortîmes dans la rue noire.(p.164)

This subtle move from seeing others to seeing oneself is consolidated in "Bonsoir, Thérèse":

A l'époque où je n'étais pas seule, nous rencontrions à Montparnasse deux femmes qui me flanquaient la panique: elles étaient pauvres, laides et vieilles (...) Elles restaient devant leur café-crème et fouillaient avidement la salle des yeux. (p.220)

The existence of these women as either seen others or reflected selves is achieved by the tantalising question:

Peut-être Thérèse était-elle parmi les femmes du bar? (p.220)

In the poignant confession in the Epilogue about the horror of old age, the ageing person, *losing sight of herself*, no longer realises the pitiful image she offers to others:

Quand je serai vieille, je voudrais bien le savoir, m'en rendre compte. C'est le désaccord entre les vieilles habitudes et la réalité qui fait que les vieilles femmes sont ridicules. (p.282)

In the closing paragraphs of "Bonsoir, Thérèse", the full ambiguity of the short story that evokes an unknown woman looking for Thérèse becomes clear:

Je vois Thérèse, elle s'avance entre les tables, je connais cette robe qu'elle porte. Je ne l'imaginai pas du tout comme ça: Thérèse n'est pas grande, elle a des cheveux clairs...Elle est un peu grasse...Où est-ce que j'ai déjà vu cette femme? Elle sourit, je vois deux dents pointues. Je connais ce grain de beauté. Elle se coiffe comme moi. Elle a mon parfum."Bonsoir, Thérèse..."

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13. Colette, *La Vagabonde*, p.15.



C'est ma voix qui répond... Je veux m'endormir avant que la musique ne s'arrête. (p.233)

"La femme au diamant" foregrounds the transition from the unknown "je" to a third-person external narration. The obvious stylistic break is in the tradition of Medieval tales where the author announces and effaces him/herself to define the limits of the récit contained within the frontiers of the complete work. In this move from accumulated memories to the narration of a story followed in the newspaper, there is no real transition that entirely separates "je" from "Anne, ma soeur Anne." She is identified as the unknown person to whom the mysterious words "Bonsoir, Thérèse" were addressed. The typographically distinguished extract from a newspaper projects her ghost-like figure towards the spectre that will return to preoccupy the narrator in the Epilogue. The Epilogue exists both as a reflection on the nature of writing and also as a self-conscious attempt at autobiography. The events she continues to evoke could therefore either be extensions of her daily experience, or narrations of her past. There is simply no longer a clear line to draw between the past and the present as there is not between the self and the created personality.

Initially, her perception of "the other" is credible and realistic:

Je m'assieds non loin de la fontaine d'un gris de crépuscule. Il y a une femme à l'autre bout du banc. (p.279)

But as I noted earlier, detail in Triolet's writing is never decorative but structural. The "gris de crépuscule" fountain invokes the unclear moment of twilight when vision is deceptive and distorted, the very time from which "je" and her friend sheltered in "Une Vie étrangère": "la dangereuse heure du crépuscule." As she surveys her neighbour more closely, details of the latter's dress link her with Anne Favart in "La femme au diamant":

Comme elle a de petits pieds, la femme assise à côté de moi sur le banc. Oh, ce manteau de zibeline, quelle beauté. (p.280)

The fading division between the character narrating and the character narrated is subsequently achieved:



La dame au manteau de zibeline se lève. Oui, c'est vrai, il faudrait peut-être rentrer...Le ciel est pommelé de rose-bonbon. Cela va être la nuit. (p.283)

La femme au manteau marche devant moi, elle tourne dans la rue Campagne-Première, moi aussi, pourquoi pas... (p.284)

In a episode paralleling that in "Une Vie étrangère", she catches sight of the same woman in a café, "près de la fenêtre"; that is to say, potentially her own reflection. The woman's exit is narrated with a striking similarity to the ending of "Bonsoir, Thérèse", where the figure glimpsed may be her perception or imagination of herself:

Elle se lève. Comme elle est mince dans cet étroit manteau noir. Elle passe devant moi avec son air de somnambule raisonnable. (p.286)

Their final meeting takes place in the sombre corridors of the building in which she lives; corridors stylistically relevant for their winding, dark corridors reminiscent of the underground passages in which Triolet's protagonists find themselves as they wander in the deserted "boyaux obscurs" of their own isolation. She is overwhelmed by the suffocating horror of the tortuous passages, "Je me sens prise dans le filet noir des couloirs". These evoke equally the realistic landings in an apartment block and the paths of her own memories, "les boîtes de conserves aux bords coupants...". And at this point she catches sight of the "other" woman again:

Une forme apparaît au fond lointain et obscur du couloir. Je la vois, mais je ne l'entends pas. Elle marche lentement, enserrée par les murs monstrueux, elle s'approche et j'ai le temps de regarder bien en face la femme au manteau de zibeline. (p.289)

Her appearance delineates the sensual peculiarity of reflections - they are visual but not auditive - as well as the uncertainty of a phantasmagoric apparition:

Elle a catastrophiquement changé. Sa tête n'est plus qu'un crâne, avec la peau comme un vieux gant blanc, glacé,...) Quand je disais que c'était une vieille femme. Elle porte une espèce de robe compliquée de clocharde. Est-ce une folle?...Elle me frôle avec un petit bruissement de feuilles sèches. (p.289)



The vision suggests the possibility of a meeting with one's present, past and potential selves, particularly considering the recurrent and poignant discussions of old-age:

Puisque c'est comme ça, j'irai encore ailleurs...Jusqu'où vont-elles me mener, les empreintes de mes pas? (p.290)

The final ambiguity is achieved by the closing paragraph of the novel. The report of the woman's death separates her from the narrator with a similar passing of narrative responsibility to that in *Le Rossignol*. The structural reinforcement achieved by descriptive repetition, however, confirms the eternal reflections between the created and the creative personalities:

Morte de faim. On la trouva sur un lit de camp, sans drap, ni oreiller. L'atelier était vide. Dans un placard traînait un écriteau: Fièvre aphteuse.(p.292)

The pillow and the board link the dead woman metonymically with "la femme au diamant." The concière who noticed the *absence* of a figure passing before her "loge" associates the dead woman with the narrator of the Epilogue. The conclusion achieves all the ambiguous imprecision of modern reality where the division between life and death is as inconstant and arbitrary as that between "le vrai et l'inventé". The kaleidoscoping of details and characters creates a dynamic structure which the "nouveaux romanciers" have called the "mise en abyme" and which corresponds to my Russian metaphor of Matrushka-structured texts. Passing details of the text reveal, repeat and anticipate the "déroulement" of the diegesis, each time reiterating the specifically novelistic reality within which we are operating:

La pratique assidue de l'analogie textuelle met en cause la dimension référentielle sur laquelle le récit s'appuie pour faire illusion.<sup>14</sup>

In a series of "matrushki", the typographically distinguished story within "Une Vie étrangère" offers an objective presentation of the "je" who is always another. This is achieved in the figures of the identical Denrow twins. The twins

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14. *Le Nouveau Roman*, p.87.



can be interpreted as what Ricardou terms a "micro-similitude" functioning within a story already contained within another. Their physical aspect and narrative function foreground the duality of the creating and created identities and the duality of the referential illusion. This is made explicit within the text when their first appearance in the café causes Doctor Kraus to question the truth of his own perception:

Quelqu'un remua le fauteuil à côté du sien et s'assit. Kraus ne releva pas la tête, mais sur le tapis orange apparut une paire de longues jambes, un pantalon bien coupé. "D'abord il était assis à gauche, pensa Kraus, le voilà maintenant assis à droite. Il jeta un coup d'oeil à gauche et vit à gauche, sur le tapis, une autre paire de longues jambes, dans un pantalon bien coupé." "Quatre en tout " se dit-il tristement; il leva la tête et regarda à droite puis à gauche. A droite et à gauche de lui se tenait un Mister Denrow en habit raie terne, avec sa brosse à dents, etc.(p.170)

Realistically, the twin brothers can be presented as identical and yet separable. However, the paradoxical nature of identity and image is narrated by their troubling existence on the borders of individuality and introversion. Towards the end of this "matrushka sequence", an "off-stage" gun-fire precipitates the characters into the bedroom where Henry is crying, "le visage collé contre une *glace brisée*:

Nous étions quatre ici, Docteur, tous pareils...Je m'y suis perdu, je ne savais plus dans quelle direction tirer...Je visais Jim...Et puis, non, j'ai oublié.  
(p.178)

Like Anthoine in Aragon's novel, *La Mise à mort*, (1965) the twins are caught in a web of image and reflection where attempting to destroy one, the other discovers he is aiming at his own reflection. In this way, they illustrate the novel's existence on the borders of narrating and narrated personalities, where the created character is never entirely independent from or a mere projection of, the person creating. Moreover, the narrator, whilst aware that she started creating, recognises that the work of art will assume an autonomous existence even if the move from action to passivity is achieved imperceptibly:

Tant qu'on écrit, on croit peut-être savoir ce que l'on tient dans l'objectif, au bout de soi-même, la lumière, l'angle, le cadrage. Et puis vient la relecture,



l'image développée, tirée, là, sur le papier. Je ne suis plus celui qui l'a prise mais celui qui la voit. (vol.40, p.164)

The separating of author and work, and the "mimétisme de la réalité par rapport à la chose écrite"<sup>15</sup> is similarly narrated within the short story "Je cherche le nom d'un parfum". Here, a woman arduously wanders around Paris seeking inspiration for the name of a perfume. In the background of this seemingly realistic tale, a tubercular painter is decorating the woman's apartment. Her impressions of Paris interweave with possible names for a perfume, a quest that can be read as a metaphor for the artistic process as the artist seeks in his or her surrounding reality an original perspective that will individualise this social context. Eventually, the banal detail in the background of the tale, the tubercular painter, provides her with the most evocative name for a perfume. The advance of the artistic imagination on an external reality is implied in the concluding lines of the tale. The woman is already musing on the haunting title "tête de pavots" when the poetic image is given its realistic correlative:

Mais la voix de la femme blafarde, que je ne pouvais plus voir derrière les gens, couvrait le tout, d'un mugissement de sirène: "La tête de mon amant".(p.213)

The previously realistic story ends with a hauntingly Maupassantesque twist.

### The Decentred Subject

The separation traditionally established between created and creating identities can be illustrated by the character of Blanche Hauteville. Blanche enters *Luna-Park* as a supernaturally hinted presence:

Décidément, cette maison était habitée, non de spectres et de revenants, mais d'une continuelle présence vivante. (p.262)

She is soon identified as the supposed recipient of a variety of letters and thus the object of their attentions and emotions. The absent Blanche and the figure of Trilby from du Maurier's novel are interwoven immediately:

Trilby avait naturellement sa place dans la maison. (p.263)

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15. See Preface to O.C. vol.14, p.22



In this way, Blanche becomes thematically involved in the three narrative lines, dictating the path of the novel itself:

Une étrange confusion se faisait dans son esprit: Blanche et Trilby se fondaient en une seule femme...C'est à Blanche qu'écrivait l'affreux, le génial, le malpropre, le mystérieux Svengali, et elle brûlait ses lettres, à moins que Justin ne les retrouvât dans la corbeille avec les autres. (p.334)

By capturing Justin's creative and romantic imagination, Blanche not only assumes a real and vital presence in the novel but satirises the image that Justin has of himself and his aesthetic omnipotence. The satisfaction and complacency of his attitude both to women and to his work are verbalised in the second chapter. It is significant that he indeed considers both relations with women and his creativity as activities dependent entirely upon his desires:

Il en avait connu des femmes! Songez que les rêves de ces femmes ne dépendaient souvent que de lui. On le savait invulnérable, uniquement préoccupé du rendement de l'écran, et c'est bien pourquoi on lui cherchait des vices, des tares. (...)

Car il créait comme Dieu-le-Père lui-même, et cela imposait le respect. (p.279)

But his infallible success is gradually ironised and subverted as the absent character Blanche takes over the novel; the muse refuses to be appropriated by the male artist. Ironic interventions in the external narration permit the reader to recognise Justin's error and laugh seemingly with Blanche at the adolescent fantasies and self-delusion of Justin Merlin before he finally admits that he is both love-sick and artistically impotent. For example, he dismisses his increasingly avid interest in Blanche's letters as a disinterested past-time:

Tout cela ne pouvait intéresser que les intéressés. (p.277)

Il était deux heures du matin passées, mais Justin n'avait décidément pas sommeil. (p.314)

His fascination with Blanche's history and his diminishing conception of his immediate surroundings, however, demonstrate his inability to control the infatuated preoccupations overtaking him. Whilst he believes he is playing the part of detective seeking Blanche, the reader can see that Justin is appropriated as a tool



by which Blanche achieves actualisation. Justin pursues his muse in the hope that he will succeed in physically identifying her. Hopelessly confusing dreams and reality, however, he learns that "on ne rêve point de ce que le soir, on a commandé pour la veille"<sup>16</sup>:

Justin regardait la porte. Une femme avec une longue chemise de nuit blanche, une châle sur les épaules... Elle détourne la tête, on ne voit que son profil perdu, sa petite oreille plate...(p.342)

Whereas "Dieu-le-Père" could create in the image he chooses, Justin realises that the fugitive and suggestive presence he pursues can entirely escape his objectification. He is just a balding, middle-aged man who cannot distinguish the novelistic character, Trilby from Blanche:

Ce qui dérangeait Justin, c'étaient ces cheveux châains et longs...Blanche était blonde, elle était or et argent, elle avait les cheveux courts. Dommage, mais elle devait avoir les cheveux courts. Pour le reste, c'était elle, c'était la Svenglai, c'était Trilby. Blanche allait tourner la tête de son côté! (...)Mais combien de jours et de nuits avait-il passés avec Trilby, avec Blanche? Il se sentait les jambes molles, il était moulu. (p.338)

He also confuses the Blanche evoked in her suitors' letters, the Blanche with whom he thinks he has fallen in love and the woman who avoids the objectification and advances of her pretendants to achieve expression through them and achieve the fulfillment of her own ambitions. He is alternately triumphantly malicious and internally jealous of the past suitors' intimacy and failed relationships with Blanche:

Justin riait, il riait tout seul, de toutes ses petites dents. Cela a dû être un drôle de coup pour Raymond d'apprendre que Blanche avait un mari! Il faut dire que Justin apprenait l'existence de ce mari par la même occasion mais ce n'était pas lui l'amant de Blanche! (p.322)

Justin remit la lettre dans son enveloppe. Il gémit, les lèvres pressées l'une contre l'autre. Il était jaloux, atrocement jaloux de l'amour qu'il n'avait pas. (p.375)

Finally, he can no longer distinguish between the film he has chosen to make based on du Maurier's novel, and the absent character Blanche, to the extent that he abandons his film projects until he has traced Blanche. A skilful inversion

16. "Un Romantisme lunaire", *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, p.380.



of du Maurier's novel is achieved within the Justin narrative. In *Trilby*, Svengali is the demonic artist who creates from a laundry girl a triumphant primadonna. In *Luna-Park*, however, art defies its incarnation in one person and denies Justin the magical creativity he thought he held. Instead he becomes the "reine démente des rossignols", desperately seeking a muse who has rejected her created role and taken to creating. As Blanche says in the letter to her husband:

Tant que tu vivras, je te demanderai de chanter.(p.365)

This narrative inversion is a striking textual assertion of the romantic obsessional and possessive nature of inspiration, rejecting entirely the omnipotence of a monologic author-dictator:

L'état de création est un état d'obsession. Tant qu'on n'a pas commencé - "obsession", tant qu'on n'a pas fini - "possession". Quelqu'un, quelque chose s'introduit en toi, ta main est un exécutant, non de toi, mais de ce quelque chose. Qui est-ce? Ce qui, à travers toi, veut exister?<sup>17</sup>

When Justin finally admits his hopeless devotion to Blanche he is prepared to listen to her for direction and guidance, recognising that the seemingly fortuitous events in the house would seem to be dictations from Blanche herself:

Il y trouva rapidement *Jacquou-le-Croquant*...En fait, c'était de l'avoir vu ici, dans la bibliothèque de Blanche qui le lui avait remis en tête. C'était encore Blanche, subitement revenue sur terre de ses parages lunaires, qui lui soufflait thème. (p.359)

The intertextual realities provided by the novels cited within the novel, quite apart from the structurally and thematically essential *Trilby*, deserve comment. When Justin first arrives at Pierce, he is seemingly drawn to the library and to certain volumes on the shelves:

Sa main allait d'elle-même aux livres les plus faciles à atteindre, à des livres lus et relus. s'ouvrant largement, comme habitués à offrir certaines pages à des yeux qui venaient chercher Dieu sait quoi. (p.261)

The novels cited all offer more intimate understandings of the *récit* in question and indeed reveal and anticipate the diegesis and the structure of work in which they appear. The books are drawn to our attention in the most elliptical fashion, for they

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17. Tsvetaeva, *L'art à la lumière de la conscience*, p.68.



are incorporated almost imperceptibly into the logical and realistic description of the scene, but can be considered also as thematic or functional "mises en abyme". Perrault, Grimm and Hoffmann, the fantastic realists define the genre of the novel; similarly, *Le Grand Meaulnes* is another fine example of magic realism. The works of Isabelle Eberhardt, the Russian traveller and innovative feminist of the nineteenth-century can be seen to shape and inspire the character of Blanche. *Jacquou-le Croquant* is evoked by Justin to comment on the peasant uprisings narrated in the novel. Finally, Justin's glance brushes casually over *Trilby* and *Wuthering Heights*. The latter offers a considerable comparison with Blanche and *Luna-Park*. Like Justin, Lockwood arrives as an outsider to *Wuthering Heights* and is attracted by both the warmth and hospitality of the domestic interior, and the disturbing sense of an unexplained presence. On the night he stays there, his dreams are provoked by staying up late reading Catherine's notebooks and diaries, trying to imagine how the unknown girl fits into the present situation. The profound and well-known effect that Catherine has on his subconsciousness leads not only to the dream but his unexplained act of sadism drawing the phantom child's wrist along the broken glass of the window. Thus the strength and former reality of Catherine is not just that of unsettled spirit but one that forces the witness into *interaction* with her. The supernatural and the real are totally consumed by the artistic reality. More absent than Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, Blanche is only present in the novel in others' references to her. Nevertheless, she holds the almost supernatural ability to force herself onto Justin's present state and dictate his actions. He is seized by an undermining of his own immediacy and reality like that experienced by Lockwood, so that he abandons anterior projects to investigate the former reality of an absent "other". In each of these examples, it should be emphasised that it is the strength of art and the aesthetic truth that is forming and determining action. External reality is presented as subordinate and inferior to aesthetic truth to the extent that Justin, for example, can no longer distinguish



between the past and the present, fantasy and fiction, his creative career and his created memories:

- Vous l'avez connue personnellement, Monsieur Merlin? (...)
- Oui, beaucoup... Si on veut. Mais pas réellement. Et je voudrais la trouver, cette femme réelle...
- Mais, recommençait l'autre, dans votre film, ou comment?... Il me semble que dans la réalité...  
Cette fois, ce fut Justin Merlin qui coupa la parole à son interlocuteur.
- Dans le film, dit-il, dans le film... nous parlons du film... (pp.390-91)

Blanche becomes the real hero of *Luna-Park*, not just the novel, but of the film Justin is now setting out to make, supposedly after having found her in the desert where he believes her to be wandering in the footsteps of her nineteenth-century model Eberhardt. But the title he chooses for his film, *Luna-Park*, points to Blanche's dream of space conquest and the romantic realisation of humanity's creative imagination. The film can also be seen as an account of looking for Blanche, a narrative in the search of its heroine, and perhaps the novel we have just read, *Luna-Park*. Again we have a fine demonstration of the extent to which the metatext can structure and determine its own text. The novel and Blanche herself point to the strength and morality of art:

Ah, l'impalpable force de l'art, elle me fait invinciblement penser à toutes les énergies imperceptibles encore qui peuvent émaner d'un être vivant.(...) Je crois que l'art est le meilleur et peut-être le seul gardien de l'histoire...(p.299)

The novel can be read as a theory of the novel in which it offers, indeed in a letter within the text, the idea of writing a novel:

*Mais pourquoi pas romancière? Pourquoi? Je t'imagine dans ton fauteuil rouge, toute ta blondeur renversée sur ce rouge, les yeux fermés... Après, tu n'aurais qu'à mettre cela sur le papier. (p.292)*

The extraordinary narrative ellipsis in this quotation will be appreciated by recognising the parallel between Drot-Pendere's image of Blanche and the narrator's presentation of Justin. The realistic expression of the doctor's attempt to dissuade Blanche from pursuing her career as a pilot also parodies Justin's vision of himself. Justin has frequently been portrayed, his little "auréole d'or" visible over



the back of the red armchair as he pores over Blanche's letters and tries to compose the film script about her. His creative aspirations thwarted, it is Blanche who leads and propels the novel. Creativity and historical actuality are idiosyncratically interwoven within the novel, and intertextual voices allow it to draw on other art forms as a sign of extra-referential truth. *Luna-Park* demonstrates the novel's relation to the future, a theme common to the series *L'Age de Nylon*, emphasising the need to maintain artistic vision and morality within the dawning epoch of the potentiality of science - genetic engineering (*Roses à crédit*), space conquest (*Luna-Park*) and cybernetics (*L'Ame*). Blanche's role as Galatea taking on a subjective existence, leading and inspiring the novel and those in interaction with her illustrates the premise first verbalised by Triolet before being celebrated by Aragon in *Le Fou d'Elsa*: "La femme est l'avenir de l'homme"<sup>18</sup>. The evolution of striking women characters can be, as Edmonde Charles-Roux demonstrates in "De l'étrangeté d'être étranger"<sup>19</sup>, traced in the female characters throughout Triolet's novelistic world, but was first noticed by Sartre in reference to *Bonsoir, Thérèse*:

A travers cette douceur étouffante et sensuelle d'un corps qui ne s'oublie pas, le monde de Thérèse se découvre, ce "monde-pour-une-femme" urgent, menaçant, et, cependant, tenu à distance respectueuse, en suspens dans cette solitude et dans cette liberté: le sujet du roman c'est, si je puis reprendre une expression de Heidegger, "l'être-dans-le-monde" d'une femme seule.<sup>20</sup>

In the "Postface à L'Age de nylon" Triolet comments on how Blanche annexes the novel without once appearing in it, where she would seem to have been created from the text apart even from the creative self-consciousness of the author:

Pourtant, si Blanche Hauteville était prise pour un symbole de l'oeuvre d'art, cela se ferait sans préméditation de la part de l'auteur.(vol.32, p.254)

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18. The reflection "Les femmes - c'est l'avenir du monde" first appears in Triolet's notebook "le cahier noir" in which she made the French and Russian notes that were to be developed into *Bonsoir, Thérèse*. She also had a "cahier bleu", in which she kept her notes in French and a "cahier bistre" for notes principally in Russian. A study of the evolution of the novel in terms of the meeting of the Russian and French notebooks can be found in Marianne Delranc's article in the first volume of *Etudes Croisées*, pp. 209-249.

19. Published in *Europe*, no.506, p.70-81.

20. J.P.Sartre, "Elsa Triolet - Bonsoir, Thérèse", *Europe*, no. 194, p.282.



Beyond *Luna-Park*, Blanche's existence took a further step into the extra-referential world when Aragon used her as the subject of his novel *Blanche, ou l'oubli* and narrated her life prior to her appearance in *Luna-park*. This remarkable temporal and narrative effect, where art becomes a fully authoritative and externally substantiated truth beyond the boundaries initially established within the novel is commented upon by Triolet in the "Postface à l'age du nylon". Aragon's extension of Blanche's existence into another text is particularly interesting considering its temporal inversion, narrating a character's existence anterior to her first appearance in the novelistic world. The consequent confirming of her "reality" by the later "biographical" work is comparable to the effect achieved by Jean Rhyss in *Wide Saragossa Sea*, (1966), which narrated the life of Bertha Mason before *Jane Eyre*.

*Luna-Park*, in this case, subverts, explores and defies the conventional boundaries of traditional realism by defamiliarising conventional techniques. The similarity with certain "nouveau roman" techniques is surely striking:

Car les artifices du Nouveau Roman, qui sautent si bien aux yeux du lecteur traditionnel qu'il ne parvient plus à lire, ne sont rien d'autre que l'envers des artifices du récit courant qui lui crèvent tellement les yeux qu'il ne parvient plus à les lire.<sup>21</sup>

Triolet foregrounds the application of what we may term a "nouveau réalisme" in her presentation of the referential illusion:

Quant à moi, j'entre si bien dans le jeu romanesque que, étrangement, l'apparition de Blanche Gaiffier authentifie pour moi la réalité de Blanche Hauteville. (...) Cette liberté, contredisant la conception figée du Réalisme (...) ne contredit pas ce que j'appelle, moi, le réalisme. (vol.32, p.261)

The advance that art is seen ineluctably to assume in relation to reality is presented in this novel as the guiding morality for modern civilisation. The reworking of myths within the novels has the particular effect of reinforcing our collective, artistic memory as well as uniting indissolubly human and artistic destinies. The subjective revolt of Galatea in the form of Blanche, her conscious

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21. *Le Nouveau Roman*, p.153.



mythological reflection in the figure of Icarus, the promethean task of uniting art and science in a modern assertion of the potential of human knowledge, such motifs associate very firmly Triolet's aesthetic theory with the future. The presence and relevance of myths reminds the present that there is nothing iconoclastic or extra-human in the scientific projects nearing realisation: the myths that were once both the extent of a civilisation's knowledge and the explanation of a world's mysteries are both the results of the human imagination and harbingers of the extensions of human endeavour. For Triolet, the future of modern civilisation depends very strongly on the greatest faith being maintained in artistic imagination and the morality that art must necessarily inhere. The novel textualises her theory and Blanche Hauteville personifies the leading inspiring, creating force of art and the created personality.



# Chapter Eight

## Time as a Creative Device

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality.  
Time past and time future  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.<sup>1</sup>

The textual and thematic treatment of time as a key to literariness is narrated and examined throughout Triolet's novelistic universe. Foregrounding the temporal devices in art, she illustrates a dissatisfaction with the putative reality of chronological precision. This reinforces the dual, dynamic interweaving of narrative fiction and reality.

Le récit est une séquence deux fois temporelle: il y a le temps de la chose-racontée et le temps du récit. Cette dualité (...) nous invite à constater qu'une des fonctions du récit est de monnayer un temps dans un autre temps.<sup>2</sup>

Novelistic time is made dominant in a number of different ways. Triolet uses temporal displacement, purposely breaking up a linear succession of events; cinematographic techniques of montage and spatialised time; structurally important figures of anachronism, compositional repetition, digression, delays and amplification. Totally true to Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation, where "the device is laid bare" the effect is indeed:

pour éprouver que la pierre est de la pierre.<sup>3</sup>

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1. T.S.Eliot, *Four Quartets, Collected Poems*, p.193.
  2. Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, p.27.
  3. Shklovsky, *L'Art comme procédé*, in *Théorie de la littérature*, p.83.



We only escape from the chronological structure to seek it more fervently, making the reader an active participant in the novel, seeking to reconstruct the logical succession that the novelist has purposefully evaded.

Le caractère elliptique de ces reprises, en fin d'analyse partielle, ne fait pour le lecteur attentif que souligner par asyndète la rupture temporelle.<sup>4</sup>

Temporal defamiliarisation has the effect of spatialising time and reducing the inevitable burden of causality. The relations between events become suggestive, construed and potential where truth exists as a fabricated pattern of eternal possibilities and independent apprehension. This textual feature also reinforces strikingly the visual experimentation and theoretical principles of the Cubists and Cubo-Futurists where description is architectonic. The reinforcement of structural detail is achieved at the expense of traditional psychological analysis. As indicated above, detail is never a realistic, sociological indicator in Triolet's descriptive prose, but a structural and therefore spatial feature of the novel.

In each novel chosen for this chapter, there is a significant textual and metatextual awareness of at least two temporal lines - the time of the reported action and the time of the reporting discourse. Even the most flagrant transgressions of these lines - the fictionalised death of the supposedly narrating character for example - reinforces the concept of time although always to the detriment of logical, unidimensional truth. The terminology established by the Formalist theoreticians, of the *fabula* and the *sjuzhet*, will be used to identify different temporal lines. Their literary method takes as its basic material a simple, temporally delineated story but then situates its transformation into art in the elaborations, complications and repetitions of the story. So constructed, the work is truly perceived, the process of perception being heightened by devices that extend and intensify the perceptive moment:

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4. *Figures III*, p.103.



le procédé de l'art (...) consiste à obscurcir la forme, à augmenter la difficulté et la durée de la perception. *L'acte de perception en art est une fin en soi et doit être prolongé.*<sup>5</sup>

### Time as a Structural Feature of the novel.

A particular spatialising manipulation of time prominent in modernist fiction is that of employing cinematographic effects. This brings the technical resources of the novel into consonance with contemporary concepts of time and space. The novel is by its physical and grammatico-linguistic nature a prominently temporal medium:

on peut passer un film à l'envers, image par image; on ne peut, sans qu'il cesse d'être un texte, lire un texte à l'envers.(...) Le livre est en plus tenu qu'on ne le dit souvent aujourd'hui par la fameuse *linéarité* du signifiant linguistique.<sup>6</sup>

Shifts between three or more temporal fields offer the writer the greatest freedom to explore states of consciousness, dream, memory and desire. The writer's primary obstacle is that of the burdensome chronology which the syntactic and physical aspects of the novel tend to impose. Twentieth-century modernist fiction abounds in attempts to transcend this.

Film, however, is constantly troubled by the contrived nature of time's passage, (as indeed is the theatre as Shakespeare's figures of Time illustrate - see *A Winter's Tale* for example). Unfolding calendar pages, subtitled elapses of time or skilful cosmetic arranging of characters all emphasise the awkward union of visual representation and temporal distance. As Bèlà Balàzs has remarked:

Pictures have no tenses. Unfolding in a perpetual present, like visual perception itself, they cannot express either a past or future.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst limited by its presentness, film is an eminently spatial medium offering a perspective that is more nearly objective. The near objectivity, the visual immediacy and the original vision that film can accommodate are understandably

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5. *Théorie de la littérature*, p.83. (Shklovsky's italics)

6. *Figures III*, p.78.

7. Balàzs, cited by George Bluestone, *Novels into Films*, p.57



features that would attract a modern novelist seeking to assert a new realism. Prose approximations of camera perspectives, the camera eye and camera motion have vastly transformed notions of perspective in modern fiction:

Ce que l'on peut dire, c'est que pour moi comme pour tous, le cinéma a enrichi la vision que nous avons des choses. (Angles, distances, des "prises de vues" panoramiques, plans fixes, "travellings", gros plans.) Et naturellement, cette nouvelle façon de voir se retrouve dans ce que j'écris.<sup>8</sup>

The innovative research into film criticism undertaken by the Formalists, and the close links between certain Formalists and film theoreticians, should be recalled. Cinematographic techniques applied by Triolet to her novelistic world are particularly interesting considering the literary heritage within which I am placing her in this study.

The application of cinematic perspectives has a variety of structural, thematic and textual implications. The inclusion of journalistic reportage offers an effect of newsreel documentary which reinforces the historical, externally referential dimension. The technique of montage permits elements to be organised without transitions or explanatory passages, a device already considered and to which I shall return:

...combining shots that are "depictive" single in meaning, neutral in context into intellectual contexts and series.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, the only chronological sequence is the temporal order which the reader constructs from the stream of visual images evoked by the narrative with an effect of continual present. The structure of *Bonsoir, Thérèse* revolves around several narrational points rather than suggesting a horological order. This creates what Genette describes as "achronie"; that is to say a structure defying attempts to reassemble it logically and chronologically. Genette defines this novelistic temporality in relation to *A la recherche du temps perdu*:

On trouve aussi dans la *Recherche* quelques événements dépourvus de toute référence temporelle, et que l'on ne peut situer d'aucune manière par rapport à ceux qui les entourent: il suffit pour cela qu'ils soient rattachés non pas à

8. Claude Simon, *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, no.185, p.103.

9. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p.30.



un autre événement (ce qui obligerait le récit à les définir comme antérieurs ou postérieurs), mais au discours commentatif (intemporel) qui les accompagne.<sup>10</sup>

This specifically novelistic time-scale illustrates how novelistic composition may be invigorated by other artistic media. The novel also achieves a "motion-picture" effect in places capturing the vastness of space travelled by an effect of serial production with far more verisimilitude than a more syntactic evocation of travelling could aspire to:

La route, la mer, les champs, les bois...Le soleil, la faim, le paysage vu d'en haut, vu d'en bas, un paysage qui fond sur vous ou qui s'étire lentement comme de la guimauve, des perspectives et des gros plans. Du cent à l'heure pour atteindre l'endroit où les deux parallèles se touchent, du trente à l'heure sur les pierres cahoteuses des villages avec une vieille église (vol.1, p.244)

Suggestions of film form have the peculiar effect of reinforcing the *novelistic* whole, just as the leaps outside time, or into spatialised time only render traditional chronology more noticeably absent. Underlining the filmic influences on the novels' architectonics, we find the structure textualised by cinematographic references which foreground the mixed-media techniques being employed. *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*, for example, presents ageing artists of the past as if on stage or appearing in their final film. The narrator remarks:

Ils étaient là, chacun porteur de sa biographie, film terminé et mis en boîte.(p.128)

In *Luna-Park* and *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, the narrator highlights the influence of the medium of cinema, using this contrast to foreground the difference between the "created" world in which all comes to a contrived happy end and the "real" world of the novel where reality continues after the artistic conclusion. This is of course directly related to the ideas introduced in Chapter Six, where in a feat of creative representation, characters in a novel compare their own, real fates with the created fates of invented figures in works of art:

- Terminé?
- Terminé, dit l'un.

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10. *Figures III*, p.119.



- Non, non! crie l'autre.

Coupé! le mot "fin" s'inscrit sur l'écran, pendant que les deux silhouettes s'éloignent dans deux directions opposées, une fin aussi banale que possible. (vol.31, p.326)

Dominant televisual images in *Luna-Park* also draw our attention to the defamiliarised medium and the multitude of temporal orders peculiar to the modern era:

Soudain, il n'y eut plus sur l'écran que le visage de Justin Merlin, en gros plan, et de ses yeux un peu plissés de recevoir en plein les projecteurs, il regardait directement Mme Vavin!

- Nous trouverons Blanche Hauteville en vie - disait-il à Mme Vavin, et des étincelles se mirent à lui picoter le visage (un camion dans les parages). (p.391)

In Chapter Seven, a clear parallel was suggested between the novel, *Luna-Park*, and the film Justin was setting out to make. This interpretation is substantiated by recognising the cinematographic effects employed in the opening and closing scenes of the novel. This imparts an artistic completeness to the novel and a notion of film form to the novelistic medium. The opening scene presents us with a general, outside portrait of the house at Pierce achieved with the near objective view of a camera:

La maison se vendait meublée. Il y avait des lilas dans le jardin, des masses de lilas, avec des grappes lourdes comme du raisin noir. L'épicière du village, qui détenait les clés de la maison, se battait avec la serrure. L'acheteur la regardait faire. Puis il entra derrière elle dans un petit hall. (p.257)

This external shot then gives way to a close-up:

Le bleu lui remplissait les yeux en entier, des yeux de nouveau-né, et l'insignifiance des cils clairs rendait ce bleu illimité. Il avait le nez court et de petites dents blanches dans une bouche moelleuse. (p.257)

The textual creation of film effects is of course then associated with the novel's thematic context:

sa stature rembourée, son auréole d'or, son regard bleu ne faisaient plus qu'un avec ce nom: Justin Merlin. Il venait de terminer un film. (p.257)

The near-objectivity of the camera-lens (one should never lose sight of the mind dictating the movements of the camera) has a second thematic significance to



be underlined. The sensation of distance between viewer and object viewed where "the camera eye" records has the immediate effect of reducing the distortion associated with subjective vision. However, like the notion of creating another to confirm oneself, the technique I examined earlier, camera effect has a hollow ring of solitude. A character functioning as "recording camera" reinforces the loneliness and exclusion lived by Triolet's heroines. They register the passing of the world outside because they have no inter-personal involvement that can complicate their vision. This was described in *Bonsoir, Thérèse*:

Dans la solitude étrangère on peut très bien regarder les choses et les gens, les regarder sans fin. C'est ce que je fais. (vol.1, p.156)

This portrait of the outsider *reduced* by her absence of involvement to a camera recording the events in an environment in which she does not belong is evoked even more poignantly in *Camouflages*:

Comme on ne remarquait la petite Varvara que pour la mettre dehors, elle avait pris l'habitude de se considérer comme un objet inutile et gênant, tâchant d'occuper le moins de place possible et de ne pas faire de bruit.(...) Elle s'était transformée en un vivant Kodak, et, sans même le vouloir, enregistrait inlassablement et avec précision ce qui l'entourait. (p.192).

The recording camera evokes simultaneously time's absence and time's hollowness, as they are experienced by someone living "on the outside". Brodsky defines this sensation of time's absence contained within time's movement in relation to Osip Mandelstam:

Mandlestam, along with producing an almost physical sensation of time's tunnel, creates the effect (...) of a pause within a pause. Which is, after all, a form of time, if not its meaning: if time does not get stopped by that it at least gets focused.<sup>11</sup>

The peculiar interaction of novelistic time and timelessness will be examined in the second part of this chapter.

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11. *Less than One*, p.127.



## The Temporal Planes of the Novel

The temporal construction of *Luna-Park* is particularly interesting in that it offers three *fabuli*: the story of Justin who arrives in Pierce and spends his summer there; the time covered in du Maurier's novel set in the 1850's, and recounted in retrospect by a well-informed narrator; and the letters narrative in which the past history of the absent Blanche is narrated. This last *fabula* is particularly significant for it is often achieved by insinuation and the suggested reconstruction of time just elapsed. For example, whereas the correspondants refer to obvious, recent events between themselves, Justin, in his attempt to reconstruct the story, has to imagine and amplify the details he (and we) are given:

Quelque chose s'était passé entre les deux lettres portant la même date... B. avait dû déposer le matin sa lettre si proprement tapée à la machine. Le soir, il avait vu Blanche, et quelque chose s'était passé entre eux...(p.273)

Justin parcourut la suite...B. avait commis une erreur, une faute, Justin ne voyait pas très bien ce que cela pouvait bien être...(...)Tiens, se dit Justin, *breach of promiss*? Et cela lui fut désagréable que cette Blanche courût après le mariage avec B.(p.275)

We are presented with a narrative illustration of the reception of art. Justin, like the reader of a novel, is faced with references and suggestions from which he has to construct a logical and conceivable *sjuzhet*. This process is also reminiscent of the theatrical telephone call where the spectator has to provide the immediate past by reconstructing a possible dialogue from the clues given in the overheard conversation.

The undermining of real time by the superior strength of what Genette calls "l'autonomie temporelle du récit" is achieved and thematised in this novel. The real time of the novel is the summer months between Justin's arrival on the first page to the autumnal twilight of the last page at the end of his television interview and when he has vacated the house. This passage of three or four months, however, is totally subsumed by the extra-referential times of the letters and by *Trilby*. This sublimation of real time by fictional creation is narrated by Justin's increasing



preoccupation with the script for his next film, *Trilby*. He abandons his film projects to trace the fate of the absent Blanche, without whom he feels incapable of continuing his film, so totally interwoven have become the figures of Trilby and his fantasised portrait of Blanche. The novel's *sjuzhet* is thus created by the additional effects that the defamiliarised and deconstructed *fabuli* have on the whole work. The fictional "present" becomes dependent on the outcome or deliberate inversion of the two stories achieved and set in the past. This temporal transposition, where the reality of the present is conceivable only by recapturing time past, is reinforced in the structural and descriptive presentation of the protagonist's actions. Justin's present becomes completely subordinated to his fascination with the two tales from the past. Until he discovers the campsite and the Baron, thereby linking his present to the letters narrative, the narration of his activities in the house assumes a timelessness because he is merely "passing time" until he can once again satisfy his curiosity with the past. For example, we do not know how, or how much, time elapses between his arrival at the house and the logical continuation of the narrative. Instead, time is evoked by a series of repeated and indistinctly evoked actions:

il s'en allait par les sentiers dans les taillis et les bois. Le paysage était assez plat, vide, grand, monotone et lorsqu'on y marchait, c'était comme dans les airs ou sur la mer...il rentrait pour manger, dormir.(p.260)

Maintenant le soleil allait tous les jours tirer Justin de son lit (...)  
A pied ou en voiture, Justin faisait des kilomètres(...) Le soir, il tombait de fatigue, allait se coucher à peine rentré et dormait si profondément que rien n'aurait pu l'atteindre au fond de ce puits.(p.297)

The novel's real time, Justin's fictional present, is thus portrayed as increasingly vague, oneiric and insignificant. Already preoccupied with the thought of coming across the enigmatic former owner of the house, the continuation of his narrated present (as opposed to descriptive evocation in the imperfect tense) depends on the return to the letters narrative:

Il avait fallu un après-midi de pluie pour que Justin s'assît à nouveau avec plaisir devant le bureau noir.(p.297)



As Justin's infatuation with Blanche grows, he becomes overtaken by creative sterility at the discovery that Blanche is missing. Having intellectually linked his own present to hers, her disappearance suspends his control of his own existence. His creative certainty and enthusiasm are as totally consumed by the fire as Blanche's letters; indeed, he considers his film script *Trilby* to be as irrecoverable as Blanche's correspondence. The loss of the material proof of Blanche's life and projects is followed by the reported disappearance of her aircraft during a trial flight in North Africa.

Tout ce qu'il avait tenu vivant entre ces mains, ni jauni ni passé...Anéanti, définitivement effacé. L'assassinat, l'homicide par imprudence, la balle perdue, n'importe, c'était l'accident mortel, la fin de tout. Cadavres, cadavres...Blanche, sa vie, son intimité, Trilby, le film... Tout avait sombré dans le feu. (p.381)

At the novel's conclusion, the three narrative lines become interwoven to the extent that the conclusion of the nineteenth-century novel is as functional as the future plans now cherished by the film director. His plans for his film demonstrate the extent to which his life and the "real" time of the novel have become subordinated to the compositional patterns borrowed from du Maurier and the letters.

J'en ai décidé ainsi. Il ne faut pas que mes personnages, que mes héroïnes...et Blanche Hauteville est une héroïne...continuent à périr à la fin de mes histoires, et que je chagrine toujours mes spectateurs qui sont mes amis. Blanche Hauteville vit et vivra. Elle ira encore dans la lune...(p.392)

Justin's next film depends on finding Blanche Hauteville, receiver and author of the letters that have consumed Justin's career; and his conceptualisation of his new film is highly reminiscent of the conclusion to du Maurier's novel. This can be seen particularly where the latter apologises to his reader for the Shakespearean holocaust his novel is threatening to emulate and so contrives to write a happy ending. The disparity between the two ages, the novel *Trilby* and the Justin narrative, is captured in the very closing sequences of the two novels. Du Maurier's characters



find peace because they "left up hankering after the moon"<sup>12</sup> whereas in *Luna-Park*, Blanche's dreams of lunar travel are being realised by the space exploration presently undertaken. The child who stares at the sky and demands: "Donne-moi la lune" is not showing infantile capriciousness but the aspirations shared by her epoch. "Aujourd'hui, Icare est femme"; but not only is Blanche a modern Icarus but her imagination is only just in advance of her age. "Et elle ira encore dans la lune...". Triolet's conception of the writer and his/her relation to the epoch celebrates this new domain in which the artist's imagination as well as scientists' knowledge should be leading their era into a new present:

Est-ce que, à présent que les savants soviétiques ont pénétré dans l'antichambre du cosmos, il ne devrait pas naître un nouveau romantisme, pour ainsi dire lunaire? (...) c'est-à-dire une nouvelle imagination créatrice multipliée par les faits réels.<sup>13</sup>

If the narrative development in *Luna-Park* unites and intertwines the three autonomous time patterns within the novelistic structure, the initial temporal structure in *Le Rossignol* is coherent and homogeneous. The woman who looks insistently at her watch without quite knowing the time of the meeting for which she is preparing herself is a textual repetition and thematic illustration of the essence of time analysed within, and structurally part of this novel:

Elle se surprenait cette nuit, comme toutes les nuits et tous les jours, à regarder l'heure de plus en plus souvent bien que l'heure et la date du rendez-vous n'aient pas été fixées, et qu'elle ne connût pas la personne qu'elle devait rencontrer. (vol.40, p.129)

As said earlier, true to the purest classical definitions of art, the *fabula* adheres<sup>e</sup> absolutely to the unity of time. The chronological sequence of the night's events leads the reader logically from the uncertain hours of twilight to the breaking light of dawn the following morning. This temporal coherence is of course only part of the role of time. Regularly interrupting the classical diegesis are the "histoires enchassées" that are the woman's memories, regrets and fantasies:

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12. *Trilby*, p.447.

13. Triolet, "Un Romantisme lunaire", *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, p.376-7.



*Te souviens-tu mon coeur des heures incertaines  
Et des souvenirs qui n'en étaient plus.* (p.162)

In an evening in which anticipation is more important than events, where the time of waiting is experienced more strongly than the time of action, these "histoires enchassées" produce an almost physical sensation of time's passage, creating the effect of a time within a time, or, more exactly, a caesura within a caesura. They are reminiscent of the marvellous hollows in Chekhov where all that is not said is felt and thus all that is not said is all the more feelingly absent. A similar effect can be located, for example, in *Bonsoir, Thérèse* and *Le Rossignol* where the same event is interrupted by a typographical caesura which divides the narrative and creates a suspension of narration in which all the unverballed sordidness and loneliness is foregrounded:

L'Américain écoutait. Puis, il me coupa la parole et dit:  
- Allons coucher...  
- ...  
Alors, on y va?...  
(vol.1, p.181; vol.40, p.166)

And this, of course, has the outstanding effect of foregrounding time.

The passages of memory in *Le Rossignol* not only interrupt the primary time sequence but interact within it, so that the memories and evocations of time past form and shape time present. This evocation of time as an aspect of space infusing every place with its own time or simultaneity of times is another novelistic means to escape the linear, sequential time by which the novel is physically restricted. *Le Rossignol* offers what may be termed intersecting vertical and horizontal planes, to use a metaphor by Butor:

Dans *Mobile*, le temps passe de deux façons qui sont presque perpendiculaires l'une à l'autre. Il y a le temps superficiel, le temps de la description: (des cinquante Etats...) Perpendiculairement à ce temps-là, il y a, se déployant peu à peu, le temps de l'histoire des Etats-Unis.<sup>14</sup>

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14. Butor, in *Le Nouveau Roman*, p.163.



Breaking across the horizontal linearity which is the passage of hours from evening to dawn, a series of dreams constructed from other times and places are juxtaposed in a conceptually perpendicular structure. Typographically and temporally separated, they propose autonomous spatio-temporal realities. These scenes do not so much break the evening, but form caesuri within it. The evening's passage across the indefinable time zones of dreams and images creates the spatial sense of cinematography, an effect also achieved by this use of juxtaposition. The setting besides one another of diverse scenes without verbal connectives annihilates the idea of beginnings and ends, transitions and direct causality, "La nuit, le temps s'évanouissaient". (p.207) Rather, succession is felt as random and haphazard and even the "histoire racontante" and the "histoire racontée" of "ce rendez-vous plein de rêves" become aspects of each other:

Cette voix, je la rêve. Elle vient du fond des ages, disparaît. Je l'oublie.  
(p.137)

Sa vie lui revient dans la bouche et l'étouffe, sa vie comme une moule pas fraîche qui lui donne envie de vomir, des crampes d'estomac. Non... la douleur n'est que la suite du rêve, c'est une souffrance rêvée. (p.185)

It is enriching also to consider the time of the evening spent as the indefinable time that has to be passed as the woman finally dies. This links very clearly to the narrator's remark in *Le Grand jamais*:

Toute une vie qui se déroule devant vous en quelques secondes, juste avant de mourir (...) C'est cela la biographie la plus exacte d'un homme, composée des sens faits dont sa vie réclame. (vol.35, p.198)

Seen from this perspective, the dinner party itself forms part of her memories, or is at least only functional in that it provides the stimulation to her ageing memory that incites the revision of her life and permits her passage into death. This is reminiscent of Brodsky's thought, that:

Memory (..) is a substitute for the tail we lost for good in the happy process of evolution. It directs our movements, including migration. Apart from that there is something clearly atavistic in the very process of recollection,



if only because such a process never is linear. Also, the more one remembers, the closer perhaps one is to dying.<sup>15</sup>

If this interpretation seems unduly removed from the immediate semantic direction of the text, we may recall the inclusion of two "éléments préfabriqués", the quotations from Aragon's poem, *Les Chambres*:

*Comme c'est long de mourir une vie entière* (p.179)

*On prétend qu'à l'heure de mourir la mémoire  
Passe la vie en revue  
Épargnez-moi cette épreuve épargnez  
Moi cette épreuve du temps renversé  
Qu'ai-je fait au ciel pour devoir m'en souvenir* (p.173)

These citations offer the fullest evocation of the evening as an indeterminable passage between living and dying when they are juxtaposed with the woman's own metaphorical sensation of drowning:

*Elle se laissait absorber entièrement par une nostalgie semblable à une noyade dans des marais.* (p.179)

In this novelistic "renversement du temps", therefore, just as the present gives way to the finer, more evocative passages of dreams, so life is being consumed both by death *and* art as "la nuit la plus courte s'étirait en éternité". (p.160):

*Le poète savait mettre en mots ce qu'il y avait en elle, ce qu'elle était.*  
(p.179)

The novel becomes an oneiric search for artistic definition. This is accomplished where the two separate time patterns, the advancing chronology of life and the nostalgic and recurrent themes of fantasies and memories become interwoven in the artistic structure, making life itself but the raw material from which art will be created. The artistic work achieved, the woman's life becomes a detail from which she can separate herself more easily.

If the dying woman is certainly impatient to be released from a life in which she no longer feels involved, this anticipation is shot through with bitterness, and fear of the self-negation that her death must also imply:

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15. *Less than One*, p.30.



Horrible mélange d'une défaite d'une anxiété lucide, de toutes les séparations qui la guettaient, dont la moindre était celle d'avec elle-même. (p.182)

Consequently, we may interpret her *récit* as the delaying tactic renowned in *The Arabian Nights*. Scheherezade's stories are admittedly the main narrative interest of the stories, but subordinate in "realistic" terms to her desire to delay an otherwise inevitable death:

On peut établir plusieurs types de nouvelles qui servent de cadre à d'autres nouvelles ou qui sont plutôt une manière d'inclure une nouvelle dans une autre. Le moyen le plus répandu, c'est de raconter des nouvelles ou des contes pour retarder l'accomplissement d'une action quelconque.(...) Shéhérazade recule par ses contes le moment de sa propre exécution.<sup>16</sup>

The novelistic quality of the work, and the achievement of its artistic wholeness thus emanate in part from its digressions<sup>S</sup> and divergences, in a manner reminiscent of Shklovsky's theory of art. That is to say that the part of the literary matter which makes the work literary or poetic is not the basic story but its elaborate complications and repetitions

The plot of *Eugene Onegin* is not Onegin's love affair with Tatiana, but the artistic handling of the *fabula*, achieved by means of interpolating digressions.<sup>17</sup>

This interpretation of the novel as the dying woman's deliberate postponement of her own death, making of her own life and death an artistic whole, can also be maintained by the structural unity of the novel. The novel opens with a dinner setting in which eleven people are supposedly participating equally, like actors on a stage. From this impression of external objectivity however, the woman's dreams narrated in the first-person distinguish her from the other characters. She becomes a privileged, participating character with an extra-referential role. Consequently, she is an alien, alterior misfit who is neither narrator nor narrated:

Mais ils étaient sans doute sortis, les maîtres du langage. (...)  
- Quand je pose une question, il n'y a jamais personne pour répondre.  
(p.141)

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16. Shklovsky, *Théorie de la littérature*, p.189.

17. *O Teorii Prozy*, p.204.



Elle n'écoutait pas ce qu'ils disaient et les voyaient mal dans l'obscurité.  
(p.130)

Within the novel's diegesis, she lives through this metatextual and verbal exclusion to die before the novel's conclusion, so reuniting herself with the novelistic characters, "ils", within an artistic whole.

Ses yeux ouverts *les englobaient tous dans un regard unique*.(...) Ils la voyaient, ils se voyaient...(p.208)

The novelistic present of a realistic night in time gives way to suspension of both time and individual subjectivity, and thus the achievement of a work of art. Born from time, art transcends it by incarnating both the inner dynamism of the text, the social context from which the text separated itself, and the indefinite future time when the text may receive countless reincarnations as potential readers engage in it. We are hence reaching a point of aesthetic synthesis comparable to that reached in Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

Words move, music moves  
Only in time; but that which is only living  
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.<sup>18</sup>

The novel's temporal patterns foreground the textual importance of time - the hours of the evening, the time reviewed in the passage of memories and the escape from time in the narrated death of the old woman. Here, we can see the intersecting of time as a novelistic device, and time as an existential phenomenon; that is to say, "le temps immobile qu'on mesure, et la durée vivante".<sup>19</sup> This meeting of artistic work, artistic destiny and subjective existence will be extended in Chapter Nine.

### Time as a Textual Figure in the Novel

Whilst foregrounding time as a structural figure of the novel, *Le Rossignol* also evokes time as the unforgiving burden accompanying anticipation, solitude

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18. *Four Quartets*, p.194.

19. Madeleine Barthélemy-Madaule, "La Quatrième dimension," *Europe*, no.506, p.130.



and inactivity. These are the moments where time would seem obstinately *not* to pass. An individual is even more conscious of his or her loneliness in the "moments creux" that figure as importantly in his or her life as those moments to which we can cheerfully attach a date, a temporal delimitation and a period of signification. This ponderous timelessness can be situated in the woman's memories of waiting, where her existence, dependent upon the presence of another, becomes a suspension of herself in the indefinable periods of the other's absence:

J'attendais. J'attendais. L'autre parlait pour moi, pour mon attente. Ce n'est pas lui que j'attendais...  
*Reviens de nulle part*  
*N'importe où je t'attends*  
 Je savais dire ses vers et je savais attendre. Les vers et l'attente se croisaient. (p.165)

In these discussions of her vigilant solitude, we can see a meeting of art and timelessness (*Les vers et l'attente se croisaient*) where her waiting in the past can be seen almost as a rehearsal for this final anticipation of death:

Elle n'en pouvait plus d'attendre mais ne savait comment abrégier l'attente. (p.179)

The unbearable *nonpassage* of time in life, reminiscent of Tennyson's "death-in-life" is portrayed most clearly in the unbearable hours of insomnia:

Seule dans son coin, à essayer de passer le temps, à rôder, disponible, affreusement, les yeux fermés sans dormir. (p.168)

Au fond de l'insomnie, sans rien dans la tête, je suis en prison et le temps ne passe pas. (p.188)

This existential paralysis between being and non-being characterises all Triolet's protagonists. Even the analyses of time seem to foreground the desperation of the character who seemingly falls beyond time's reach. It is responsible for the impotence that overtakes Justin Merlin as shown earlier. Varvara, the protagonist of *Camouflages*, illustrates that, far from being an embittered conclusion to Triolet's novelistic destiny, this foregrounding of isolation and temporal inactivity is one of Triolet's very "points de départ":



- Eprouver tout le temps l'infini...C'est à cause de cela que j'ai une peur malade de l'espace...L'infini dans le temps, c'est l'éternité ou la mort...Je me sens dans un courant d'air perpétuel, sans aucune protection. (p.295)

This nonpassage of time, the "moments creux", delineates where aesthetic narration begins. Purpose and action give way to the "unfolding of the verbal material" to adopt a popular Formalist concept. Hence, in *Le Grand jamais*, the author-narrator reflecting about the nature of novel writing remarks "Comment encadrer le vide?" (p.302) "Le vide", "le moment creux" is the point where journalism - the reportage of events, and history - linking events in a time more removed, fade into fiction. The "moments creux" can also be compared to Chekhov's pauses, where they foreground the aesthetic potential of "le détail inutile". In novelistic terms the "moment creux" also focalises the moment of scriptural activity. This will be studied closely in Chapter Nine:

Avec la description, un certain temps passe (celui de la littéralité lue) pendant lequel il ne se passe rien. Le temps des aventures y subit donc l'injection périlleuse d'un temps inutile.(...) Cette extension scripturale du temps de la fiction provoque d'irrémediables dommages dans le développement du récit.<sup>20</sup>

Released from the burden of meaningfulness or teleology this is the moment where either characters or narration achieve aesthetic existence, achieving in their existence or "détail inutile" what Barthes categorises as the very accomplishment of modern realism:

La carence même du signifié au profit du seul référent devient le signifiant même du réalisme: il se produit un *effet de réel*, fondement de ce vraisemblable inavoué qui forme l'esthétique de toutes les oeuvres courantes de la modernité.<sup>21</sup>

This aesthetic function is reminiscent of the ancients' "epideictic", where discourse itself is an aesthetic aim. Subject only to the cultural laws of representation, such an aesthetic captures all the ambiguity of modern reality in its multiformity, and its stress on becoming. It is, as Kundera has said, when "thought wanders off in sweet lazy liberty"<sup>22</sup>.

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20. *Le Nouveau Roman*, p.141.

21. Barthes, "L'effet du réel", in *Littérature et réalité*, p.89.

22. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.162.



Existence that appears as a caesura denies the subject the comforting interaction with others who bring meaning and purpose to one's monologues, and with events that unite the subject reassuringly with the continuum of history. The narrating personality in the Epilogue of *Bonsoir, Thérèse* describes "la partie creuse d'une vie dont on tairait les événements". (p.279) It recalls the death-in-life of the observing, reporting personality:

Même cette journée-ci, qui a débuté par un prodige, sera longue comme une insomnie..

*Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie...*

Qu'est-ce que j'en ai fait, mon Dieu...(p.180)

This can be illustrated in *Bonsoir, Thérèse* in a passage that masterfully evokes all the hope of recognition and the hollowness of insignificance that accompanies Triolet's heroines. At the close of "Une Vie étrangère", the narrator is lying alone in her hotel bedroom, waiting for the night to pass:

...brusquement j'entendis le frottement d'une main sur ma porte. Je ne dormais plus. Le coeur me sauta dans la gorge. Mais la main trouva le bouton de la minuterie sur le palier à côté de ma porte, car les fentes et le trou de la serrure s'éclaircirent, et j'entendis des pas qui s'éloignaient...(p.183)

As the fear of intrusion gives way to the realisation that no-one is sufficiently concerned to wish to disturb her, the narrator and the reader alike are aware of the hollow existence bearing upon her. To return to the metonymy of death-in-life, the subject deprived of social interaction is reduced to a state that is not living, but waiting:

- Tu sais, quand je t'ai vue pour la première fois, enfin pour la deuxième, j'avais envie de te toucher pour être sûr que tu n'es pas une vision. Alors, comment vivais-tu?

- Je ne vivais pas; c'est bien simple: j'attendais. (p.250)

The resolution of this desolating non-being was illustrated in Part Two. In *Le Monument*, Lewka wanders desolately through the town which he is convinced his failed art has massacred. Believing he has failed the demands of both time past



and time future<sup>23</sup>, he decides, in the most strict adherence to his linguistic apparatus, that he must kill time:

Il sortit dans la rue...Où aller? Que faire? Comment tuer le temps? Lui, dont la vie a été pleine comme un oeuf frais, le voilà réduit à se battre avec le temps. Le temps est devenu son pire ennemi. Comment tuer le temps sans se tuer...(vol.14, p.137)

The idea of suicide is rejected both in *Bonsoir, Thérèse* and *Le Rossignol*. Instead, time is successfully transcended in aesthetic creation, in the achieving of a self that has as many beginnings and ends as the work has readers, that reconciles the alienated subject caught between movement and stillness in a stillness moulded out of the flux of time. Aesthetic meaningfulness is born from this hollow in the temporal "déroulement". This is illustrated by a theme introduced towards the end of *Le Rossignol*. The poetic, immanent meanings in an utterance are emphasised when the narrator deliberately extends figurative expressions in familiar speech that have been rendered banal, almost meaningless. She considers them with a deliberation perhaps particular to a non-native speaker who approaches a language as an outsider and therefore experiences an effect of verbal defamiliarisation before its idiosyncratic and linguistic quirks. For example, a telephone call from an unknown woman intrudes into the woman's tenth dream, in which, in a kaleidescoping dream within a dream, she daydreams to assuage her dreamt insomnia that prevents her from sleeping:

C'est elle qui brise: "Eh bien, on n'est pas encore sorti de l'auberge..." Je raccroche. Je me recouche. (p.187)

A passing impatience and misunderstanding give way to her growing preoccupation with "l'auberge":

Je vais le prendre au pied de la lettre, le prendre mal. Pourquoi est-il allé dans une auberge? Et si je le surprénais sortant d'une auberge avec une femme?(p.188)

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23. That is, he has not only betrayed his artistic heritage by sculpting the hideous and overshadowing monument, but he has also destroyed for uncountable generations in the future, the beauty and dignity of the town he had cherished. His monument has therefore rendered sterile his restoration works and his own artistic creations in the past.



As the figure obsesses her thoughts and imagination, it becomes an obstacle to her own tranquility of mind:

Elle se dit qu'elle est peut-être en train de dormir, qu'elle rêve ces trois marches et cet air divinement frais. Elle n'est pas encore sortie de l'auberge - qui, quand, où? - oui, le téléphone, la sonnerie...le lit..(p.205)

It is finally synonymous with her death itself:

...mais elle n'avait qu'à la supporter un peu, dans un petit instant ça serait fini. Elle allait sortir de l'auberge, la dame osseuse et souriante était au rendez-vous. (p.207)

Just as a transient, temporal unfolding has given way to the multiplicity and resonance of her dreams, so the casual-to-the-point-of-meaningless utterances of everyday speech give way to aesthetic metaphor, confirming the reality of novelistic and imaginary existence against the meaninglessness and illusion of a transitory life. This too can be seen as a fictional realisation of the Formalists' premises:

The material of poetry is neither images nor emotions, but words...Poetry is verbal art.<sup>24</sup>

It is a confirmation that celebrates verbal existence, not as a fidelity between words and their objects, but as a semantic shift, the eternal reflections between the sign and the referent, protagonists and situations, between the text and metatext:

...sans contradiction, il n'y a pas de jeu des concepts, il n'y pas de jeu des signes, le rapport entre le concept et le signe devient automatique, le cours des événements s'arrête, la conscience de la réalité se meurt.<sup>25</sup>

Triplet's novels confirm the material force of words, where language accompanies discourse "en lui tendant le miroir de sa propre structure"<sup>26</sup> and where speech is transformed into a new, independent reality. This autonomy and vitality of words expresses a neo-religious faith in the creative capacity of humanity, the linguistic hope in a future and the quest for a morality that will assure not just a future but an ethical one:

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24. Zirminsky, quoted in Ehrlich, *Russian Formalism*, p.175.

25. Roman Jakobson, "Qu'est-ce que la poésie". *Huit questions de poétique*, p.46.

26. "Analyse structurale des récits", *Poétique du récit*, p.13.



Penser à haute voix, cela se fait au théâtre pour le bénéfice du public, le monologue intérieur et les dialogues muets se pratiquent dans le texte sans voix: l'écriture. L'Écriture, la plus noble conquête de l'homme. Le roman, intermédiaire entre l'homme et la vie.<sup>27</sup>

And this intellectual reality, the verbal paper existence of Triolet's created characters where the text assumes an authentic existence and where the only true referential truth is the aesthetic illusion itself is where we shall trace the final development of Triolet's aesthetic framework and will be the theory developed in the final section.

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27. *La Mise en mots*, p.102.



## **Part Four**

# **Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Novel**



# Introduction

Rien ne vaut la peine d'être vécu qui n'est pas d'abord une œuvre d'imagination.<sup>1</sup>

The final stage of this study identifies the summit of Triolet's aesthetic theory in the juxtaposition of human experience and creative pursuits. Not only are both aspects of each other, but the alternative reality of art is maintained as finer and truer. The traditional strongholds of "truth" and "reality" are broken down within the diegesis of the chosen texts to show their fictional, created origins. History is shown to be an aspect of novelistic creation; the passage of "real" horological time is shown to be inferior to the created, vital energy of novelistic time. Even the hegemony of author and text is deconstructed to show that the traditional omniscience of the author is yet another fiction denied by the multifaceted truths of the text. Accepting the constructed, artificial nature of every aspect of reality, Triolet analyses her craft to assert a new novelistic and human ethic to replace the artificial and deceiving truths that have been dethroned. This "credo" to which she is moving is one that avoids the escape of mystic experience to assert the valuable, redemptive role that art can assume in a more human future.

Now, if the novel's *raison d'être* is to keep "the world of life" under a permanent life and to protect us from the forgetting of being, is it not more than ever necessary today that the novel should exist?<sup>2</sup>

Triolet's lucid conceptualisation of art permits a synthesis of both romantic aesthetics and committed ethics, thus saving literature from the embittered and pessimistic tendencies of a great deal of modernist literature. The art she celebrates is not an iconoclastic break with former traditions, rather a synthesis of vision

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1. Romain Gary, *Les Cerfs-Volants*, p.241.

2. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.17.



ahead and retrospection. The myths of the past are revived and presented as the proof that the poetic imagination should be at the forefront of human progress. As Romain Gary reminds us in *Europa*:

Si l'humanité s'en était tenue à la réalité seule, il n'y aurait jamais eu de civilisation. (...) Le rêve est l'ennemi de tout ce qui existe, et un créateur d'avenir. Tout ce qui est devenu réalité, tout ce qui a été bâti, a été arraché de l'imaginaire.<sup>3</sup>

Value as a human construct is one aspect of a fictionalised, created reality that we are constantly permitted to condone or refuse and which the freedom of the imagination permits us to extend. Consequently, the artist's "privileged insight" that s/he established at the height of the romantic era is renewed. Now, however, creativity must function as a guiding light towards a human future and not as a passport to solipsism and despair. These principled aesthetics recall Camus as much as they define Triolet:

Le monde romanesque n'est que la correction de ce monde-ci, suivant le désir profond de l'homme.<sup>4</sup>

The novels chosen to illustrate this section demonstrate precisely a complete overthrowing of novelistic verisimilitude. The development from the examination of novelistic traditionalism described in the previous section is essential. The three novels examined in Part Three maintained a fictional and thematic unity, defamiliarising traditions in order to foreground and examine them. In the novels studied here, thematic unity is brushed aside and aspects of every convention are totally exploded. Breaking down the traditional unities of character, time, place, action and the written text itself, *Le Grand jamais* and *Ecoutez-Voir* not only thematise their own structures but put into question the notions of creating, receiving and interpreting a work. In the words of Ricardou explaining the "second generation" of the *nouveau roman*, "du stade de l'unité agresseé, on est passé au stade de l'unité impossible".<sup>5</sup> The real, historical author appears on the

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3. *Europa*, p.184.

4. *L'homme révolté*, p.328

5. Ricardou, *Le Nouveau Roman*, p.152.



same plane as her fictional characters, to the extent that she is engulfed into the text. Moreover, the materials of the text are foregrounded, permitting the writer to consider the nature of expression and meaning in an age where the interweaving of sign and meaning is at best haphazard. The profoundly artificial aspect that the works assume of course becomes the very expression of a neo-realism, as Barthes has indicated:

La littérature, c'est l'irréel même; ou plus exactement, bien loin d'une copie analogique du réel, la littérature est au contraire la conscience même de l'irréel du langage: la littérature la plus vraie, c'est celle qui se sait la plus irréaliste.<sup>6</sup>

Flaunting artifice as a synonym of truth, the novels tend towards technical introversion where the works question their own making, structures and presuppositions. This technical intensity is discussed by Mark Schorer who asserts that the importance of the modern novelist is "not only that he pays so much attention to his medium but that, when he pays most, he discovers through it a new subject matter, and a greater one."<sup>7</sup> In this way, fictions become more obviously *verbal* constructs which transcend the outmoded mimesis they once sought by acquiring a neo-symbolist wholeness. Language becomes both what we *see*, and what we see *through*. This technique is itself highlighted by the exploitation of the visual aspects of the page. Art is offered a new autonomy on the border between mimesis and autotelism.

Such definitions are of course pertinent to an immensely wide variety of modernist writers throughout Europe but Triolet's contribution bringing together aesthetic purpose and investigation from both early Soviet experimentalism and the French mid-century literary avant-garde has a particular originality which this chapter will attempt to define. As Part Three demonstrated, her novels point towards truth as a horizon to which we can aspire. Literature exists as an attempt to

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6. *Essais Critiques*, p.164.

7. Quoted in *Modernism*, p.401.



reveal unknown sides of human existence, never claiming a privileged access to truth but never ceasing to search for it:

Ne pas connaître les raisons des faits n'est pas une raison de nier leur existence.<sup>8</sup>

We can recall the basic tenets of Adorno's *Théorie Esthétique* which claimed that the aesthetic illusion is the only approximation to truth since from the outset it does not pretend to be anything other than illusion:

In the world of the beautiful illusion, Adorno argued, the hope for truth is ultimately preserved. "In illusion there is a promise of freedom from illusion."<sup>9</sup>

By celebrating the truth of illusion and imagination, the later novels, more particularly *Le Grand jamais* and *Ecoutez-Voir*, and the oneiric work of artistic definition, *La Mise en mots*, assert the multidimensional truths contained in the poetic space. The particular charm of this definition is that it exists on the very boundaries of the inexistent. Art or literature cannot be defined without our becoming embroiled in the insufficiencies of language to say something beyond mere language itself. Triolet's position is reminiscent of that expressed by Riffaterre:

L'existence d'une réalité en dehors de l'univers des mots est indéniable.<sup>10</sup>

This final definition exists as an extra-linguistic faith. The author can speak, but the text will always say far more than anything she may have intended to express. Caught up in an additional confrontation with language as a bilingual, bi-cultural artist, Triolet "a maille à partir avec des mots".<sup>11</sup> Moving beyond "les arguments verbaux", however, she extends and reconsiders her own craft, ever maintaining the faith in her artistic destiny:

L'histoire, le roman, l'art...Je tourne dans mon labyrinthe. Je sais que si tout m'échappait comme la vie, jusqu'à mon dernier souffle je dirais "credo" devant une oeuvre d'art. C'est à l'art que je donne ma foi. L'art seul possède toutes les vertues que je cherchais ailleurs, insensée.(vol.35,p.294)

8. "Postface à l'age de nylon", O.C. vol.32, p.261

9. Graham McCann, "Message in a Broken Bottle", p.18.

10. Riffaterre, *Littérature et réalité*, p.92.

11. *La Mise en mots*, p.54.



The final redemption of time, where the unilinear process of the human condition is transcended by myth and literary form, is considered in Chapter Nine. This section is illustrated by Triolet's *Mythe de la Baronne Mélanie* written specifically in answer to Camus's *L'Étranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* in which existential paralysis is powerfully overcome by romantic vision. Chapter Ten illustrates the triumph of fictionalising structures over what Nietzsche termed the "debilitating voyeurism" of a historical consciousness. Again, the destruction of a transcendent or teleological truth is replaced by the eternal play of questions and reflections that are achieved in fiction. In this section, therefore, I shall demonstrate Triolet's preoccupation with the falsifying nature of historical structures identified in the mythicising process of both language and the human imagination. Chapter Eleven reinforces the construction of a linguistic reality which creates rather than copies. It analyses the questionable identity or existence of the author when characters and writer alike are caught up in a Lewis Carroll-like game of chase with the reader. Like the legend of the Golem of Prague to which Triolet's novels make frequent reference, you only catch up with the evasive, mythical object you are chasing to find that it disappears from sight as you approach.

From a concern with the writer's responsibility and a faith in the redemptive morality that art can represent, we move in the final chapter to a study of the new paths open to art in an era that is always overstepping its own boundaries. The author's concern with defamiliarisation turns to literature's own frontiers. Remaining within a Formalist methodology, these later works offer formal innovations using other art forms. For example, the final works *Écoutez-Voir* and *La Mise en mots* were conceived with a pictorial accompaniment so that the pictures do not illustrate but function alongside the verbal material. The power of expression in old pictures, etchings and modern photographs all provide an original commentary on visual, auditive and sensual communication. They demonstrate that if the art of the novel reached a point of no-return by adhering to traditional



boundaries, the potential for poetic expression has yet to come of age. Art is saved from abstract philosophical dimensions, decoration or pedantry and presented as the hope and light towards a more human future. This move towards a more vital, poignant literature is in the tradition defined by Calvino:

A literature that breathes the air of philosophy and science but at the same time keeps its distance, while with a gentle puff, it blows away both theoretical abstractions and the apparent concreteness of reality.<sup>12</sup>

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12. Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine*, p.46.



## Chapter Nine

### Le Rendez-Vous avec le temps

Quelque fois, je sens la caresse du temps qui passe;  
d'autrefois, le plus souvent, je le sens qui ne passe pas. De  
tremblantes minutes s'affalent, m'engloutissent et n'en  
finissent pas d'agoniser; croupies mais encore vives, on les  
balaye, d'autres les remplacent, plus fraîches, tout aussi  
vaines.<sup>1</sup>

"Le Rendez-Vous avec le temps", the title of the penultimate chapter of *Le Grand jamais*, expresses the ambiguity that time has gradually assumed in Triolet's novelistic world. The eighth chapter demonstrated the manipulation of temporal devices within the narrative and the thematic analysis of time where subjectively experienced moments of loneliness or anticipation were contrasted with the regular, mathematical structures of horological time. My analysis demonstrated, however, that complications of narrative chronology, particularly the procedures of *zatrudeniye* and *obnazheniye* (making difficult, and laying bare the device) have the singular effect of reinforcing the importance of a temporal, linear structure.

In the later novels, the author admits that formal and technical innovations do not solve the enigma of temporal presentation in verbal structures, nor do they explain why the question of time should so preoccupy a contemporary writer. From considerations of the created work's relation to external time, the writer moves to the "scriptural" recording of time's passage. Gradually, these preoccupations move beyond textual preoccupations to assume a more phenomenological character. The writer cannot examine the character of created time without defining the abstract conceptualisation of time. The philosophical concerns of Triolet's fiction are apparent in the innovative juxtaposition of scientific, abstract time which I refer to

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1. Sartre, *Les Mots*, pp.80-81.



as horological time, and creative, instinctive movement. This meeting of temporal "déroutement" and the creative force that is neither in or out of time but an atemporal *élan* suggests the Bergsonian tradition. I shall consider the aptness of Bergson's thought in relation to Triolet's text to show how, from her deconstruction of novelistic and historical cause-and-effect, a new and positive theory of time as creativity and the expression of human freedom is developed.

We may read *Le Grand jamais* as the trial of literary and existential temporal preoccupations in which the equivocality of art is celebrated as the solution to our quest for clarity. Structurally, the novel expands the Formalists' dual-sided time of the *sjuzhet* and the *fabula* with a third temporal plane - that of the author's voice at the time of writing. This original narrative level corresponds to that identified by Genette in *Figures III*:

co-existence paradoxale de la plus grande intensité mimétique et d'une présence du narrateur en principe contraire à toute mimésis romanesque, au niveau du récit d'actions; dominance du discours direct, aggravée par l'autonomie stylistique des personnages, comble de mimésis dialogique, mais qui finit par absorber les personnages dans un immense jeu verbal, comble de gratuité littéraire, antithèse du réalisme; concurrence enfin de focalisations théoriquement incompatibles, qui ébranle toute la logique de la représentation narrative.<sup>2</sup>

The novel's structure is made up not only of sections of narrative which the reader reassembles into a coherent whole but also of passages of undisguised intervention by the historical author. She comments on the novel's genesis and on incidents which helped form and structure the novel she is now writing. This innovative "polymodalité" is extended further by her desire to make time itself the hero of the novel. "Je ne veux plus du roman consacré au destin d'un être humain", Triolet asserts, pointing towards a novel that would transcend the most linear of subjects - a living character.

The opening chapter of *Le Grand jamais*, whose very title points towards a synthesis of the ever and the never, presents the *récit* of a man conscious of his

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2. *Figures III*, p.224.



own death and imminent burial. For the experiment to remain valid, the author is anxious to point out her strategic ploy that has nothing to do with science-fiction:

Vous qui entrez ici, perdez toute espérance fantastique. Je ne vous parlerai plus d'un mort comme s'il était vivant, mais de nous autres, simple mortels. (p.55)

This thematic originality of situating the protagonist beyond time and history's reach, "tel que je suis là, dans mon trou, je suis inattaquable, inflétri-sable" (p.51), is ardently constructed and reinforced by the author:

pour ne pas sentir le poids du temps qui préoccupe les romanciers, il aurait aimé écrire hors le temps.(p.256)

The project however fails within the novel itself:

Le temps qui devait être le héros de ce roman, qu'est-ce que j'en ai fait? C'est que j'ai des doutes et sur lui, et sur moi.(p.227)

The author is therefore turning towards an existential consideration of time which by far exceeds the limits of the novel and its protagonist. Her analysis of horological time proves as incomplete as her considerations of temporal devices. However, from the dead-ends of temporal defamiliarisation and the phenomenological passage of time, she constructs a profound and aesthetic unity, bringing together novelistic experimentalism and the preoccupation with death. Regis, the novel's deceased protagonist, looks ahead to this new temporal plane in terms reminiscent of the thoughts expressed by Drot-Pendère in *Luna-Park* and by Triolet herself in *Un Romantisme Lunaire*:

Les trains marchent de plus en plus vite. Il y a les avions. Les fusées. On passe le mur de la lumière... On crie au romancier: Tempo! Tempo! reste au rythme de l'univers! Les distances se compriment, il entre de plus en plus d'espace dans le même laps de temps, les romanciers vont-ils rester à la traîne, piétiner sur ce qui n'est plus qu'une pointe d'épingle? Le rythme du roman va-t-il suivre le rythme du cœur humain ou celui de la fusée? (p.40)

### **Structural Devices and Temporal Ruses**

The defamiliarisation of traditional means of temporal presentation, and the foregrounding of subjective experience of time are extensions of the techniques



examined in the preceding chapter. I shall summarise their development in *Le Grand jamais* and *Ecoutez-Voir*, however, so as to underline the important development of the question of time from a figurative to an existential concern.

The narrator is aware that defamiliarising "les règles du jeu" by structural manipulations of the text makes the conventions and traditions of fiction more apparent. She therefore considers a new, temporal ruse:

Ecrire en vrac, et, ensuite, y mettre l'ordre des saisons et des heures, des événements extérieurs, selon leur véritable écoulement, l'âge des personnages. (p.263)

The author is facing the paradox described by Barthes:

Ainsi, l'on retrouve dans le roman, cet appareil à la fois destructif et résurrectionnel propre à tout l'art moderne. Ce qu'il s'agit de détruire, c'est la durée, c'est-à-dire, la liaison ineffable de l'existence: l'ordre.(...) Mais ce qui reconquiert l'écrivain, c'est encore la durée, car il est impossible de développer une négation dans le temps, sans élaborer un art positif, un ordre qui doit être à nouveau détruit.<sup>3</sup>

The narrator also considers the particular features of time evoked verbally, defamiliarising novelistic effects that traditionally assure time a linguistic reality. This foregrounds the irregular passages of time, defined by Genette as the *sommaire*, *ellipse*, *scene* and *pause*. Alongside an event's relation to a logical, *internal* chronology, the author considers the irregular representation of time narrated as equal to its verbal evocation, or as greater or less than its narrative presentation. That is to say that the narration of the passage of an hour may take a few words, or present material which takes one hour or very much more to read. Attention is brought to the symbolic representation of time "on paper". This is not simply self-consciousness of the type, "la marquise est sortie à cinq heures", but it highlights the precarious approximation between the movement of time and its static indications on the page:

N'empêche que, dans la vie de Madeleine, il y a eu un temps mort, comme je l'ai dit au début de ce chapitre. Puisque c'est ainsi qu'on appelle un temps sans repères, la vie sans surprises. (p.238)

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3. *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, p.58.



Avec tout ça, j'ai oublié de vous dire que c'était à nouveau le printemps.  
(p.80)

Triolet's starting point is again comparable to Genette's considerations of *A la recherche du temps perdu*:

Mais l'isochronisme d'un récit peut aussi se définir, comme celui d'un pendule par exemple, non plus relativement, par comparaison entre sa durée et celle de l'histoire qu'il raconte, mais de manière en quelque sorte absolue et autonome, comme constance de vitesse.<sup>4</sup>

Like Genette, she becomes preoccupied with the chances of reader's and author's visions overlapping if the narrative conventions are so imprecise and treacherous. Within the novel, Triolet therefore considers including the textual equivalent to a cartographer's key that should define the representations of time's passage and the linguistic symbols responsible for time's representation:

On devrait donner dans un coin d'un livre l'échelle de son écriture, comme on le fait sur un plan d'architecte ou une carte géographique. Un millimètre pour un mètre; un infiniment petit pour un infiniment grand. Voilà qui permettrait d'imaginer chaque chose écrite à la grandeur nature. (pp.67-68)

In addition, in the same tradition as Sartre who claimed that in a modern world of relativity, a novelist can not hold himself up as God, intimately knowing each of his characters, Triolet herself remains external to certain events or passages of time and with an incomplete knowledge of the novel's internal time:

Je ne sais pas combien de temps s'est passé depuis le voyage que Madeleine a fait dans le Midi. Avec le soleil de là-bas, je me suis embrouillée dans les saisons. Il ne serait pas bien compliqué de feuilleter le manuscrit. (p.138)

The haphazard rhythms of the text anticipate the comparison of novelistic time and horological time. The insufficiencies of linguistic descriptions of time are first suggested by the recurrent theme of "le temps mort". Against the horological precision of hours and minutes unrolling with uncontrollable precision, Triolet indicates that subjective experience of time has nothing to do with strictly measured and identical units. As the earlier novels have shown, we can regulate our watches and measure the time of our ordinary experiences but instinctively we

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4. *Figures 111*, p.123.



differentiate between the same length of time spent waiting and spent pleasurably, for example.

Triolet's manipulation of the pause has implications beyond the indications of Genette. It foregrounds precisely the desperate loneliness of the characters who feel outside the time-continuum either of history or of the novel's internal time. The pause can therefore be understood as the illustration of the absence of interaction with other characters or shared experience with another which would confirm time's passage:

Une révélation horrible. On pouvait donc n'avoir envie de rien, le temps arrêté, sans espoir qu'il se remette en marche? (p.111)

The pause is also foregrounded by the speaking characters:

D'ailleurs, parfois il semble m'oublier...Ainsi, (...) il s'est passé une année où l'auteur m'a laissée périr à ma guise, devenir une ombre. (p.146)

The unseizable character of time is particularly apparent in the second quotation where the reader cannot even be sure to which temporal plane the character is referring. Is the year in which Madeleine is left to her own devices a period of time where composition was interrupted? Or is the pause suddenly becoming synonymous with the ellipsis, so that Madeleine's lost year is actually a self-conscious equivalent of "une année passa"?

The search for a definition of time begins with Madeleine's quest for the truth of her deceased husband. Considering Triolet's indications for the real protagonist of the novel, Madeleine's quest is also for the truth of time. As she becomes implicated in the past, in her efforts to distil truth from past time, she loses control of her own present, until she becomes a figure of others' memories of her but without a present of her own. Aspects of Régis's past of which she had been ignorant make his reconstructed life differ greatly from the image she had of his former existence. Madeleine's project is therefore a "condensé" of the novel's quest for a definition of time. Her research functions not only as a description of the facts of Régis's life so as to reassemble the truthful *fabula*. It also defines the very



insufficiency of horological time which defines statically what is an essentially moving and developing life process. The problematical nature of novelistic time is a metonymy for "real", horological time:

L'art, c'est de mettre de l'ordre dans cette masse de matière, d'en tirer l'essentiel...Mes difficultés sont oiseuses, dira-t-on. Mais le temps? Qu'en faites-vous, du temps? Je voudrais courir au devant de nouvelles conventions, voir le roman sortir de ses règles de fer, de ce qui est notre unité de lieu, de temps et d'action, que nous ne remarquons même pas, tant nous sommes habitués à nos chaînes. (p.295)

### The Abstract Concept of Time

In the last novels, the impossible task of retrieving an event or a person from the past becomes obsessional. The novelist gradually confirms the philosophical belief that nothing is reversible; the life of the universe is a creative process and if the past is carried in the present, it is also separated from the present by the time that has since elapsed. The theme is narrated by Régis Lalande who does not believe in the possibility of retrieving history and who chooses to invent history as the truest way of expressing what history is. The theme is then expanded by Madeleine's posthumous quest for the truth of her deceased husband. She discovers that, like his treacherous followers whose distortions she had hoped to denounce, she can only invent a Régis according to her memory and its artistic arrangement of the past. Within the novel, moreover, Triolet develops this subject into an analysis of human life against the unpardoning truth and negation of death:

La chose dont nous disons qu'elle nous a pris du temps n'est pas ce qui le détruit, le temps, il se serait écoulé quand même. Lui et nous n'allons peut-être pas dans le même sens? Oh, que si...et quelque part, là-bas, il se jette dans l'océan de l'infini en même temps que nous. (...) Que les unités du temps nous aient paru longues ou courtes, qu'on n'ait pas vu passer le temps ou que le temps ne passât plus, nous ne nous tromperons pas d'heure, nous ne raterons pas le train, nous serons à l'heure pour notre mort. (p.123)

Here, we are faced with what Barthélemy-Madaule has called "la quatrième dimension" of Triolet's thought, where novelistic concerns overlap and complement philosophical preoccupations. This confrontation with time seeks to



define the dividing line between a time that can be repeated and *durée* which we bear within us and which makes life and time a constantly moving and creating order. Triolet discusses repetition in the third chapter as a provocative means of suggesting that we can redeem past time:

Je reviens sur mes pas, je recommence et, dans cette mesure, et par rapport à ce que je fais, le temps ne compte pas. (p.227)

This desire to transcend the cause-effect pattern of chronology means too that she selects as protagonist a deceased historian, who is therefore beyond the reach of time and history. Regis's death is absolute, but he is allowed to speak before being exposed to the vast distortions of tactics, forgetting and timelessness, "ici, où je n'ai pas l'heure, pas de calendrier". He is represented in a series of images that are always second-hand, where distant past overlaps and is juxtaposed with the more immediate past and where an evocation of the absent man relates as much about the speaking person as it does about the person spoken about. Neither the veracity nor the original order can be proved; the posthumous representation of a former teacher and good-humoured academic provides an image which even Madeleine can only refute half-heartedly as her own conviction in his former "truth" fades:

A ce compte là, disait Madelaine très fort, pourquoi pas dieu?! S'il pouvait me tirer à moi des colombes du nez et des serpentins de l'oreille!... Tout est possible! Quand un homme est mort, tout, tout, tout est possible. (p.180)

The troubling questions that Regis's posthumous life represent underline the falsity of past truth. In keeping with Bergsonian time, abstract, homogeneous time is a symbolic representation of "real" time, but not "real" time itself. If we can relive certain events, we only relive their physical experience and not their relation to the temporal order, and the subsequent repetitions will always be influenced by the memory of the original. This is recognised by Triolet in the chapter "Le temps, activité de l'espace":

Une expérience chimique est réversible, on peut la recommencer à zéro, mais on ne peut recommencer sa vie, elle est irréversible. Non pas le temps, la vie, avec chaque frisson de notre corps, chaque pensée fugitive qui toujours ont une conséquence, et une conséquence de conséquence...(p.227)



The vital difference between the abstract time of physics and the real time of human consciousness narrated by Triolet is examined by Bergson:

l'intervalle de la durée existe uniquement pour nous, et à cause de la pénétration mutuelle de nos états de conscience; au delà de nous, on ne trouverait que l'espace et donc des simultanités dont on ne peut même dire qu'objectivement, elles se succèdent, puisque toute succession est conçue en comparant le présent au passé.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, what *was* no longer *is* and only memory and consciousness maintain the continuity of the world. Time in terms of both *durée* and memory is a subjective, creative process where no facts are given. Abstract equations are the scientific means of falsely separating and immobilising what is really movement. The sterility of replacing intuition with abstraction is demonstrated by the non-character Regis. Once Regis and his posthumous adventures are reduced to an abstract, philosophical concern, the novelist herself loses interest in him, and their significance fades.

The novel demonstrates, as Madeleine Barthélemy-Madaule has said, "si du temps nous ignorons la nature, la mise en condition qu'il impose à l'homme est évidente".<sup>6</sup> The value of a consideration of time lies not in a complete definition of a horological convention but by studying the proof of time's existence in its interaction with human activities. In this association of *durée* and human destiny we can differentiate between the cyclical passage of the seasons for example and the repetitive activities undertaken by a living person. Likewise, the interest of Régis Lalande lies not in releasing him from the temporal condition of the living, but in studying how his former life comes to bear upon and direct the time lived by the other characters. Thus, the author admits that her novel loses the subject she had intended, to adopt one that she had conceived as incidental:

Il n'y a rien à faire, je ne peux pas y résister...Madeleine m'entraîne (...)ce n'est pas sa biographie qui me guide, mais elle-même, ses tours et détours dans l'épaisseur du temps. (p.137)

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5. *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, p.86

6. "La Quatrième Dimension", *Europe*, no.506, p.130.



The significance of time is recognised, not as an abstract horological convention, but as a concept relative to activity in space:

C'est notre vie qui passe, non pas le temps. Le temps ne se transforme pas, n'évolue pas, c'est nous qui nous transformons, évoluons et nous en accusons le temps. (p.232)

Triolet's examination of "l'opposition bergsonienne du temps immobile qu'on mesure, et de la durée vivante"<sup>7</sup> identifies the aesthetic and ethic relation that time has to the author and to creativity. Since time is creative, the creative urge becomes the finest pursuit of humanity and the clearest insight into the nature of time.

The "rendez-vous avec le temps" is the synthesis already indicated in the last chapter where the end of the novel *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* coincides with the end of the narrated evening. The meeting anticipated throughout concerns as much the woman's figurative passage into death as it does the end of the novel which is the "death" of the written "I" of the narrator. It is the point of intersection between author, character, novel and reader. This point of synthesis also offers a means of escape for the narrator and her philosophical preoccupations in *Le Grand jamais* which risk burdening the novel rather than enriching it:

Le temps disparaît en s'amenuisant et moi, je suis là à écrire un roman. Je tâtonne, je cherche. (p.308)

The novels confidently assert art as the solace to the present and a morality towards which the future may incline. They thus consolidate the notion of aesthetic redemption to which her works aspire, refusing to despair before the absurdity of an inescapably unilinear human condition. We have already seen how the act of writing itself is one of defiance against meaninglessness or mortality. When the torturous abstractions of novelistic and referential temporal planes risk engulfing the novel rather than enlightening it, Triolet offers an escape:

Je me débats comme une mouche prise sous un verre renversé. Je vois à travers le verre, je ne peux pas y aller, de l'autre côté.(...) Et je me rends à m'agiter, à me briser les ailes et la tête contre la paroi transparente. Je vis

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7. "La Quatrième Dimension", p.130.



dans le verre comme on dit dans le temps. On vit dans le temps, à l'intérieur. (p.232)

This metaphor for the human condition portrays with poignant clarity the helpless desire for knowledge beyond the limits of our own mortality in which we are contained like the fly in a bell-jar. A series of interwoven images of death and fear of death can be identified in this metaphysical crisis. The narrator herself is caught up in a crisis of identity towards the close of the novel, where, having assumed a verbal subjectivity within the boundaries of the novel, she recognises her own "cessation" with the close of the novel. This is the second "rendez-vous avec le temps" where the narrator, like Scheherazade is narrating to postpone her own death:

J'écris un roman. (...) Je me divertis. J'essaie de ne pas penser au rendez-vous que j'ai avec le temps. Ce n'est pas moi qui l'ai pris, fixé, c'est lui.(p.307)

This idea was also emphasised by Jean Marcenac, who wrote:

Elsa Triolet disait un jour du romancier qu'il fait "le métier de Schéhérazade". Donnons à l'image son sens le plus lointain, sa vertu d'horizon...Il ne s'agit pas que de conter: il faut comprendre que si l'on n'invente pas, on meurt.<sup>8</sup>

### Time as Aesthetic Redemption

In *L'Evolution créatrice*, Bergson compares our minds to the cinematographic mechanism in reverse. Thought decomposes movement into a finite number of immobile pictures on a film, and reconstructs succession and meaning afterwards. We can apply the same process to time, and indeed to language. Our linguistic and intellectual apparatus fragments experience to immobilise our experience of time, making it accessible and definable. In this fashion, Triolet demonstrates her awareness of the approximative character of her novelistic world where reality has been selected and interpreted and temporal succession has been projected by the mind. As Jacques Petit says:

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8. "Inventer ou mourir", *Les Cahiers du Communisme*, no.61, p.84.



L'auteur insiste très volontairement et fréquemment sur les faiblesses de l'art romanesque.<sup>9</sup>

Petit attributes this also to the influence of the *nouveau roman* on Triolet, but if we accept the Russian Formalists as one of the essential influences on the later French school, the influence upon Triolet was rather more formative than Petit implies, as I suggested above. Triolet's earliest works, particularly from *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, demonstrate this perpetual putting into question of the narrative code, and underline her temporal, presentational and linguistic disquiet:

Que fait le romancier? C'est selon. Selon l'époque. Le temps passe et avec lui les romans qui ne sont pas aux mesures des temps nouveaux. (p.67)

This fragility of her art leads her not to despair but to a coherent series of "sous-conversations" and narrative images constructing a role and destination for art as a protection against the inevitable decline and death that is human destiny.

Like Kundera, she can be seen:

to broaden the issue beyond the Proustian problem of personal memory to the enigma of collective time, the time of Europe, Europe looking back on its own past, weighing up its history.<sup>10</sup>

The future is unknown, but, like a Chekhovian hero, she never fails to believe in it:

"Je crois que l'avenir saura mieux".(p.308)

The novelist's ability to create time becomes a means of transcending the pointlessness imposed by human mortality. Death is the inevitable end to movement, as we saw above:

(Le temps) et nous n'allons peut-être pas dans le même sens? Oh, que si....et quelque part là-bas, il se jette dans l'océan de l'infini en même temps que nous.(p.123)

However, her works indicate the neo-romantic belief that we confirm the ultimacy of death at the end of movement only if we regard the movement itself as ultimate. Within this perpetual movement, however, the individual is offered the choice of mere death or creativity.

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9. "Le rendez-vous avec le temps", *Europe*, no. 506, p.116

10. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.16.



The futility of death is narrated in an extension of the metaphor of the animal caught in a bell-jar considered in the section above. The writer, caught up in dreams of the future and the past, is reminded nevertheless of her unknown but certain mortality when her existence will be caught up by the time she had to live. Never is this a futile dream of immortality. On the contrary, faced with eternity, the characters protest and resist; they seek to "enlever le dard de la mort" as Regis says but not to transcend it altogether:

Comment donc se comporterait le Juif Errant moderne, je veux dire, un Juif Errant de nos jours? Il doit bien continuer à rôder quelque part, ce *perpetuum mobile* humain... Quelqu'un s'inscrirait-il pour ce destin? Jusqu'ici l'on a accepté tous les risques abrégant la vie, mais le risque de l'immortalité, non, il est trop gros.(p.52)

The bell-jar image of the human condition is likewise evoked by Regis:

Nous dire: notre propriété se termine là, voici la clôture. Il y a à quoi faire dans l'enclos. De temps en temps, on a de quoi agrandir le domaine et on transporte la clôture plus loin. (p.50)

The devastating effects of this human imprisonment are revived in *Ecoutez-Voir*. Here, the human condition is less a bell-jar but a cage. The only alternative to creativity as a means of forgetting the absurdity in which mankind is suspended is destructiveness and mutilation. The metaphor is subtly extended and its uncompromising vision of the future is undeniable:

C'est Madeleine qui m'a parlé de la panthère qui s'est arraché une patte de ses propres dents, poussée à la folie par l'impuissance devant les barreaux. "*Une panthère ne joue pas la comédie*, dit Madeleine,(...) Elle se mutile pour faire quelque chose, arrêter le supplice intolérable de l'impuissance."

We are reminded of Camus's *Mythe de Sisyphe*, where "la mort est là comme la seule réalité". Here, the temporal, absurd confrontation of "l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde" is a reason not for despair but passion and imagination.<sup>11</sup> "Il faut *imaginer* Sisyphe heureux", that is *create* our reason and passion, for they are not automatically given. As such, creativity is

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11. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p.46.



offered as a means of positive revolt for, according to the narrator in *Le Grand jamais*:

Seuls le roman, la poésie peuvent nous venir en aide lorsque nous nous faisons trop mal aux ailes. Rien que de les voir jouer de l'autre côté du verre, de l'iriser peut-être, et nous voilà l'oeil collé à la transparence...(p.232)

In other words, while we remain captured within our own mortality, "le roman, la poésie" allow us to create temporal planes beyond our imprisonment, and offer us the imaginative realm of a better, life-affirming "reality".

*Le Mythe de Sisyphe* is particularly significant here for it compelled Triolet to write her own myth of revolt against the human condition in an answer to Camus. She indicated to him that his "étranger" had the advantage of eternal youth as a novelistic character whilst, for the reader wishing to subscribe to the passion of the two works, the insidious process towards death made Camus's myth deceptive. And it is this remarkable essay written in 1943, in which many of the concepts developed in the later novels can be found in embryonic form, that I shall now examine:

Mais n'importe, je m'attache à l'étranger, avec lui je jette le gant à l'absurde et ce défi, cette lutte deviennent ma raison de vivre, j'en accepte les conséquences, les jours sans lendemain, les expériences multipliées jusqu'à l'épuisement.(...) Et subitement, je me trouve seule. L'étranger, lui, continue tandis que le temps de ma vie s'arrête au seuil de la vieillesse...(p.14)

The "aller et retour de la Baronne Mélanie" intends, like Regis and Madeleine, "de ne plus sentir le dard de la vieillesse, ni celui de la mort". We are presented with the Baroness's charming life-lived-backwards:

...La baronne Mélanie d'Aubrey se retourna dans sa tombe comme elle put, cogna du nez contre le couvercle du cercueil, on dirait un poussin qui essaye de sortir de l'oeuf...(p.16)

Living life backwards she of course remains linked to a linear process that entails "consequences and the consequences of consequences". This way round, however, the consequences make her anxious for the event, and the tragedy easier to bear:



Ainsi, si à aller, il n'y avait qu'une chose dont Mélanie comme tout le monde pouvait être certain: la mort, au retour, quelques faits de sa vie, dans les grandes lignes, lui étaient connus d'avance.(p.21)

The narrator interrupts her tale to recognise its strictly artistic nature, and its peculiar relation to the one-way life:

A l'usage je me rends compte que la vie réversible de la Baronne Mélanie ne l'est pas à la façon d'un disque ou un film lancés à l'envers... La vie de la Baronne est renversée par groupes, comme pourrait l'être un morceau de musique au piano, joué en commençant par le dernier accord: les sons partirait du piano, les cordes feraient vibrer l'air et non le contraire. Ainsi, quand, au retour, Mélanie mange, elle avale, elle ne crache pas, elle dit: Mélanie, et non Einalem.(p.20)

The account encounters other problems, the potential encounters "au retour" with people "à aller" for example; but the artistic optimism of the whole remains imperturbable: "la libération de l'idée de la mort et de la vieillesse fera qu'au retour la Baronne vivra en optimiste".

In this way, the "mentir-vrai" of art comes to rescue us, when we are caught at the windows of a temporal existence, recalling the bell-jar quoted above, or Khlebnikov's butterfly in the poem, *Zanguézi*:

Dois-je, moi, papillon voletant, égaré  
 Dans une chambre de vie humaine,  
 Laisser sur les fenêtres sévères  
 L'écriture de ma poussière, ma signature de prisonnier  
 Sur les vitres austères du sort?<sup>12</sup>

Triolet's *Myth* allows an imaginative liberation from an uncompromising destiny, subverting the temporal scheme in which we are involved. It also encourages "un instinct vital vigoureux" so that, from the consolation of art we may turn back once more, and face life:

Qu'ils vivent, l'Etranger et ses illusions, c'est un homme comme il nous en faudrait beaucoup!(...Un mythe magnifique, un apport philosophique, un stimulant pour l'intelligence.)(p.26)

The additional importance of these myths is that they offer a deontology that is apt and rigorous *now*. As Michel Apel-Muller says:

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12. Quoted at the beginning of *Ecoutez-Voir*, O.C. vol 36, p.11.



On voudra bien admettre alors que le *credo* en l'art par lequel la romancière concluait *Le Grand Jamais* est tout autre chose qu'un mystique acte de foi. Ici, enfin, le labyrinthe s'efface.<sup>13</sup>

The work of art exists beyond our transience, not as some eternal promise of faith but as an eternal present. This distinction is essential. Like her protagonists, Triolet refutes the lure of eternity, for both herself and for her works of art:

L'éternité! Laissez-moi rire. Notre éternité humaine est, par rapport à quelque chose d'autre un instantané. (vol.35, p.81)

Rather, the work of art which is "valable" enlightens the present and secures a renewed present existence at each reading. The novel is not held up as some alternative, or preferable reality but, "tangible, matérielle, existante" (vol. 35, p.162), it is succinctly implicated in this one. The author's aim is not to redeem the past for, as T.S Eliot has said:

You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,  
That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.<sup>14</sup>

The novel is "une art-fiction, une réalité à venir". It is a "perpetual present" which achieves a new present existence each time a reader/ spectator engages in it.

The reception of the work of art in time depends on an uncertain time future for its realisation, where the perspective of this time in the future will unforeseeably alter the understanding of the work's present. This is not only discussed in abstract terms but, as we have seen so frequently, narrated on a thematic level, in *Le Grand jamais*. It is this Matrushka structure of theory-in-narrative, and its application in thematic form within the work, that gives the most originality to Triolet's ideas. The reader as the work's dialectic correlative is hardly startlingly original - it is of course at the heart of Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* The fictional *expression* of these ideas, however, is far more idiosyncratic. The work of art achieved within the diegesis - the sculpture realised by Destaing to Regis Lalande - offers a coherent metaphor for the reception of a work and its future present. The sculpture is not a "realistic", physical representation of Regis, but rather it is a *perpetuum*

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13. Michel Apel-Muller, "Labyrinthes", *Europe*, no.506, p.156.

14. *Four Quartets, Collected Poems*, p.210



*mobile*, a metallic structure that moves when the sun illuminates it and ceases moving as the sunlight passes. With the movement of the metallic structures, at certain times a woman's head can be seen enclosed within the statue. Around her neck, a necklace inscribed with the words "à tout à l'heure" can be perceived. This work, the "mariage de l'art et la science" brings a fourth dimension to artistic creation. Time is achieved figuratively by movement:

Sur un socle noir anthracite, le monument pointe vers le ciel. Quatre boucles argentées s'enroulent et coulent de là-haut en spirales...Qu'est-ce? Du mercure, métal vivant, dans une enveloppe de verre? Ou du verre qui brille, très blanc, verdissant aux tranches? (p.311)

The abstract construction becomes the very expression of reality, where an illusion of imitated precision is replaced by a spiralling, changing series of images that capture in their heterogeneity the truth of an unstable, multidimensional reality. The work recalls the Baroque art as it was practised by Louis II of Bavaria. This is the school Regis respected because it saw truth as an interchanging mass of reflections and counter-reflections, simulations and make-believe, and not a photographic representation:

Le roman, il est vrai, les fixe (les vérités successives) et c'est là, semble-t-il, pour Elsa Triolet, si l'on s'en tient à ces trois oeuvres, le secret de l'art, ou de la technique romanesque; comme peut-être le secret de l'art baroque: intégrer le temps, en figeant le mouvement, dans ce qu'il y a de plus instable; la "réalité glissante".<sup>15</sup>

The statue points to the transcending of time *in* time, and through artistic form. Moreover, the work of art is not achieved *per se* but is vulnerable to its reception in time future. And here, both Madeleine's reception of Destaing's monument and a passage in the novel devoted to the peculiar equivocality in the French language of "le temps", offer a second "condensé" within the novelistic whole:

Curieux qu'en français le mot *temps* désigne non seulement une somme d'années, d'heures, de secondes, mais aussi un état atmosphérique. (p.237)

The statue confirms Triolet's assertion at the end of this digression:

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15. Jacques Petit, "Le Rendez-vous avec le temps", *Europe*, no.506, p.119.



Dans la transformation du monde, le temps-durée et le temps atmosphérique sont en liaison étroite. (p.238)

What would seem to be an idiosyncratic linguistic quirk is proved by the statue to be a signifier of a deeper truth. When Madeleine first visits the monument, an event presented elliptically in *Le Grand jamais* but narrated fully in *Ecoutez-Voir* in an interesting extension of anachronistic intertextuality, she comes during the evening and therefore sees a static, lifeless statue:

Dans l'ombre nocturne, les boucles immobiles enroulaient leurs volutes. Sur le socle, en lettres blanches, lisibles même dans l'obscurité, cette dédicace: A Régis Lalande, son pays. (p.314)

The novel closes as Madeleine leaves, concluding sadly, "Pauvre Régis... On comprend tout de travers..." The proleptic irony of her reflection is of course relevant to her own misperception of the statue.

A work of art is thus vulnerable to time-*durée*, and the physical conditions of time's passage. Reinforcing Triolet's rejection of a work achieved "pour l'éternité" in favour of "un éternel présent", this metaphor is extended by the monuments surveyed by Madeleine and "l'homme de Florence" in *Ecoutez-Voir*. When the man describes the statue of Marie-Madeleine, the work created by Mathias Braun in 1726 is juxtaposed with the physical manifestations of two centuries of "le temps et les intemperies" to give a new perception realised in the present:

L'épaule nue de Marie-Madeleine, sa tête renversée, (...) les traits estompés, le nez effacé...mais les boucles de ses cheveux s'enroulaient vivantes plus bas que le cou splendide...(p.63)

The statue is symbolic of Madeleine's past femininity and fertility, eroded also by the time past she is devoted to by searching for the truth of Régis's former present. This time past is now feeding parasitically on her present. This realisation strikes her during *Le Grand jamais*:

Le cliquetis de la machine à écrire s'arrêta. La pendule de Régis sonna trois coups...Madeleine pense à l'enfant qu'elle n'a pas eu. (p.213)



The eroded identity of a realistic image anticipates Madeleine's recognition that her very subjectivity is being eaten away by her failing grasp on the past and a lack of identity in the present. Finally, the statue can be seen as one in a series of images of women throughout the text that present the metaphoric and artistic destinies of Madeleine. The question of the images within the text brings us to the spatio-temporal aspect of the narrative text that I shall study in Chapter Twelve. These visual images bring our attention to the physical properties of the text, where the textual disposition is as essential to the temporal unfolding as the narrated, verbal movement:

La disposition d'un texte donne les pauses, les reprises de respiration, les changements de décors, la marche du temps.<sup>16</sup>

Reproductions of canonised works of art juxtaposed with contemporary photographs offer a new space-time perspective, where an image is as much a pause, or a focalisation as a structural, thematically functioning commentary. Again, on both an extradiegetic and diegetic level, the particular temporality of art is presented. It is derived at once from a timeless creative source existing outside the boundaries of human mortality, and its realisation within the flux of time.

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16. *La Mise en mots*, p.113.



# Chapter Ten

## Story and History

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now  
History has so many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
Guides us by vanities.<sup>1</sup>

Once the writer begins to question the formerly universal truths of reality and art, of mimesis and diegesis, it follows quite logically that she should turn to the greatly admired truth of history. The burden of a historical consciousness has been illustrated amply in modernist literature, perceived in Dostoevsky's terms as a yoke binding the present to "the worst slavery imaginable".<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, history has been seen as a teleological process reducing the present to a stepping stone towards a more glorious future:

With the aid of Marx, Communism passed from moral efforts of isolated individuals - "Oh, where are you, golden age?" - into the sphere of universal history, which became purposeful as never before and turned into mankind's march toward Communism.<sup>3</sup>

Triolet's highly sensitive analysis of the equivocal nature of history was expressed by Aragon in a private conversation with Maxwell Adereth:

...The whole of Elsa Triolet's work is at bottom a criticism of history.(...)historians tend to confuse the written word with facts. But what another historian has written is not a real document. Elsa and I have always stressed the difficulty, the impossibility of writing history.<sup>4</sup>

Aragon emphasised the link between the formal approach to treating art and reality and the convention of history:

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1. T.S.Eliot, *Gerontion*, *Collected Poems*, p.40.
  2. Dostoevsky. *The Diary of a Writer*, quoted by Tertz in *On Socialist Realism*, p.139
  3. Tertz, *On Socialist Realism*, p.155.
  4. Adereth, *The Interwoven lives and works of Aragon and Triolet*, Appendix 2, "Conversation between the author and Louis Aragon, 14 October, 1971". (Translated by Adereth.)



..it is always the same difficulty, the same impossibility of writing history.<sup>5</sup>

This inescapable, and yet absurdly indefinable concept of history recalls the intrusion of the world of politics and actuality into a private sphere, so that, as was seen in Chapter Three, "the monster comes from the outside and is called History". Simultaneously, history is seen as "les manigances"; where the unbearable importance of political events is exacerbated by their utter contingency and chance. "Impersonal, uncontrollable, incalculable, incomprehensible" is the nearest to a definition of history's unbearable paradoxes that Kundera suggests.

This preoccupation with the mythical, fictional nature of history is a particularly pronounced characteristic of East European writing. Those who have seen their history frequently rewritten and reorientated, with former villains emerging as reinstated heroes and martyrs, refuse to participate in an unquestioned respect for, and a belief in, historical truth:

Et tout cela, j'ai mis en mots, le poids du temps, de l'histoire, fausse comme un jeton, le poids de la mort.<sup>6</sup>

For Kundera and Triolet, for example, history is almost synonymous with forgetting and distorting. Art, however, becomes the very place of safe-keeping for truth and values which history would otherwise erode away:

...that precious essence of the European spirit is being held safe as in a treasure chest inside the history of the novel, the wisdom of the novel.<sup>7</sup>

Je vois que l'art est le meilleur et peut-être le seul gardien de l'histoire.<sup>8</sup>

For Triolet and her historian-protagonist Regis, history is a fictional sub-genre. It should be borne in mind that the sublimation of history by mythicising structures does not immediately imply a denial of history, or of a refusal of social interaction. As Todorov has indicated:

L'historien qui, à partir de documents écrits, ou le juge qui, s'appuyant sur des témoignages oraux, reconstituent, l'un et l'autre, "les faits" ne procèdent

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5. Adereth, Appendix 2, p.3.

6. *La Mise en mots*, p.53.

7. *The Art of the Novel*, p.165.

8. *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, p.380.



pas différemment, dans le principe du lecteur d'Armance; ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'il ne subsiste pas de différences de détail.<sup>9</sup>

Rather, unequivocal meaning is denounced for its enfeebling effect on human potential; and the domain of art which replaces statement by question is maintained as the point of consciousness between creative personality, social milieu and aesthetic form. The texts bring us to the intersection of factual accounts and fictional structures, giving art the finest claim to authenticity; in the words of Virginia Woolf, where "nothing is simply one thing".<sup>10</sup>

At this point, we should recognise the meeting of Regis's thesis of historical affabulation and Triolet's preoccupation with the falsifications of history. In his monologue, Regis outlines his scepticism thus:

Quant à la reconstitution d'un pays, de ses moeurs, de l'aspect physique et spirituel de ses habitants, elle ne diffère pas de la façon dont le théâtre représente une pièce étrangère, même contemporaine: tout y est faux. (p.39)

The narrator in *Le Grand jamais* refers to the distortions and myths being constructed around Regis and concludes that he is a metonymy for history itself:

... multiplions ce Régis-là et nous arrivons à un faux immense qui est notre histoire collective.(p.160)

We may note the small detail of the colour of Regis's eyes, which his friends recall with absolute certainty as being either blue, or brown or grey. Similar nostalgia for striking eyes which onlookers remember in different colours can be found in various memories left by Chekhov's friends.

In *La Mise en mots*, Triolet remarks:

Et tout cela, j'ai mis en mots, était inventé, pour dire l'impossibilité qu'il y a de discerner la vérité dans l'Histoire, pour dire que l'Histoire est toujours reconstituée du point de vue de la pensée dominante.<sup>11</sup>

Such admissions should emphasise the vast misreadings of Triolet's texts by a politically orientated audience wishing only to extract a pre-existing affirmation of

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9. *Poétique de la prose*, p.187.

10. *To the Lighthouse*, p.172.

11. *La Mise en mots*, p.39.



political fact from her works. Jean Marcenac, for example, whilst admiring *Le Grand Jamais*, is anxious to note that:

....c'est une plaisanterie ou une calomnie d'imaginer, parce que l'historien Régis Lalande ne croit pas à la vérité historique qu'Elsa Triolet remette en cause, par exemple, l'interprétation marxiste de l'histoire.<sup>12</sup>

Such a judgement is illustrative perhaps of those Triolet condemned as being politically defined from the outset. They refused to recognise any meandering from a rigorous self-confident doctrine which establishes literature as a depository for a set of given truths. Similarly, Marcenac's understanding of the vast interweaving illusions of the "faux-semblant" appears as a refusal to read anything but Marxist dogma into strikingly apolitical texts.

...elle croit tout au contraire que la vie a un sens, qu'il nous faut comprendre, que nous pouvons comprendre et seule nous en empêche une sorte de hâte que nous mettons à le vouloir, et qui dans notre impatience, nous arrête à mi-chemin, cloués au faux-semblant...<sup>13</sup>

Triolet's novels indicate that false interpretations form part of a novel or author's posthumous destiny. We can therefore read Marcenac's article as a further example of the fictive nature of truth. It gives an extradiegetic illustration to the diegetic and metadiegetic preoccupations of Triolet's works.

### **The Impossibility of Writing History**

The very pronounced undermining of the truth of historical representation is, as has been seen, certainly not unique to Triolet's later works. However, in *Le Grand jamais* a more acerbic, critical tangent is evident. True to Triolet's "Matrushka technique", the subject is discussed, and the monolithic nature of history deconstructed, on metatextual, textual and intertextual levels simultaneously. In this case, Triolet preoccupied with the falsifications of history, writes a novel in which a historian convinced of the falsity of history writes deliberately falsified historical texts. At his death, the historian becomes a subject

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12. "Inventer ou mourir", p.81.

13. "Inventer ou mourir", p.81.



of academic history and his works are subjected to falsifying readings and interpretations which are themselves exposed to new readings and interpretations...

*Le Grand jamais* is introduced by the author in the Preface to the *Oeuvres Croisées*:

Je mentirais si je disais que la biographie de Vladimir Maiakovski, poète russe, telle qu'elle s'écrit de nos jours, n'a pas pesé sur ce thème de la falsification de l'Histoire, et ne m'a pas dans une certaine mesure menée à l'écriture de ces deux romans.  
(vol.35, pp.18-9)

The novel's deceased protagonist Régis Lalande is a former history teacher convinced of the inaccessibility of historical truth. He therefore chooses to write invented narratives which he publishes as History; his technique is extended to its most logical when he publishes Madeleine's childish fantasies about Catherine the Great as his own, highly researched work:

Et plus tard, Régis a publié les inventions de Madeleine comme un travail scientifique sur le règne de l'impératrice de toutes les Russies!...Il s'amusait. Il aimait les trucages, les farces et attrapes, les mystifications. (p.88)

Régis does not deny the existence of an external reality that can be called History. Rather, it is a bland chaos of events from which the author, like the novelist, selects certain elements to be assembled in the montage structure of the whole. As Kundera said:

All historical circumstances I treat with the greatest economy. I behave toward history like the stage designer who constructs an abstract set out of the few items indispensable to the action.<sup>14</sup>

We may recall that the Empress Catherine's reign witnessed the "trompe-l'oeil" Potemkin villages as part of the "truth" of her reign which adds a certain extra resonance to this history of make-believe. Régis's incompleting *magnus opus* is a study of Louis II of Bavaria:

Il se maquille en roi pour les quelques paysans et bûcherons des environs. Il se crée une vie ersatz. Il remplit son néant de lecture, le théâtre, l'opéra, et la construction de châteaux dont le faste est destiné à sa seule personne royale. (p.286)

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14. *The Art of the Novel*, p.36.



The closest approximation of truth lay, according to Régis, in the "mise en scène" of a man pretending to be a king, in a game that did not aim to dissemble its artifices, but rather flaunted them. From this perspective, history becomes almost a metonymy for art itself, if art is accepted in the tradition of Adorno, as truthful illusion:

l'art possède la vérité en tant qu'apparence d'une réalité non apparente.<sup>15</sup>

The falsifying nature of history distorts its creation from its microcosmic level to a macrocosmic one; that is from its verbal structures to its subjective interpretations. In the first chapter, Régis refers to the work of the Russian poet Khlebnikov and his dream of a universal language based on sound units. Régis, however, illustrates how the very phonemes of language are shot through with meaning and implication depending on where and how they are uttered:

*M : le pouvoir de faire, donc la joie mâle et maternelle. Pas de liens entre le russe et l'anglais. Difficile, la langue universelle qui devait unir les hommes. Non seulement les mots, les consonnes mêmes s'y opposent.* (p.44)

Régis is illustrating the thesis that has since been largely expanded by Barthes, and the French Structuralists. That is to say that language itself is an interpreting and presenting code that makes the relation between writer and work at best approximative and imaginative. Barthes describes the transitive and intransitive uses of language made by the "écrivain" and the "écrivain". Régis is however aware that the transitive efforts of the historian are self-deluding:

Nous voulons *écrire quelque chose*, et en même temps, nous *écrivons* tout court. Bref notre époque accoucherait d'un type bâtard: l'écrivain-écrivain.<sup>16</sup>

Régis demonstrates the mythicising process which is at the very basis of language. This imparts a history of secondary meanings and implications to the simplest utterance:

ils ont beau se démener dans la camisole de force du langage, ils ne peuvent s'en libérer tout à fait et la ressemblance entre ce qu'ils disent et ce qu'ils

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15. *Théorie Esthétique*, p.173.

16. *Essais Critiques*, "Ecrivains et Ecrivains", 1960.



veulent dire ne sera jamais approximative, comme le récit d'un rêve mal retrouvé au réveil. (p.45)

Triolet's preoccupation with the falsifications perpetrated by "the mythographers who assume the name of historians"<sup>17</sup>, develops through the historian for whom "l'histoire, c'était du roman". This is extended into an intertextual examination of history and myth.

After Regis's death, his life and works are exposed to the revisions and interpretations of scholars, friends and family making him an illustration of his own thesis. Overzealous scholars create a philosopher whose works revolve around the questions of religious faith and metaphysics; his first wife avenges herself by embroidering a revised version of the divorce case; a former neophyte is only too pleased to reassert the pedagogical joker as a misunderstood genius:

Bernard était en train d'inventer un Régis tout faux, il l'inventait de toutes pièces. Et, avec ça, il prétendait s'en emparer: ce Régis-là, c'était une affaire d'homme, Madeleine n'y avait pas droit. (p.87)

The truth Madeleine thought she had known is undermined by this male-orientated discourse from which she is purposely alienated and which patronises her "naivety" in maintaining she had understood Regis:

Mais avoir "bien connu" ne veut pas encore dire "bien compris". - Un léger ricanement traversa la salle. - Nous savons par notre propre expérience qu'une épouse est la personne la moins fiable qui soit. (p.166)

Petite Madame, dit le grand Nicolas Ribert, (...) séchez vos beaux yeux et ne vous occupez plus du *temps Lalande*. J'espère que vous avez quelque amant, sinon dépêchez-vous d'en prendre un. (pp.170-1)

As it investigates historical deception, the text moves beyond the verbal ambiguities and the strategic distortions of a chronicle of facts. It demonstrates how the impulse to relate and narrate events imposes a pattern on the events to make them cohere to a certain genre. This division of history into the traditional genres of literature has been examined by Hayden White:

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17. Aragon, in the first introduction to Kundera's *The Joke*.



Historical narratives are appeals to putative causal laws by exploiting the metaphorical similarities between real events and the conventional structures of our fiction.<sup>18</sup>

The vast, mythicising process of memory, already seen in Chapter Five to be as much a creative as a recollective process, recreates events from the past. The sincerity which can undoubtedly accompany unintentional revisions of the past is evoked by one of the narrator's digressions recalling Chaplin's visit to Paris. Having quoted from two conflicting *récits* describing the same evening, Charlie Chaplin's own and that by Aragon, the narrator comments:

Ce soir-là il y avait avec nous Pozner et sa femme. Il y a quelque chose d'irrésistiblement comique dans cette description de Sartre qui est peut-être bien Pozner, ce Sartre qui ne dit pas grand chose, parce que, ce soir-là, il était certainement ailleurs. (p.146)

Everything conspires to distort the truths in which Madeleine thought she believed, and to create a posthumous Regis whom she does not recognise. The full significance of her eponym, "La fidèle infidèle", used as a chapter heading within the novel and by Triolet in the preface to the novel in the *Oeuvres Croisées*, can thus be understood. By remaining loyal to her husband's former self and attempting to correct the falsehoods propagated around him, Madeleine is in fact seeking to disprove his thesis that a fact once historical becomes distorted by will, forgetting or language itself. By adhering to the posthumous Regis, Madeleine would respect his theories, whilst betraying herself and her own memories.

She is absorbed into the morass of history itself, becoming a novelistic illustration reminiscent of the discovery made by Sartre's Roquentin, "Il faut choisir - vivre ou raconter". Once Madeleine embarks on a path of personal fidelity, she becomes engulfed by the questions surrounding past truth to the extent that her own present becomes suspended:

Madeleine, couchée sur le dos, immobile dans le grand lit de mort de Régis. (p.155)

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18. Hayden White, p.88.



When Madeleine discovers Régis's authorship of second-rate thrillers the impossibility of her quest for the final truth of her husband becomes clear. This last discovery is particularly intriguing considering Régis's own dismissal of *la série noire* as a modern, fictional opiate. It is of course to maintain a certain ignorance on the part of the reader that Régis does not admit his other writings in his "confession"; indeed, he leads us to believe otherwise:

Peut-être que, si j'avais écrit autre chose que des études historiques...(p.28)

Leaving aside his strategic omission, his deliberate distortion of the truth also undermines the putative truth or sincerity of confessions and autobiography.

L'autobiographie induit en erreur avec encore plus d'art et d'astuce que les biographies nommées romans. (p.149)

The manuscripts for the thrillers make Madeleine the "esclave posthume" of her former husband. An aspect of his past of which she had been ignorant permits her a privileged posthumous relation with her husband. It also illustrates the difference between his former reality as Madeleine had known him and the new truths of his reconstructed history. In an idiosyncratic extension of existential psychology, Madeleine's faith in the time past and refusal of the present reduces her to a semi-existent memory caught between the illusions of the past and the inventions of the present:

...je sais que je ne suis plus qu'une arête, que la chair est mangée, il n'en reste plus. Me voilà clocharde dans l'âme, cendres et poussière. Le temps où j'aurais pu *devenir* est loin.(p.111)

Madeleine becomes a lifeless reflection of others' interpretations of her when she chooses to "raconter l'Histoire". Her decision is made at the expense of her present life. Caught in the web of images offered to her by others and the intellectual groundlessness of her own quest, Madeleine loses grip on her own biography. Her former reality is replaced by a myth:

Je me sens devenir chacune des images que j'ai été pour l'Homme de Florence. Je me sens devenir pitre, je m'étends sur le sol de la forêt tchèque, le temps me ronge et il pleut, il pleut sur moi...*j'ai été pour lui inatteignable comme une oeuvre d'art.*(p.180)



On the other hand, having read Régis's novels, Madeleine maintains that a work may be appreciated critically regardless of the writer's self-diagnosis. The character most dedicated to establishing an absolute and truthful history has to admit that the simplest historical fact can appear differently in retrospect, creating a dual temporal existence between a date in a chronicle and its evocation in a time future. That is to say that she is indirectly subscribing to the belief that a past "truth" is not a static, rigid fact but a perspective which a modern viewer may reject, question or distort. Having intended to trace the truth of the past, she follows the path of the "mentir-vrai". While Régis's close friend Jean maintains that the novels were nothing but a joke and a humble commercial effort, Madeleine reads the works not only as a perfection of the genre, but also as a subtextual examination of the questions most preoccupying Lalande:

Régis retirait de la mort son dard. La mort dite violente y était accueillie favorablement.(...) Régis faisait mourir les créatures de Dieu (...) de façon ineffable, *pour quelque chose*.(p.218)

Like the concept of time, history is most clearly evoked *fictionally* by illusions and make-believe, so that, as Triolet says:

Les romans les moins historiques sont, sans doute, les romans historiques, mensongers comme l'histoire. C'est le roman tout court qui l'est, historique, il appartient à une certaine époque du seul fait d'y être né.<sup>19</sup>

History has been shown by verbal and referential ambiguities to be treacherous and many-sided. There is the respected and scholastic notion of "L'Histoire", its distortion, "pour lui je raconte des histoires", and the timid, illusive "histoire" of novels. These divisions and contradictions of history are illustrated by a further story within a story - the Matrushka doll within *Ecoutez-Voir* - which retells the same tale in a modern setting.

Austin launches his project of contemporary, political truth as Madeleine submits to the inevitable falsifications of history. His intention is to create a pirate radio destined to nationwide broadcasting of fact, "la vérité dans toute la mesure du

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19. *La Mise en mots*, p.29.



possible" (p.188) He posts his own journalists and spies in embassies, factories and government institutions. The project bears a naive confidence and immaturity reminiscent of that of the protagonists in Nizan's *La Conspiration*:

...La guerre sera déclarée entre les jeunes d'aujourd'hui et les générations précédentes.(p.190)

Each broadcast is announced by the sound of a cuckoo. But from the first broadcast, various obstacles highlight the arbitrariness of truth. The absolute truth sought by Austin is restricted for example geographically and technically:

Mes rêves d'émission qui couvraient au moins la France se révélaient rêves d'ignorant: si notre émetteur couvre Paris et sa périphérie sur une trentaine de kilomètres, ça sera déjà bien beau.(p.186)

There are physical and practical restrictions imposed by the cumbersome aerial and the secrecy they must maintain. More importantly, the restrictive and interpretative nature of truth undermines Austin's project. Journalistic truth begins to resemble novelistic invention once the mass of information requires selection and organisation:

nous devons, nous, dont la devise est *A nu!* - mentir par omission.(p.192)

Le dechet des informations recueillie est inimaginable, il y en a des tonnes mais déjà certains de mes jeunes commencent à piger et à choisir.(p.188)

The greatest obstacle is his humanist-philosophical conscience once material has been revealed that benefits most the organs of state. The cuckoo is feeding the parent it had been intending to cheat. Austin is faced with the responsibility of grappling with potentially lethal knowledge:

Je croyais écraser l'espionnage par l'espionnage et redonner vie à la vérité...Et tout ce que j'aurais pu faire savoir aux hommes servirait à la camoufler. (p.239)

When Madeleine finally emphasises the fictionalised aspect of every conceived truth, the two traditional strongholds of truth, history and contemporary politics, are overthrown. Both are trying to dissemble their dependence upon language. As a presenting, rather than *representing* mode, language relies upon previous structures and understanding, upon comparison and images:



Moi, ce n'est pas la divulgation qui m'aurait tourmentée, mais comment capter les faits? Les capter tous... Comment savoir si ce sont des faits?(p.197)

Austin abandons his station of absolute truth to broadcast "musique, rires tonitruants, cris d'oiseaux." We are again in the domain of the "mentir-vrai", where the finest truth is captured in metaphor, illusion, and interpretation:

Un fracas gratuit, ni pour ni contre, ni menti ni avoué, un fracas pour rien.(p.244)

### **Falsity as truth in fiction**

The overthrowing of history by the finer, elusive meanings of art is discussed in the textual fabric of the novels. The texts also narrate the theme by illustrating and presenting the fictionalising process to which any historical or "real" fact is exposed once presented by language, image or metaphor.

Protagonists, text and subtext therefore expose history and monolithic truth as fragile, fraudulent outlines that are selected and interpreted. In the words of Jakobson:

History finds a use for Beethoven's deafness and Cezanne's astigmatism.<sup>20</sup>

The finest illustration of this subsuming of truth by fiction is found in the fictionalising historian Régis who himself becomes fictitious. His unwitting follower Austin, significantly the eponymous hero of a novel by Régis before assuming an extra-referential existence in *Ecoutez-Voir*, illustrates and then subscribes to the former's thesis.

We may note that the "mentir-vrai" as practised by Régis not only seeks to undermine the illusions of meaning and absolute truth. It also expresses a vital and positive belief in the redeeming nature of creativity where given reality can be refused and a finer, liberating and constructive reality can take over:

Régis disait (...) que notre vie aussi n'était qu'un tout petit réduit, mais qu'il nous appartenait de la garnir de miroirs et, alors, rien n'arrêterait les perspectives du temps et de l'espace, dans toutes les directions. Qu'il ne

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20. Jakobson, "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets", in *Major Soviet Writers*, p.31.



fallait pas s'en amuser, mais y croire... moi, je suis pour le faux-semblant.  
(p.298)

As was seen in the last section, at a certain moment, the importance of artistic activity defies verbal definition, but can only be suggested by aesthetic intuition. It is in this way that art comes to the rescue in the reconstruction of a new, positive truth when the narrator is caught up in the unending questions and risks losing control:

Je me débats comme une mouche prise sous un verre renversé. (p.232)

At the end of *La Nausée*, *Roquentin* can only offer a hesitant solution to this theoretical impasse:

ils se sont lavés du péché d'exister...La négresse chante. Alors, on peut justifier son existence?<sup>21</sup>

The intuitive impulse towards artistic creation as an answer to hopelessness suggested by Sartre is confirmed and confidently asserted by Triolet and her protagonist. The fictive nature of history, of reality, can be a discovery leading to intellectual freedom and human responsibility. Her intention is not merely to explode and reject history. Rather, reminiscent of the original, mythical role of history, a form of past harmony is being restored that will reunite art and history in a more ethical whole. In the words of Walter Lacqueur:

The muses had one father; and Calliope and Erato were Clio's elder sisters. If tragedy was born out of the spirit of music, history descends from epic and lyric poetry, from tragedy and comedy, not from Euclid. The relationship between Clio and her sisters in the age of quantification has become a distant and tenuous one, but it ought to be recalled from time to time.<sup>22</sup>

The fictionalising effects on historical characters and facts that enter the novel are narrated on two thematic levels within *Le Grand jamais* and *Ecoutez-Voir*. Without denying the chronicle of history, both novels narrate how its meaning and purpose are constructed figures which do not imitate events but reveal them. It can be suggested that, failing to *define* this interweaving of fact and

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21. Sartre, *Les Mots*, p.249.

22. "Literature and the Historian", *Journal of Contemporary History*, p.6.



fiction, the narrator offers us an *illustration*. For example, the narrator in *Le Grand jamais* abandons Madeleine momentarily as she follows the road towards her parents' home, to make the following intrusion:

Je l'ai faite, cette route d'Orléans, et déjà mon héroïne de "Mille Regrets" l'avait vécue pour moi...C'est elle qui a vu à ma place l'autobus d'une Maternité qui emmenait vers le sud des poupons emmaillotés, rangés sur les bancs comme des bûches. Maintenant, je vais faire voyager Ma-Reine et Madeleine, avec ces nouveaux nés dans ce même autobus. (p.208)

This narrational analepsis is as ambivalent as are the quasi-confessions of historical truth. The author speaks between the time of writing, ("maintenant"), the pre-textual time of Madeleine and Ma-Reine's journey in occupied territory, the extra-textual time of "Mille Regrets" written and situated in 1940, and the textual present, as Madeleine returns to her former home, preoccupied with memories of her previous visit after her marriage several years before. The differing time sequences correspond to the extra-referential truths which interweave to create the novel's own "reality". The separate space-time unities from history, autobiography and fiction are brought together to illustrate the novel's peculiar spatial and temporal diversity.

A parallel effect can be found towards the beginning of the novel:

Maintenant qu'elles se taisaient, le grondement de la rue monta dans l'appartement et le remplit.(p.89)

The symbolic purpose of such an apparently banal detail is obvious and the involved reader recognises the silence as a signifier of the pain of the present. The intrusion of the noise outside reinforces the intrusion of social and external forces into the fragile "monde intérieur" that the characters attempt to maintain. The narrator then foregrounds her own devices, indicating first that:

...pour la réalité du moment (puisque je suis un écrivain réaliste), j'ai choisi ce bruit qui monte de la rue Raymond-Losserand, rue à sens unique. Tout roman étant historique, on saura que le trafic dans cette rue, de la Porte de Vanves vers Paris, incommodait ses habitants.(p.90)

The historical detail of such a comment is then waved aside by the narrator:



Pour vous mettre au parfum de ce qui est ici l'idée-majeure - la fragilité de toute vérité historique - il fallait, d'entre tout ce que ces deux femmes se sont dit, choisir ce qui vous mettrait la puce à l'oreille. (p.90)

A detail that may or may not have occurred in "real life" is included in the fictional framework, which includes the invented paragraphs of story, and the diary-like passages of direct address. Consequently, it is exposed to what Triolet describes as the "signes, symboles, conventions et prétextes" of creative reality and it figures as metaphor rather than description:

cette petite indication était le moindre de mes soucis, je ne l'ai choisie que pour ce qu'elle avait de littéraire, un moyen de décrire le silence des deux femmes.(p.90)

Such devices also express the full ambiguity of the author in relation to the text. The self-conscious interruptions and changing points of view highlight the author's total control of the narrative material, "il ne faut pas oublier que j'écris un roman" (p.308). At the same time, it likens her to an onlooker who whispers a discreet aside before continuing to record the event she is witnessing as a spectator:

Madeleine ne pouvait pas se rappeler ce qui m'était arrivé, à moi, le vide des Champs-Élysées l'attirait. D'ailleurs, il ne m'était rien arrivé, comment raconter une absence d'événements qui a compté dans votre vie.(p.302)

In an interesting subversion of the dichotomy of the text-as-truth or history-as-truth, these subjective interventions by the narrator confirm the text's authenticity whilst putting into question its claim to truth. The question of author and text, however, will be discussed in the following section.

The possibilities of the real, the *trompe l'oeil* and the purely invented are narrated in the visit to the Krumlov castle. The setting presents reality as an aspect of the aesthetic illusion:

Dans ce pays, ce qu'il y a de plus réel, c'est le fantastique.(p.74)

The "Homme de Florence" watches Madeleine, already unsure if he is in fact watching her or one of her myriad reflections in the distortions of the room's mirrors. Madeleine is, or seems to be, walking across the stage of the former King's theatre until she disappears before his eyes:



Et j'ai vu de mes yeux Madeleine sur scène, dos à la salle, s'éloigner de moi, allant vers le fond infiniment lointain, et finalement disparaître là où les parallèles se touchent. Madeleine, avalée par la perspective, au fond de la mémoire, au-delà, où il n'y a plus rien. (p.56)

The effect is a striking parallel to that achieved by the narrator at the end of *Le Grand jamais*:

Elle s'éloignait du monument, et, vue de la place, se faisait de plus en plus petite: la perspective s'était emparée d'elle. (p.315)

The engulfing of a reflection, or a real character, by the perspectives of the novel can be seen to echo the way the real or historical world is subsumed by the frontiers of fiction. Again, the traditional spaces of truth, history and fiction are being broken down to the extent that the definition of the novel itself becomes problematical. The perplexing authenticity and inventedness of Madeleine who disappears as we catch up with her becomes a metaphor of the modern novel itself:

S'affranchissant de certaines traditions, de règles implicites, le roman acquiert davantage de liberté mais échappe aux cadres qui permettaient habituellement de le définir. Son existence même devient problématique.<sup>23</sup>

The images of perspective evoked verbally and reinforced pictorially are engulfed by the perspective of the novel, itself "la vie en trompe-l'oeil". Similarly, historical events or characters become subsumed by the eternal ambiguities of the text's reality. In the most rewarding of narrative inversions, the characters are not only aware of being characters in novels, but are dissatisfied with their novelistic lot, feeling condemned by the aporia of modern literature to second-rate roles, regretting the more spectacular novels of the past. The inversion is reminiscent of Voinitsky's cry of distress in *Uncle Vanya*:

Si j'avais vécu normalement, je serais peut-être devenu un Schopenhauer, un Dostoïevski.<sup>24</sup>

Austin, who has also already existed "sur les pages d'un roman", regrets that, since the novels he should have liked to write or figure in exist already, he is condemned to a life on the periphery:

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23. *Esthétique du roman moderne*, p.155.

24. Tchekhov, *L'Oncle Vania*, Acte III, p.126.



Les âmes mortes, disait-il, sont déjà écrits. Et Faust aussi. Et déjà le Soulier de Satin est un titre. Don Juan et Don Quichotte sont des personnages connus même de ceux qui ne savent pas d'où ils sortent.(p.95)

Madeleine, who existed as an episodic figure in *Le Grand jamais*, is in *Ecoutez-Voir*, more like a picaresque hero searching for the novel in which she is supposed to be figuring, before becoming resigned to her life as a "post-scriptum". Even then, she is not immune to forgetting the novel in which she appears to project herself momentarily into another:

Mais pourquoi est-ce que je me monte comme ça, je n'ai jamais eu à vivre cette sorte de vacances. Sûre que je me trompe de roman, je ne suis pas celle que j'ai cru être pendant un moment.(p.274)

Equally, in a particularly interesting use of intertextuality, she can be seen to drift back to *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, just as the figure of the "clocharde" in *Bonsoir, Thérèse* can be seen to wander through *Ecoutez-Voir*:

J'ai besoin que quelqu'un de vivant me dise "Bonsoir, Madeleine."(p.181)

Et voilà que je vois une autre vieille marcher à petits pas à ma rencontre...elle a tout qui pend: seins, mèches, robe à terre. Je rêve, c'est sûr! Je ne sais plus où j'en suis.(p.217)

This technique of projecting characters beyond their own novel to regret destinies that could have been their own is extended to a contemporary, extra-referential desire when Austin wishes that the film-director Jean-Luc Godard could meet Madeleine.

The reader is constantly faced with indisputably pre-existent facts which assume both autonomy and signifying potential once the author includes them in her text. The traditional concept of life and imitation is completely deconstructed, an effect already recognised in *Le Grand jamais*:

La vie ressemble toujours à l'histoire, et l'histoire au roman. Le pays réel, c'est toujours le pays dont on rêve.<sup>25</sup>

This inversion is illustrated most succinctly in certain passages in *Ecoutez-Voir*. For example, Madeleine compares her increasing thinness, already signifying her existential wasting away, to the skeletal form of Nancy Cunard in the last years of

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25. Philippe Sénart, "Enquête autour du pays réel", p.117.



her life. The latter then becomes part of the text to the extent that Madeleine can recall a past meeting between them. It would seem that even the "personnage épisodique" can no longer distinguish between her own narrating "I" and the narrating "I" of Madeleine:

Cependant, tout au long de ces pages, je crains de me verser dans un destin semblable au sien.(p.154)

Ah, cette scène à l'hôtel où ils l'entouraient, impuissants, à la regarder monter l'escalier avec son os de fémur cassé.(...) Il se trouve que j'avais dormi, cette nuit-là, dans cet hôtel - déjà j'étais une rôdeuse - et c'est en descendant que j'ai vu la scène...(p.155)

The passing interaction of narrated and historical characters and a putatively factual account of Nancy Cunard's eventual death are united by the symbolism of the text in the final paragraphs of the chapter. Nancy becomes a harbinger of the anonymous death Madeleine imagines for herself, a death derived from the myth of the river, "encore une inconnue de la Seine". The image is extended by Man Ray's photograph of the unknown woman's death-mask. The picture was evoked verbally by Aragon, in *Aurelien*, where, significantly, the myth and its haunting representation preoccupied Aurelien and Berenice to the extent of affecting their relationship. The artistic wholeness is extended by the ensuing photograph, also by Man Ray, of Nancy herself, offering an additional potential image and prototype of Madeleine. The text completes this unceasing game of reflections and reflected objects where each is bound to the other by a shared artistic function of signification, and where the quest for a final, certain truth is renounced in favour of aesthetic ambiguity:

"c'est normal" que l'Inconnue et Nancy aient eu le même photographe. Madeleine Lalande fuyait les photographes et, moi, Madeleine tout court, on ne me photographie pas. Pas Man Ray. L'Inconnue, Nancy, Madeleine...la chaîne de l'amitié.(pp.157-8)

From this example, the innovative structure of *Ecoutez-Voir* should be clear, where the form itself is narrating alongside and along with the text. The



novel has been dismissed as a failed experiment with superficial decoration.<sup>26</sup> However, the images included within the text point to the very illusion of aesthetic truth which the text discusses and seeks. Madeleine's peculiar destiny of "rôdeuse" is linked to a mythical, universal pattern once it is juxtaposed with images of medieval travellers. Bosch's picture "Le Vagabond" assumes particular signifying potential when details from the canvas are also reproduced in the text, so that these details themselves become a metonymy for Madeleine's semi-vagrancy. Bosch's wanderer's feet are then juxtaposed with a contemporary photograph of Parisian vagrants, and a close-up reproduction of their feet invests this image with a metaphorical significance that almost directs rather than illustrates Madeleine's situation. Hence, the reader is offered the most striking example of the artistic work which does not reflect but seemingly leads life. It is as if the author were working with images that form part of her pictorial vocabulary, where the portrait of Madeleine is in part formed by haunting representations of alienated or rejected women. Like the relation between past history and modern politics, the juxtaposition of old paintings and modern photographs offers a new perspective of the present. Myth and meaning are part of a collective imagination and the impulse to narrate and mythicise is both at the root of, and the goal, of creative activity.

This inescapable diversity of meanings also points towards the paradoxical dialectic of artistic creativity. In Barthes's words:

La vie ne fait jamais qu'imiter le livre, et ce livre lui-même n'est qu'un tissu de signes, imitation perdue, infiniment récelée.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst striving towards originality or ingenuity, the work remains related to the works from which it wishes to distinguish itself so that the artist has a sort of artistic biography that is at once personal and collective. It is as based upon chance and selection as it is upon personal and collective history. From this point of view,

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26. See for example a rare British review of her works, "Words and Pictures", *Times Literary Supplement*, 9.1.69.

27. Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur", *Le bruissement de la langue*, p.65.



the only aspect of history to be truly essential is that of literary history, so that the creator has a literary biography to work within or against:

Le texte est un tissu de citations, issues de mille foyers de la culture.<sup>28</sup>

This artistic illusion that is, and is illustrated within, the novel finds its most satisfying expression in the ending. The question of ending a "realistic" work undoubtedly troubled Triolet in general for she tends to let her texts drift into silence, thus replacing the most conventional tying of ends with inconclusive and uncertain non-endings. In *Ecoutez-Voir*, however, the artificial, contrived character of the ending is itself celebrated. The effect is achieved in the most Shakespearian, stylised way, by the addition of a scene in the form of a coda in which what has preceded is defined as "art":

Or, un rêveur passant dans les parages n'en sait rien, lui, il se sent plein de cette rumeur et ce qui naît en lui d'une légende incertaine et de faits précis va s'appeler roman. Tout ne sera plus qu'affaire de rêve, de sortilèges.(p.346)

The effect recalls the closing words of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended-  
That you have but slumbered here  
While these visions did appear.  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding than a dream.<sup>29</sup>

The convention of dramatic interruption, separating the spectator and the dream with a gentle reminder of "reality" is still however contained within the the artistic whole, so that as Genette has said:

le plus troublant est bien dans cette hypothèse inacceptable et insistante, que l'extradiégétique est peut-être toujours déjà diégétique.<sup>30</sup>

Hence, we are not quite within the sixteenth century convention of holding up a mirror to nature, before announcing a return to the reality of nature itself. The mirror, as it was conceived and described by Regis, is multifaceted, distorting,

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28. Barthes, *Le bruissement de la langue*, p.65.

29. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V, sc.1.

30. *Figures 111*, p.245.



changing and creating. We can never be sure where its reflections end, or on which side of the mirror the onlooker is standing. Nor does the mirror offer a static reflection of a universal reality. It is a looking-glass in the finest tradition of Lewis Carroll.

The "wink" of complicity from the character addressing the audience to bring the performance to a close has the contemporary effect of extending the limits of the stage and the infamous fourth wall to include the once external, non-participating spectator. As Mireille Gouaux has said:

A la différence du baroque, l'illusion romanesque ne renvoie pas à celle du monde, bien au contraire elle tente de faire naître dans ce monde le rêve dont il est gros pour le faire devenir réalité.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, history has become a creative aspect of the greater "story" just as horological time gave way to creative time. The former poles of fiction and non-fiction are united in a synergetic, symbiotic union, in which both the writer and the reader become engulfed by the perspective of art. The last speaking voice in the novel indicates that "tout dépend maintenant de vous". I shall now consider this question of the reader's active participation and its original application in Triolet's texts.

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31. Gouaux, "Ecoutez-Voir ou la peinture dans les mots", p.30.



# Chapter Eleven

## The Writer and the Written World

For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live...(However) in the end, the writer is not even allowed to live in his writing.<sup>1</sup>

In each text studied here, I have emphasised the dominant notion of multiplicity inherent in a work of art. We have seen the traditional hegemonies of political commitment, time, history and realism undermined by ambiguity, interpretation and play. We now turn to the figure of the author who traditionally determined and controlled the text. The last section identified the narrator's voice, foregrounding the strategies and artifices of the written text. We shall now turn to the conflicting diegeses, where textual unity is undermined by an abrupt overtaking of narrative responsibility. To extend the original metaphor for text and the *mise en abyme* that I have used to illustrate Triolet's idiosyncratic construction of the text, each "Matrushka" turns round to see she is contained within a larger, speaking identity. For example, in *Ecoutez-Voir*, two speaking characters who shared the narrative responsibility admit their dependence on the third narrating "I", Madeleine. Madeleine in turn refers freely to her creating authority, the narrator, an anonymous other who remains in the "wings" of the novel until the coda. Her narrator too admits being spoken through by the author, external to the text and yet responsible for its clarity and unity. In a striking synthesis of romantic inspiration and modernist linguistic problematics, however, the author herself is incidental in the construction of the text:

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1. Adorno, quoted by Graham McCann, "Message in a Broken Bottle", *Times Higher Education Supplement*, p.11.



je vis toujours, attirée par un aimant qui change d'aspect, de sens, de tête et ne perd pas sa force d'attraction.(...)si je ne me suis pas encore rompu le cou, c'est que je suis inconsciente du fait que je marche sur la corniche d'un gratte-ciel. Une seconde de veille, et ja vacille, prise d'angoisse, de vertige, de simple peur.<sup>2</sup>

Triolet's concern with the subjective identity is heard not only in the diegeses but also in the sub-text, the textual interruptions and the works of self-analysis.

Echoing Barthes's recognition that "*qui parle n'est pas qui écrit et qui écrit n'est pas qui est*",<sup>3</sup> the author herself turns round to see whom she is created by.

As the author's autonomy and responsibility within the text become obscured and increasingly contingent, she also considers the literary events and characters within the text. These are actually imposing their individuality and historical prototypes upon the writer's mind so that she is recording their voices rather than defining them. Caught in the indefinable mass of meanings, allusions and subjective receptions, the writer faces the reality of the written world where, as was shown in Part Three, "les grandes oeuvres (...) signifient toujours plus qu'ils ont conscience de le dire". She is turning back to find herself created by her language, so that the word, the smallest unit she uses to create her texts, itself contains the creator and dictates the nature of her creative activities.

The author has a creating subjectivity that is born within the creative act and which lives only for the duration of the work:

Tant qu'on écrit, on croit peut-être savoir ce que l'on tient dans l'objectif.(...) et puis, je ne suis plus celui qui l'a prise mais celui qui la voit.(vol.40, p.164)

*Le Grand jamais* and *Ecoutez-voir* are fragmented by the question raised by Lacan, "le sujet dont je parle quand je parle est-il le même que celui qui parle?".<sup>4</sup> The ambiguous nature of the subjective identity leads to the profoundest *mise en abyme* of the text, to the extent that, as Ricardou explains:

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2. *La Mise en mots*, p.26.

3. *Poétique du récit*, p.40. (his italics)

4. Quoted by Barthes in *Poétique du récit*, p.56, note 52.



Le récit n'a donc pas disparu: au cours de son procès, il s'est multiplié et ce pluriel est entré en conflit avec lui-même.<sup>5</sup>

The Formalists called the self-conscious act of creation, where a subject faced with a blank sheet starts to write, the "sdvig" or "shift". This implies a deliberate departure on the part of the artist from the so-called natural way of writing or painting to analyse the artistic process itself. It is carefully examined by Pasternak in his autobiography:

the clearest, most memorable and most important thing in art is its coming into being, and the best productions of world art while they tell of the most varied things are in reality recounting their own birth.<sup>6</sup>

I would suggest that implicit in Triolet's use of the shift is also the exacerbated sense of exile imposed upon the writer. She is alienated from any aspect of the work other than the experience of its genesis. Writing in her native language meant writing into the silence and non-reception of censorship and proscription. Writing in French required her to use an adopted language, for an adoptive and often hostile cultural tradition.

Aragon pointed out that if in Russian Triolet had a specific relationship with the language at the base of her very being, expression through a second language had a curiously contingent and fictional relation to reality:

C'est quand elle changea de langue que véritablement, comme par pudeur, naquit d'elle la fiction.<sup>7</sup>

I would extend this thought to assert that Triolet's bilingualism therefore defamiliarised French for her and foregrounded the fictional and imaginative resonance of communication. A native speaker, feeling more confident in relation to the language, may be less sensitive to its internal structures. Triolet termed this the "bi-mi destin" of bilingualism, pondering over the fragile poverty of the written word which is so shot through with other, anterior associations that it is only ever an approximation hinting at the enormity of the "objet présenté". Triolet's works point to the escape from another eventual aporia for a sensitive modern writer

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5. *Le Nouveau Roman*, p.152.

6. *Safe Conduct*, (1931) *Proza 1915-1958*, p.241.

7. *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, p.12.



faced with the burden of meaninglessness or unrestricted interpretations and deconstructions. She anticipates future paths for the novel and aspects of artistic creation that can permit new perspectives of communication that are in keeping with our changing, modern world.

### The Death of the Author

The opening pages of *Le Grand jamais* evoke the autonomy of the author who preconceived and structured her novel prior to its coming into being graphically. It would appear, however, that the narrator only asserts her omnipotent, omniscient mastery so as better to foreground her suspended individuality and significance once the act of writing begins. In the second chapter, an authorial intrusion disturbs what had seemed to be a traditional, externally narrated text:

L'auteur en sait toujours tellement plus sur ses personnages qu'il ne veut en dire. Il sait tout ce qui se passe dans les intervalles, entre les moments décrits, entre les temps forts d'une vie.(p.55)

Despite this confidence of "Dieu le Père", the narrator is rapidly taken over by a second speaking narrator existing within the novel. Triolet-the-narrator's submission to a more powerful narrative force corresponds to Ricardou's definition of narrative bifurcation:

Cette fois ce n'est plus un récit qui en englobe un autre, c'est un nouveau narrateur qui accapare le récit en cours. Parfois le premier narrateur tend même à devenir personnage du récit que le second désormais s'attribue.<sup>8</sup>

The first speaking voice is that of Regis, in fact when he is already dead. His voice is subsumed by the narrator who proclaims herself the novel's author. Her self-conscious narration is subsumed by the novel itself:

Et moi, qui croyais être dans ce que j'écris, toute puissante comme Dieu le Père, je me sens emportée sur une pente qui me mène à mon temple: l'art.  
(p.295)

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8. *Le Nouveau Roman*, p.128.



Just as one narrator is engulfed by another, we may recall that Madeleine was subsumed by Regis's texts. She had intended to write a true account of his life and ideas but her work and her research reveal another subject to her. Her discovery of the ambiguities of authorship thus parallel the suspension of responsibility described by her author, Triolet:

Ayant déclenché le mécanisme de l'écriture, celle-ci mène le romancier dans une direction par lui imprévue.(vol.35,p.123-4)

...même alors ses personnages le mènent autant qu'il les mène.<sup>9</sup>

The effect is to foreground a new subjectivity, so that the "je narrant" is no longer the person who picked up the pen, but a subjectivity born from this act of writing, within the written word, and whose existence will be maintained until the end of the novel. This effect is described by Sartre:

Je suis né de l'écriture; avant elle, il n'y avait qu'un jeu de miroirs; dès mon premier roman je sus qu'un enfant s'était introduit dans le palais des glaces.<sup>10</sup>

The writer becomes instrumental, almost incidental, in the writing process as the written text develops. It is as if the writer were joining a process that was already in motion when she entered it and that continues far beyond the act of writing. This is of course the concept established by Barthes, the "death of the author":

Dès qu'un fait est raconté à des fins intransitives et non plus pour agir directement sur le réel, c'est-à-dire finalement hors de toute fonction autre que l'exercice même du symbole, ce décrochage se produit, la voix perd son origine, l'auteur entre dans sa propre mort, l'écriture commence.<sup>11</sup>

The coming-into-being of the work defies the author's methodological preparations. For example, Triolet herself is surprised when Madeleine leaves Destaing and rationalises this autonomous act within the framework of the novel as well as in *La Mise en mots*.<sup>12</sup>

This dialogism, described by Triolet as a "question d'entente entre le personnage et son créateur", has been examined by Kundera in relation to *Anna*

9. *La Mise en mots*, p.33.

10. Sartre, *Les Mots*, p.131.

11. Barthes, *Le bruissement de la langue*, p.61.

12. *La Mise en mots*, p.37.



*Karenina*. Like Triolet he emphasises the "suprapersonal wisdom" that a true novelist should be listening for and that will shape their texts independently and even in spite of the author.<sup>13</sup> The dialogue conceptualised between writer and character is itself "mis en scène" in *Ecoutez-Voir*. Here, the writer's voice in the textual digressions is not that of Triolet herself. This is of course the case in *Le Grand jamais*, which can be read as a diary chronicling the very act and impulses behind the creation of the text. In *Ecoutez-Voir*, the characters refer freely to the narrating character, even if the narration is supposedly passed between them. In the coda, the narrating character herself intrudes on a diegetic level within the text to explain certain ambiguities in the text. She then appears with the other characters to join in the figurative bow at the end of the performance, like a director appearing on stage at the end of a theatrical performance to receive the applause:

L'auteur vous laisse ce qu'il possédait. (...) Les personnages du roman vous tirent leur révérence.(p.347)

A new fictional perspective is thus achieved. The author, former godhead, becomes a spectator before the work, or, in Calvino's terms, an actor participating in its realisation:

an author is an author in so far as he enters into a role the way an actor does and reidentifies himself with that projection of himself at the time of the writing.<sup>14</sup>

The author's figurative appearance is described in the closing chapter in a *Matrushka* sequence working backwards:

Je pourrais être le récitant qui se cache derrière l'histoire racontée par lui, le témoin dans l'ombre d'une aventure dont il n'est pas le héros..(...) Madeleine aimait ces contes vieillots où l'auteur fait parler un personnage qui se veut épisodique. (p.339)

The novels that Madeleine-within-the-text found entrancing become illustrated by the novel we are completing.

Both text and self-analysis refuse the idea of narration as individual thought transposed into verbal images, and replace this tradition by a desire to

13. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 158.

14. *The Literature Machine*, p.111.



communicate restricted by the multiplicity of words. We are presented with the notion of the writer herself being written by her craft. Whilst believing in her art and in her perpetual impulse to literary communication, Triolet admits her fragile relationship with her texts:

Les mots, mes amis dangereux, versatiles, traîtres, qui changent de visage, selon celui à qu'ils s'adressent. Les mots, mon tourment..<sup>15</sup>

Realistically or metaphorically, her texts have built up a complex labyrinthine world that has been examined as both the refuge and the place of exclusion for the artist. An additional interpretation of this underground maze can now be considered. The labyrinth is both Triolet's work and her means of expression; it is the maze of meanings offered to the reader, and it is the treacherous paths of language and interpretation from which the writer hopes to shape her work. This new aspect of the labyrinth is evoked by Triolet in *La Mise en mots*:

J'aime penser à un roman-ville, à un roman-labyrinthe avec dédales, miroirs, rues, fenêtres...des trompe-l'oeil, des personnages fictifs et existants.<sup>16</sup>

In *Le Grand jamais* the narrator presents the labyrinth as both the creative process and the creative work:

Je tisse un fil, et, mon propre Ariane, je le suis pour me sortir de mon labyrinthe. Et voilà que je fais marche arrière, mon fil se relâche et je me perds, je perds le fil de ce roman qui devait faire sa pelote avec autre chose que le destin de quelques personnages. (p.213)

She is lost in the labyrinths of her own works and their interpretations, while the novel she believed she would write is replaced by another that will be understood differently. But the "fil d'Ariane" can also be understood to be the text offered to the reader so that s/he may follow the narrator in the eternal quest for an exit which is in fact for meaning itself. The author-character is maintained within the labyrinth of meanings, to be re-analysed and recreated on each new reading. Like the

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15. *La Mise en mots*, p.63.

16. *La Mise en mots*, p.49.



metaphorical pattern in the carpet that has frequently illustrated literary criticism, the elaborate pattern of paths that make up the labyrinth are the novel itself.

Ecrire, c'est remettre aux autres de fermer eux-mêmes votre propre parole, et l'écriture n'est qu'une proposition dont on ne connaît jamais la réponse. On écrit pour être aimé, on est lu sans pouvoir l'être, c'est sans doute cette distance qui constitue l'écrivain.<sup>17</sup>

If the death of the author means that the text is left as a maze of meanings in which the reader may lose or follow the author's indications, we should note that this "aspect impondérable" does not necessarily destroy the novel itself. If the absolutism of author or protagonist has been overthrown, a new character is now brought into play. The literary maze is not just a morass of signifiers that a reader can interpret at will. It is also conceived with a "destinataire" in mind, and it is this addressee that links both text and author with the reader.

### The Reader in Dialogue

The tradition of expanding the frontiers of the novel by including the perspective of the reader has surely been implicit in the novel almost as long as the novel has existed, as *Tristram Shandy* or *Jacques le Fataliste* demonstrate. However, it is in the modern era that the reader has been regarded as a constructive but indeterminate element in the novel's genesis. This changing role is discussed by Sartre in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*:

...l'objet littéraire est une étrange toupie, qui n'existe qu'en mouvement. Pour la faire surgir, il faut un acte concret qui s'appelle la lecture, et elle ne dure qu'autant que cette lecture peut durer.<sup>18</sup>

Todorov has shown how the innovatory premises established by Sartre give way to "disappointing conclusions".<sup>19</sup> Sartre implies that the author enters into communication only with a historically determined and therefore unpredictable reader who will interpret the work according to his/her own perspective and understanding. In this case, the work is reduced to a code without a message, or at

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17. Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p.276.

18. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, p.48.

19. *A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism*, p.49



least where the slightest overlapping of written code and read code are possible only by chance. This literary dead-end is of course short-lived, and we recognise instinctively that "le texte contient toujours en lui-même une notice sur son mode d'emploi."<sup>20</sup> The reader's consciousness constitutes part of the pattern of the novel and establishes the coherence and unity of the work as a whole. Notwithstanding, during the work's evolution, the author has set intentional limits and directives that are complemented by the reader's creative participation:

J'essaie d'imposer au lecteur mon rêve, de le faire rêver à sa façon mais à partir du mien, je ne veux pas qu'il voie un téléphone là où j'ai mis une mitraillette.<sup>21</sup>

Culler shows in *Structuralist Poetics* how the competent reader is working within a set of conventions that will be structuring participation in the text, even when these codes and rules are being defamiliarised or deliberately distorted. It is within this tradition that I believe Triolet conceptualised her authorial role and the function of dialogism. An important section of *La Mise en mots* considers the various levels of reception and misreading. Her approach and conclusions recall research carried out by Bakhtin:

Pour comprendre la stratégie de l'écriture, il faut identifier ce "surdestinataire" qu'a imaginé l'auteur.<sup>22</sup>

The reader is divided into two immediate categories, the particular addressee who is engaging in the text, and the superaddressee who is the conceptually unlimited reader borne in mind by the writer at the time of writing. The "lecteur tout court", as Triolet refers to her particular addressee, may follow the writer's carefully structured "roman-labyrinthe", participating in the text and its construction. Alternatively, s/he may become the "lecteur hideux" who ignores the author's intentional signs and directives to construct his own vision:

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20. *Poétique de la prose*, p.184.

21. *La Mise en mots*, p.66.

22. Quoted in *Mikhail Bakhtine le principe dialogique*, p.170



Il ne sait seulement pas lire l'heure au cadran du roman, tant il est borné, et ne parlons pas du mécanisme qui fait marcher les aiguilles. Me voilà déjà au stade où le lecteur est devenu mon pire ennemi.<sup>23</sup>

The reception of the text is illustrated in an extended theatre-novel metaphor. In *La Mise en mots*, both image and text point to the melodramas of the past where the audience did not simply receive the performance passively but shouted warnings and advice to the performing characters. (page 45-46) And yet, while the audience has evolved, while our literary and theatrical reception has become more sophisticated, Triolet underlines the surprisingly traditional, deliberately gullible character of the modern audience. In pantomime and melodramas, the audience never expected the actors to respond to their appeals nor the anti-hero to be moved by the outrage of the public to rectify his caddish behaviour. Likewise, the reader demonstrates:

une curieuse volonté de préserver cette foi contre le personnage imaginaire qui se dit lui-même imaginé.<sup>24</sup>

Todorov has brought attention to this surprising traditionalism despite innovatory developments in other aspects of novelistic interpretation and reception:

...nous avons du mal à nous débarrasser d'une manière de voir, inscrite jusque dans nos habitudes linguistiques, qui consiste à penser le roman en termes de représentation de transposition d'une réalité - qui lui serait préexistante. Même si elle ne cherche à décrire que le processus de création, cette vision fait déjà problème; elle est franchement déformante si elle se rapporte au texte même.<sup>25</sup>

Triolet emphasises this novelty which was criticised and refused by contemporary readers of *Ecoutez-Voir*. She notes that, despite their "expériences extravagantes" in iconoclastic aspects of novel writing, they instinctively refuse the Pirandello-like notion of novelistic characters who are aware of the novel in which they figure. She compares this self-consciousness to a pigeon who flies away from the magician, announcing "il m'a sorti de sous son aisselle".<sup>26</sup>

The increasingly important role of the reader confirms the contingent,

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23. *La Mise en mots*, p.48.

24. *La Mise en mots*, p.40.

25. *Poétique de la prose*, p.175.

26. *La Mise en mots*, p.41.



"impondérable" character of the novel. The concept of the superaddressee, however, distinguishes the work from freely interpretable material. Whilst accepting that the texts include what Iser termed "gaps" or "indeterminate elements" and what Triolet calls "les impondérables", the superaddressee is both the ideal reader addressed by the writer at the moment of constructing the text, and the "lecteur complice" that the historical reader becomes if s/he becomes sincerely engaged in the imaginative whole of the text. Triolet develops her ideal reader as a partner and accomplice participating in the novel's construction. She called this superaddressee the "personnage actant", which is the Russian term for the characters appearing in a play. Thus the reader, like the actor, plays a part in the action, but always in a dialogic performance between creating and participating voices and not as an individual monopolising the text. This is the point of synthesis where the work is truly perceived. In the place of the absolute author or reader, we find a multiplicity of viewpoints. This multiplicity is illustrated textually by the changing narrator's voice in *Ecoutez-Voir*. Jean-Pierre Faye and Roman Jakobson have underlined the striking modernity of this notion of acting character which not only introduces the theatre-novel project cherished by Triolet, but also associates her novelistic innovations with the most recent linguistic research:

Les actants sont les êtres ou les choses qui, à un titre quelconque et de quelque façon que ce soit, même au titre de simples figurants et de la façon la plus passive, participent au procès.<sup>27</sup>

The "lecteur complice" is developed by Triolet into a textual and extra-textual personification of the receiver involved in what Barthes has called "la dimension amoureuse de l'écriture." She enhances the concept of a "rapport d'amour", to achieve a satisfying metaphor for novelistic activity. At the beginning of *La Mise en mots* the writer is defined in neo-romantic terms, drawn by an "aimant" which will reveal subject, form and expression to the listening writer.

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27. Jean Pierre Faye, "La Mise en lien", *Europe*, no.506, p.100.



During the course of her self-analysis, the inanimate "aimant" is personified and individualised as an "amant" to whom her creative impulse is directed:

Et j'irai encore à mon rendez-vous d'amour avec lui.<sup>28</sup>

The notion of writer and reader meeting in a love affair from which the literary work will result is reminiscent of Barthes's illustration of literature and reality:

On pourrait dire, je crois, que la littérature, c'est Orphée remontant des enfers; tant qu'elle va devant soi, sachant cependant qu'elle conduit quelqu'un, le réel qui est derrière elle et qu'elle tire peu à peu de l'innommé, respire, marche, vit, se dirige vers la clarté d'un sens; mais sitôt qu'elle se retourne sur ce qu'elle aime, il ne reste plus entre ses mains qu'un sens nommé, c'est-à-dire un sens mort.<sup>29</sup>

The writer and reader are caught, like the writer and text, in a sort of Orpheus and Eurydice relation where now one, now the other is drawing the work from obscurity to light. If the "rapport d'amour" gives way to scientific curiosity, if the writer imposes the novelistic message too ponderously, if the reader turns to inspect the writer and not the work, then both fall back to obscurity and inaccessibility.

The "rapport d'amour" is one for which the writer has prepared herself:

Pour ce rendez-vous je me suis longuement préparée (...) Pour qu'il dise, le lecteur, parlant du créateur, il ment divinement. Il ment comme le rossignol la nuit. Ainsi parlait Vélimir Khlébnikov... le lecteur...lui murmurer des choses, front contre front.<sup>30</sup>

And despite destructive or dogmatic readings because "les pages imprimées sont un lieu public", Triolet continues to evoke her "tête à tête amoureux". The illustration at the end of the section "Le lecteur rêvé" which describes the categories of reader for whom she is writing, is a photograph of Aragon taken by Man Ray in 1923. The superaddressee therefore has both a realistic and a figurative dimension in the mind of the author. The photograph was taken five years before Triolet and Aragon met. In other words, the ideal reader is not just the partner with

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28. *La Mise en mots*, p.52.

29. Barthes, *Essais Critiques*, p.265.

30. *La Mise en mots*, p.44.



whom Triolet is associated historically, but an image which she idealised before. The reader is a figurative lover in a "rapport d'amour" for whom she had also found a realistic personification.

### The Self-Consciously Fictive Character

To complete this study of the conventions and codes that Triolet defamiliarises and deconstructs, I shall turn now to the created, verbal world of the text which has gradually replaced the modes of mimesis and historical verisimilitude. This verbal-linguistic reality is identified by Blanchot, where reading in a sense negates author and reader to make the book exist:

Le livre a en quelque sorte besoin du lecteur(...) pour s'affirmer chose sans auteur et aussi sans lecteur.<sup>31</sup>

In this conceptualisation of literature as a quasi-magical reality that exists once the book is opened, like a theatrical performance revealed when the curtain is raised, the convention of the fourth wall remains metaphorically valid. Neither novelistic nor dramatic characters can "bump into" this convention without startling the public. As I showed above, the reader is more resistant to this neo-realistic inventedness than is the audience at the theatre. When created characters voice their inventedness, we move into the more obscure domain of self-conscious fiction. Like the magician's pigeon referred to above which announces its own illusions, the effect shocks the reader by flaunting the artificiality of the *trompe l'oeil* construction.

Triolet maintains that such innovations are mere extensions of the novelistic realism she is investigating:

...je n'ai voulu casser le jouet de personne, je n'ai pas vu la différence entre mes créatures conscientes d'être inventées et celles qui cachent leur identité, le mécanisme; qui se les cachent et prétendent exister sans le concours de l'auteur, prétendant se promener dans la vie réelle ou irréaliste.<sup>32</sup>

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31. Blanchot, quoted by Bree, *Littérature française, XXème siècle*, p.182.

32. *La Mise en mots*, p.41.



Although this innovation can be accepted now without difficulty, after a twenty-year period that has witnessed the most vigorous, post-modern literary inventiveness, Triolet's contemporary reader was affronted by *Ecoutez-Voir*. The reader was reluctant to follow the characters into the verbal labyrinth of the novel if it was too flagrantly labelled as paper and the character a construction of words. Traditional verisimilitude is strikingly deconstructed in the name of neo-realism, making this novel a remarkable written world that contains a commentary on the nature of literary works in general, where literature is put forward as an allegory of poetics. The devices are skilfully manipulated, and if the reader can bear to witness the protagonist-puppets playing with their own strings and scheming to catch sight of the puppeteer when she is not looking, the novel is perhaps the most satisfyingly *artistic* of all of Triolet's works. It is a striking if unintentional illustration of the conclusion reached by the horse in Tolstoy's short story, *Khlostomier*,

L'activité des hommes (...) est guidée par les paroles, et la nôtre par les actes.<sup>33</sup>

Madeleine is the speaking character who opens *Ecoutez-Voir* as a fictional, created voice. Her role as a secondary character in *Le Grand jamais* has been reduced still further by the space and time separating her from the character Madeleine Lalande whom she had known, and who depended on Regis Lalande for her identity. We may note here that in the second novel, when Madeleine overhears people referring to her full title, using her married name, she is struck by the impression of hearing about another. Her former identity and personality had been formed and dictated by her husband to such an extent that as his memory fades into myth and forgetting, these former aspects of her identity die after him. She fades into semi-anonymity: not Madeleine Lalande but Madeleine "tout court". The undermining of the formerly male-identified woman has yet to receive the critical attention it merits. The erosion of an identity is presented in the thematic material and is reinforced visually in the images of women recurring through the text. It is

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33. *Khlostomier*, in *Les Cosaques*, p.491.



also illustrated verbally. For example, in the later novel Madeleine is not even directly created but an after-thought. She describes herself as "un verbe irrégulier qu'il faut apprendre par coeur" and a "post scriptum"(pp.15-17).

Her relationship with Régis, narrated and structurally functional in *Le Grand jamais*, is presented as a verbal construct by Triolet:

J'ai aimé, nous nous sommes aimés, il m'a aimée, je ne l'ai plus aimé, j'aime Régis...voilà comment s'énonce grammaticalement le point de vue de Madeleine.<sup>34</sup>

Madeleine reappears in the suburban house that soon becomes the setting for a modern realisation of *The Cherry Orchard*. The intrusive log-cutting outside narrates the destruction of her "vie privée" that is also the silence and inactivity preempting the novel's composition. Her gratuitous existence is little more than a memory of time past, which is of course the former novel. She indeed emphasises her previously scriptural character:

...dans cette maison, je pourrais me croire *une ligne d'écriture effacée* sur le tableau noir du temps.(p.18)

She is shaken from her silence and inactivity since the end of the previous novel to be launched by the writer into a renewed verbal existence, into her written world:

Et ne voila-t-il pas que je réapparais grandeur nature et que l'auteur, de sa grosse écriture bien lisible, trace à l'encre bleu ce post-scriptum qui me concerne. (p.90)

In a renewed vision of literary realism, Madeleine and the other speaking characters recognise their verbal existence and explore its horizons. She coincides with Barthes's definition of modern realism:

L'oeuvre la plus "réaliste" ne sera pas celle qui "peint" la réalité mais qui, se servant du monde comme contenu (...) explorera le plus profondément possible la réalité irréaliste du langage.<sup>35</sup>

This exploration is maintained on two levels; the characters are aware of their construction in linguistic terms and they also explore the very subtleties and symbolic passages of the verbal constructs themselves.

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34. Marc Albert-Levin interviewing Triolet, *Les Lettres françaises*, no.1254.

35. *Essais Critiques*, p.164.



The author is allowed to disappear "comme une figurine tout au bout de la scène littéraire"<sup>36</sup>. In the tradition of Joyce and Faulkner for example, Triolet uses the technique of letting the principal characters take up the narrative successively. The narrator's organisational role is only apparent in terms of the knowledge that each character has of the moment when they should take over, always picking the narrative up logically and without gratuitous double narrations of the same scenes. For example, when Madeleine resumes the narrative after the first chapter spoken by the "Homme de Florence", she comments on his *récit* as if she too had read it. She also comments on his role in the novel, so that the characters can be seen to narrate their own narrative function, at a point where diegesis and exegesis overlap within a narrated character. That is to say that traditionally, it was the reader or critic who separated the characters to decipher their symbolic function and purpose beyond that of figuring in the constructed story. Here, the characters know they are playing a functional role that will identify them as protagonist or secondary:

L'homme de Florence a été introduit ici pour me servir. Moi, roman, moi son personnage. Il est un moyen pour me faire vivre, une lumière sur moi. On n'a pas besoin de lui autrement. (p.75)

Encore une fois, il s'est contenté de jouer le rôle du récitant, comme à sa première apparition sur ces pages. (p.143))

The novel rotates far more around Madeleine than it does around the other speaking characters, despite the turns they take in assuming the narrating function. It is comparatively easy therefore to accept the verbal identity and existence of both the "Homme de Florence" - who never has any other name - and Austin - who changes name three times according to his narrative function. Madeleine foregrounds this narrative device:

Avez-vous remarqué que personne ne l'appelle jamais par son nom? L'auteur doit considérer que ce sont là des renseignements inutiles pour le rôle que cet homme doit jouer ici (...) Il n'a plus d'importance que je n'en avais, moi, dans le roman précédent. (pp.143-4)

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36. *Le bruissement de la langue*, p.64.



Je pense à Austin, j'ai l'idée qu'il ne fera pas long feu sur ces pages, l'auteur va le laisser tomber. (p.226)

Madeleine may appear autonomous, but the reader is still prevented from reverting to the traditional reception of novelistic characters. Even when the characters would seem to react independently of the creator's will, they still foreground the latter's vital scriptural activity which will ensure their realisation:

Mon créateur me laisse seule? Je n'aurais donc plus besoin d'autres personnages pour mes trois dimensions? Pourquoi me faire ça? (...) Plus d'Homme de Florence? Pourquoi me faire ça? Et Austin qui s'estompe. (p.225)

Nancy Jane Breed has shown how linguistic existence also permits characters to return to the narrative after their apparent death, should the requirements of the narrative structure or plot so require.<sup>37</sup> It is regrettable that this internal logic, where characters can be written back into scripts, was considered "blatantly absurd" by Breed. For example, the "Homme de Florence", who appears to die in the sixth chapter, is effaced from the narrative structure:

J'ai revu ce soir l'Homme de Florence une deuxième fois: il était en train de mourir chez Austin, de moins en moins reconnaissable, un martyr. Comme je n'étais d'aucun secours, je suis partie sans attendre le mot *fin*. (p.169)

When Austin recognises the "Homme de Florence"'s use for his radio project, the latter is returned to the narrative stage, although from this point, always as a spoken character. He never resumes a narrating role.

When Madeleine loses a sense of her own existence as the distortions and falsifications of her past continually eat into her fragile present, it is by reading about herself that she may confirm her existence:

J'ai tout le temps à me remémorer. Je feuillette mon passé et je retrouve, étonnée, des passages une seule fois vécus, la fois initiale, jamais relus. Dans tous les romans il y a des pages sacrifiées, l'auteur aurait peut-être bien, mieux fait de ne pas les vivre, du moment qu'elles ne comptent pas. (p.321)

It is pertinent that the novel closes with a deliberately metatextual addition which confirms the peculiarly verbal nature of characters and setting. The "personnage

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37. Breed, *Female Self-Consciousness and Masculine referent*, pp. 170-71.



épisodique", the creator in the wings whom Madeleine had tried to espy, introduces herself as the fourth speaking person within the novel to indicate the eventual destinies of the characters. For Austin, this is presented in the guise of a journalistic excerpt, in a technique that I have already identified in Triolet's fiction, allowing the narrator a certain authoritative knowledge and giving her report an extra-referential claim to truth. In a footnote by the author which itself undermines the putatively truthful journalistic text, the intricate construction of fictional, linguistic reality is reinforced:

Son passé aventureux est *un véritable roman* dont les éléments essentiels échappent à toute investigation. (p.341)

Thus Austin, the character from a novel by Regis who becomes a character in the novel *Ecoutez-Voir*, is presented as a real character who resembles a fictional creation.

Triolet and her protagonist Madeleine reinforce the verbal nature of the novelistic world. Both bring attention to the unpredictable expressivity of words which have a personal and universal history of prior meanings and implications. They suggest that language is a sort of verbal *pret-à-porter*. The speaker can only use this "faute de mieux" means of communication with a terrifying sense of the treachery of the written word.<sup>38</sup> Madeleine brings our attention to this linguistic dissatisfaction:

Je m'en allais, la mort dans l'âme. Encore une expression bien faite, comme la fin de tout. Rien de mieux que la confection pour habiller des malheurs taille mannequin.(p.88)

It is examined more closely in *La Mise en mots*:

Tout me ramène à la pauvreté du langage en comparaison avec l'infini des choses à exprimer.<sup>39</sup>

The writer is caught between her ardent desire to create and the semantic multiplicity of literature which depends perhaps precisely on the very ambivalence

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38. The reader may note another striking awareness of the "pret-à-porter" of our language and communication in the works of another bi-cultural, bilingual writer, Romain Gary. *L'angoisse du roi Salomon* illustrates this preoccupation well.

39. *La Mise en mots*, p.70.



of language. She still wishes to ensure the meeting of her imagination with that of her objective correlative, the reader:

Comment combiner les mots de façon à exprimer ce qui n'a pas de mots pour se dire?<sup>40</sup>

Caught in the distance separating the writer and her material, aware of the treacherous labyrinth that is the passage of thought before it reaches expression, Triolet asserts a vigorous scriptural faith:

..l'art était la seule activité humaine qui déborde les limites humaines .(...) L'art qui transforme l'homme, lui donne les possibilités nouvelles est paradoxalement, lui-même inconcevable.(vol.35, p.258)

The writer is compelled to approach the literary space with an imagination which corresponds to her era. She should "rêver à une lune nouvelle", refusing "le rêve lunaire de jadis",<sup>41</sup> where she would fall into the same traditionalism that the reader demonstrated:

Il y a de plus en plus à dire et c'est en soi-même qu'il faut chercher la richesse du dire.<sup>42</sup>

The writer has exhausted verbal arguments and turns to consider her art from the perspective of the future. She is seeking a new, contemporary imagination that should embrace new paths for novelistic invention invigorated by both the traditions of the past, the artistic research of the present and the scientific promises for the future.

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40. *La Mise en mots*, p.107.

41. *La Mise en mots*, p.41.

42. *La Mise en mots*, p.106.



## Chapter Twelve

### Desideratum

The artist of colour, the artist of sound and the artist of volume are the ones who open up the hidden world and change it into the concrete world. The mystery remains an open reality and every reality is endlessly varied and many-sided.<sup>1</sup>

A variety of forms of art from sculpture to the theatre have been used to illustrate Triolet's novelistic world. My readings of Triolet's texts have emphasised her use of the plastic arts or other forms of written art in both thematic material and structural and visual presentation. I have also used illustrations from other artistic media to reinforce my critical examination of her works. This closing section will show the metaphorical and imaginative unity contained in these recurrent themes. The artistic leitmotif is apparent, as has been seen, from the thematic material to the architectonics of the text and the artist's own self-conscious act of creativity. Following this pattern, my analysis has moved from the novels about works of art - Lewka's monument and Slavsky's painting - to the novels about novel writing and the structural processes of fiction. At the same time, I have traced the novelist's investigations into her artistic world, where reality is fictive and cognition is interpretative, from the study of the multifaceted work to the awareness of the equally ambivalent word. Just as truth has been replaced by device and illusion, so too reality has been discarded as vague and contingent. It is replaced by the higher reality of the artistic quest and the direction of the artistic imagination in an unknown future. The debate around the fictive and the real is included within the fictional world, so that an original art form is achieved that is at once preoccupied

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1. Malevich, *The Artist*; quoted in "A Short introduction to his work", tr. Margo Muntz. Archives, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



with its own aesthetics and recounting the development of its form. Such introversion should underline the profoundly modernist preoccupations of Triolet's novels, which correspond wholly with Fletcher and Bradbury's definition of literary Modernism:

...time and time again, the modernist novel has explored the space between something aesthetically compact and the muddle of human life, between Poetry and History, between the metaphorical symbol and the place it takes in disorderly time; it has hung curiously poised between the energetic powers of aesthetic making and the counterveiling claims of history or contingency, between the artifice of eternity and the conviction that this artifice is no more than a consoling fiction.<sup>2</sup>

The essential originality in Triolet's Modernism is that it instills aesthetics with an ethical purpose. Her intention is neither to desert her reader in the void of meaninglessness, nor to leave a world of incomprehension and ruins as the only truth. I have shown how she becomes increasingly concerned with what the Structuralists have called the depotentialization of language, which is the vast aporia separating the verbal message from both the full intentions of the speaker and the interpretative experience of the receiver. Nevertheless, she remains convinced of the value of language, of the resources of communication and the unspoken aesthetic understanding that a valuable artistic work will evoke.

Il y a de plus en plus à dire et c'est en soi-même qu'il faut chercher la richesse du dire.<sup>3</sup>

Against the facile claim of the death of the novel, Triolet asserts new paths for the artistic message illuminated by the new impulses of the modern imagination. My interpretation of the final novels, and most particularly *Ecoutez-Voir* and *La Mise en mots*, foregrounds the vast semantic and presentational richness yet to be exploited by artists in the traditional fields of art. The writer, for example, traditionally only presented sound, texture, space and colour *verbally*. The separate domains of the theatre, music or the graphic arts have always remained within their particular artistic boundary. Triolet can be seen to anticipate

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2. *Modernism*, p.411.

3. *La Mise en mots*, p.106.



the vast opening-up of artistic expression when this conventional separation is itself brought into question.

### The Limits of the Word

The highly sensitive linguistic self-consciousness in Triolet's works finds two clear means of expression. I have identified the effect of deliberate linguistic defamiliarisation whereby the writer examines the expressions and semantic intuitions that words suggest. Secondly, there is an original textual examination of the potential expansion of meaning and understanding achieved when verbal and non-verbal art forms confront and complement each other. We may indeed recall Apollinaire's dream of "le livre vu et entendu de l'avenir" considered in Chapter One. The very title *Ecoutez-Voir*, derived from a popular dictum, offers a far-sighted demonstration of the visual, aural and communicative potential of the novel to which Apollinaire aspired. This technique is developed to its logical conclusion by including extra-formal leitmotifs or excerpts within the structures of the novel. Both these techniques were discussed above, but will be examined again here in view of their original and experimental nature in relation to the modernist and post-modernist novel which they both reinforce and anticipate.

Verbal self-awareness is both limiting and liberating. As Mayakovsky wrote:

Voyez -  
 Je suis cloué au papier  
 avec les clous des mots.<sup>4</sup>

It derives in part from a bilingual cultural tradition:

Pour les bilingues, se traduire devrait être facile? Non pas! On se regarde comme dans une glace, on s'y cherche, ne reconnaît pas son reflet.<sup>5</sup>

The autonomous or "self-valuable" word was a preoccupation of the Formalist tradition. It should be noted that if the Futurists and Formalists celebrated non-

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4. *La flûte des vertèbres*, quoted in *Mayakovsky: vers et proses*, p.127.)

5. *La Mise en mots*, p.76.



referential verbal structures, the experiment was short-lived. While their original premises intended to reject the symbolist tradition, their later publications point to an awareness of an inevitable, somewhat mystical correspondence between sounds. Shklovsky's statement opened the debate about the "self-valuable" word:

But the word is not a shadow. The word is a thing.<sup>6</sup>

But Mukarovsky's later formulation should be borne in mind:

Like language, art is a system of signs invested with intersubjective meanings.<sup>7</sup>

Their short-lived fascination with total abstraction soon gave way to psychological or interpretative repercussions as they recognised the subjective, deciphering process of cognition. In the visual arts, the futurist-inspired school of Suprematists recognised their experiments in abstraction and minimalism as an *extension* of realistic presentation rather than a true departure from it. This is exemplified by Malevich's famous black square. In the verbal arts, trans-sense experiments proved that by passing through language, literary abstraction was a conceptual contradiction. This recognition is recalled by Triolet as follows:

Remarquez que la moyenne des admirateurs de l'art abstrait y cherche le concret, veut y reconnaître un paysage, une figure humaine, un téléphone.<sup>8</sup>

Partir dans l'inconnu, l'inconnaissable, imaginer, rêver, deviner peut-être. Mais non, ce que l'on veut et peut imaginer, toujours ressemble au connu, au directement connaissable.<sup>9</sup>

Refusing to renounce hope of communication before this terrifying vision of incommunicability and misunderstanding, Triolet, rather like Sartre, turns from sterile philosophising to extract an artistic strength from the writer-written word-receiver dialectic:

Même maintenant, je préfère la série noire à Wittgenstein.<sup>10</sup>

As Mireille Gouaux has said of Triolet's linguistic awareness:

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6. Shklovsky, *O Teorii Prozy*, p.51.

7. Quoted by Erlich in *Russian Formalism*, p.203.

8. *La Mise en mots*, p.65.

9. *La Mise en mots*, p.69.

10. Sartre, *Les Mots*, p.66.



Faisant de sa limite une esthétique, ("j'écris en clair, déclare-t-elle, dans l'immédiat déchiffrable"), Elsa cherche ailleurs les moyens de suggérer l'arrière-texte, le rêve, voire d'être créateur au sens plein du terme.<sup>11</sup>

The imprecise semantic potential of words can be instrumental in the liberating process of artistic creativity. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, Sartre recognised the ambiguity of the verbal sign used within the artistic space:

L'ambiguïté du signe implique qu'on puisse à son gré le traverser comme une vitre vers sa réalité et le considérer comme un objet.<sup>12</sup>

Triplet echoes Sartre when she recognises the unpredictable meanings and interpretations of the written word in verbal art. She anticipates Genette, for example in *Fiction ou diction*, when she foregrounds the symbolism inherent in every "juxtaposition de mots, de sons, de sens":

Même les simples interdictions manquent de netteté: à *l'Interdit de fumer*, on a pu ajouter, *même une Gitane*. Voilà qui est plus clair.<sup>13</sup>

Reminiscent of *La Nausée* and *Steppenwolf*, the artistic impulse is situated as an intuition which replaces a previous hypertrophied doubt and scepticism. The character cannot define his revelation, but only recognises it instinctively as such.

The illustration and discussion of linguistic symbolism is centred on the character of Madeleine in *Ecoutez-voir*. She functions as a verbal entity and a self-consciously literary device. Her existence on the borders of the mimetic and the autotelic is narrated in the scene witnessed by the "Homme de Florence". To reinforce their roles as *personnages actants* in the novel, their function as acting characters receives a textual illustration. Madeleine and her "personnage épisodique" spend the day wandering in the dizzying baroque galleries of Louis II's castle in Krumlov. Characters and readers alike lose all sense of the limits of the *trompe l'oeil* paintings, Madeleine's real and fantasy existence and the historical reality of the castle:

La vie en trompe l'oeil. Je suis gagné par l'optique de Madeleine, non, par sa méfiance, son incredulité. Il me semblait que j'étais tout près d'elle, mais

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11. "Ecoutez-voir ou la peinture dans les mots", p.24.

12. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* p.19.

13. *La Mise en mots*, p.122.



quand je voulais la saisir, il me fallait me rendre à l'évidence: elle était ailleurs. L'adresse diabolique d'un artiste-peintre m'avait fait croire à sa présence.

(...)

Un arlequin me rit au nez. Je devais être ridicule.(pp.52-4)

The ambiguity is derived in part from the particular confrontation of "real" illustrations and written text, in part from the exploitation of the conventional structures of novelistic reality. Art forms not traditionally included within the structures of the novel evoke a new potential for interpretation and connotation. This can be seen when, during the same evening, the "Homme de Florence" and Madeleine attend an open-air theatrical performance in the castle's amphitheatre. The imprecise divisions of art, and a reality external to art, are narrated in the shifting scenes presented now before the castle, now at the edge of the forest, now in the theatre itself.

The thematic and textual inversion of reality and realism is illustrated when the two "personnages actants" from the novel escape from their role of reluctant spectators watching a play. The shifting lights that situate different scenes in different places mean that during their escape Madeleine and her companion risk being caught by the spot-lights and revealed as performers on the stage, disturbing one "fête du faux-semblant" by representing another:

Frôlant le bord de la scène-allée, nous avons fui, pris de panique à l'idée qu'un mouvement des projecteurs pourrait nous révéler aux spectateurs!(p.58)

The realities of other art-forms and the diegetic reality of the text overlap, just as the roles even of performer and spectator become imprecise. We are reminded of Borges's troubling suggestion:

De telles inventions suggèrent que si les personnages d'une fiction peuvent être lecteurs ou spectateurs, nous, leurs lecteurs ou spectateurs, pouvons être des personnages fictifs.<sup>14</sup>

The Matrushka technique is maintained where the theatrical references are not just limited to events narrated diegetically but they become an aspect of the novel's

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14. Quoted by Genette in *Figures III*, p.245.



architectonics. For example, we find the novel's characters lost in the wings of the novel's metaphorical stage:

Je suis le parfait spectateur, m'a dit Pierrot, je n'ai pas le droit d'intervenir, de couvrir ce corps nu et brisé, l'emporter. Et je n'ai même pas le droit de savoir où elle est...Le spectacle se termine ici, les coulisses sont interdites au public.(p.139)

The effect is consolidated by the theatricality of the novel's ending.

The experiment in "theatre-novel" form is applied in *Ecoutez-voir* and discussed in *La Mise en mots*. Triolet points to the vast differences in reception between verbal *read* art and verbal *spoken* art. She emphasises the double-sided reception of stage action as reality of the theatre and the reality of representation. On stage, we are accustomed to watching an actor interpreting the role of a particular character, both believing in the performance to follow it closely, but not being troubled by what is logically supernatural when a character killed during the performance returns to the stage to take a bow at the end. We receive fictional characters differently, demanding that they do not play a role but they *are* their role. Triolet's original use of "theatrical" devices for her characters's functions can be compared to the innovations of novelistic space envisaged by Butor:

Lorsque nous tournons les pages d'un livre, considérons les illustrations, lisons les signes, un petit théâtre se développe; inversement nous pouvons imaginer une littérature d'un type nouveau qui serait le théâtre comme livre, ou des oeuvres formées de mots, dont le livre ne serait qu'un élément.<sup>15</sup>

Triolet's intention here is not to compare the different receptions of art but to experiment with the amplification of aesthetic potential by bringing two or more forms that are traditionally independent to augment the possibilities of expression and the frontiers of the novel. Madeleine's self-consciously paper existence is an example of the defamiliarising techniques brought from the stage to the novel as a logical consequence of Triolet's formal experiments. The modern age, according to Triolet, needs new imaginative potential to accompany its move into the future. If

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15. *Répertoire III*, p.402.



the novel should be not only a spot-light on the present but also a guiding light into the future, then the novel should adapt and question its own traditions and forms:

Le roman ne se contente pas de courir parallèlement aux événements, c'est un art-fiction, une réalité à venir. (vol.35, p.81)

An awareness of and impatience for the future can be associated with the reproductions of perspective that recur throughout the text (eight images) and the preoccupation with racing (eight images). In *Bonsoir, Thérèse*, Jean and Anne accelerate along the open roads trying to catch up with the perspective. This textual interest in the traditional presentation of space and time has developed by the later novels into an iconographic, thematic and structural investigation. The desire to expand novelistic space-time with visual images and modern artistic media is well-illustrated by the juxtaposition of text and the still from Godard's film, *Week-End*, (page 288). The symbolism of the images of perspective from Renaissance etchings to modern photographs are brought together in this picture with the structural montage of fictional and cinematographic techniques.

Cinematographic references and experimentation are further developed in *Ecoutez-voir* by Austin who regrets that:

un voleur de metteur en scène a déjà fait le film qui dit qu'il n'y a rien à dire.(p.95)

He is referring obliquely here to Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. The latter used a tennis game at the end of his film to demonstrate that all language games had become sophisticated, even fatuous because the ball, the guarantee of communication between subject and object, had been lost. Austin twice refers explicitly to the film in Chapter 14:

Pourquoi n'est-ce pas moi qui ai fait *Blow-Up*, moi, qui suis son héros...(p.240)

Austin's impatience and dissatisfaction hints at a way out of the hypertrophised, traditional art forms:

Tout ce que j'aurais aimé écrire est déjà écrit. Tous les beaux tableaux sont déjà peints. La gamme n'a que huit notes.(p.95)



There is hope for unexplored originality, however, when the separate domains of art and music are combined, so that their independent structures can defamiliarise and vastly expand their expressive potential. Triolet's texts move beyond the verbal, referential inclusion of other art-forms, to quote from other media in their original form. It is thus from the insufficiencies of language, or the restrictive traditions of one art, ("La gamme n'a que huit notes"), that iconographic representations come to amplify the message. In this way, from a montage of two separate messages, a third signifying potential is born.

### The Monistic Ensemble

The transition from the verbal representation of graphic or theatrical arts to their inclusion as elements in the text is achieved in *Ecoutez-voir*. The notion of an image expressing a sentiment or conflation of intuitions beyond words is introduced in *L'Ame*. Here Christo wishes to capture in a work of art Nathalie's particular human and saintly qualities which he fails to define verbally. The juxtaposition of text and image derives logically from this preoccupation with saying more than the fragile network of treacherous words can express:

C'est à bout d'arguments verbaux que j'ai vu l'image me faire signe, elle accourait au-devant de moi. Non pas l'image verbale, mais bel et bien l'image picturale, le tableau.<sup>16</sup>

Triolet is thus extending the "Collages" technique that I have already studied in her texts, derived from Shklovsky's factography:

Je me mis à écrire autant avec des images qu'avec des mots: c'étaient mes citations picturales.<sup>17</sup>

Letters, song-lines, verses of poetry and advertising slogans amplified her texts from *Camouflages* onwards, providing constant reinforcement of the realistic-imaginative dialectic. Photographs, paintings and film stills are the original way by which Triolet expands her novels' architectonics with "éléments préfabriqués". At

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16. *La Mise en mots*, p.107.

17. *La Mise en mots*, p.108.



the same time, they illustrate her awareness of the mythical and recurrent structures which underlie all communication:

l'image m'est un élément tout à fait préfabriqué comme le mot.<sup>18</sup>

In his novel *L'Immortalité*, Kundera studies the derivations and past meanings of words and pictures so that our communication is always amplified by anterior expression. He develops this notion into a "pret-à-porter" system of communication that is pertinent to words, images and gestures:

Le geste n'a nullement dévoilé une essence de la dame, on devrait plutôt dire que la dame m'a révélé le charme d'un geste. Car on ne peut considérer un geste ni comme la propriété d'un individu, ni comme sa création (nul n'étant en mesure de créer un geste propre, entièrement original et n'appartenant qu'à soi), ni même comme son instrument; le contraire est vrai: ce sont les gestes qui se servent de nous; nous sommes leurs instruments, leurs marionnettes, leurs incarnations.<sup>19</sup>

As writers, both Triolet and Kundera are preoccupied with the renewal of artistic expression. Kundera's originality can be seen in his use of novelistic essays, rotating architectonics and verbal divestment<sup>20</sup>. Triolet's approach extends to the montage of text and non-text, word and picture. Both depend on contrapuntal and polyphonic structures that combine forms whilst maintaining their difference. The conceptual originality, therefore, of a "texte imagé" is the juxtaposing of two artistic media:

L'illustration vient une fois le texte écrit, mon image apparaît en même temps que l'écriture.<sup>21</sup>

This difference is essential, for as Kundera explains in the essay "Dialogue on the art of composition":

...to my mind, the conditions *sine qua non* for counterpoint in the novel are, first: the equality of the various "lines", and second: the indivisibility of the whole.<sup>22</sup>

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18. *La Mise en mots*, p.108.

19. *L'Immortalité*, p.18.

20. See *The Art of the Novel*, particularly the "Dialogue on the Art of Composition", pp.71-96.

21. *La Mise en mots*, p.110.

22. *The Art of the Novel*, p.76.



There would be nothing outstanding about illustrating one's text - the technique has existed particularly since nineteenth-century printing refinements permitted a writer to include pictures that would help the reader see what was being expressed. In this case, the pictures were entirely secondary to the text and the text could equally well exist without them. Such an illustrating effect is seen in the *Oeuvres Croisées* where, for the republication of their texts, Triolet and Aragon selected designs and pictures to complement texts that had first been conceived as strictly verbal unities. Critical assessments of *Ecoutez-voir* have considered the visual effects equally decorative where the images are subsumed by the text which does nothing more than describe them verbally. Nancy Jane Breed for example refers to the "failure of the artistic experiment."<sup>23</sup>

However, *Ecoutez-voir* demonstrates the visual dimension of printed language which has always been presumed neutral. The imaged text offers an iconographic visualisation in which pictures do not describe characters or the setting but give a symbolic "condensé" of the text. The image may be seen as a metaphor for the word, or vice versa. The effect has a great impact on the temporal limitations of the traditional novel discussed earlier. The linear process of reading is broken and interwoven with the spatial discovery of images. The superposing of text and illustration on page 186, for example, is particularly effective in fragmenting the regular pattern of reading from left to right, top to bottom. Rather, the broadcasting aerial offers a centralising effect on the page towards which the eye is drawn; few lines of typescript do not require the eye to register both the circular image of the aerial and the linear movement of the text. Vertical and horizontal planes are presented simultaneously. The writer enters a new spatio-temporal dimension because, as Triolet says in *La Mise en Mots*, "l'immobilité muette de l'image arrête le temps".<sup>24</sup>

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23. *Feminine Self-Consciousness and Masculine Referent*, p.180.

24. *La Mise en mots*, p.107.



I have already shown how the novelist's attempts to defamiliarise time verbally have confirmed the importance of time and accentuated the problems of recording it. Here, in the application of a technique first launched for its signifying originality in cinematography by Eisenstein, original form and expression are achieved by the combination of separate forms. Eisenstein's theory, which he defined as the "monistic ensemble", is based on the techniques he identified in the Japanese Kabuki theatre. This mixed media technique combined theatre arts with song, chants, dance and powerful musical rhythms. The monism of Eisenstein's technique is vital, for it refuses to subordinate one form to another but conflates two or more forms so that a third, intellectual meaning is derived from the confrontation of two separate media:

combining shots that are "depictive", single in meaning, neutral in context into intellectual contexts and series.<sup>25</sup>

Eisenstein then applied this technique to his film montage, making montage a creative and not a technical activity. Pictures or images were juxtaposed without comments or transitions so that a signifying, additional meaning was born in the eye of the spectator. Attention has been drawn already to the montage techniques applied by Triolet in her assembling of paragraphs and themes. This technique is now extended to the montage between visual and verbal images. The whole effect can be understood as a particularly resonant application of defamiliarisation for it puts into question the habitual categories of thought and reception. Traditionally, art makes an appeal to a particular sense through a particular medium. The technique of defamiliarisation is amplified by allowing the novel's form to question the very traditions of novelistic form, so as to express non-verbal experiences and the spatio-temporal subtleties of the age. Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*, built on the movement of a string quartet, achieves a comparable effect. Similarly, in *The Joke*, dramatic movement is juxtaposed with Slave folk songs, quoted on the stave in the text. The structure, emotional tension and the concept of destiny in *The*

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25. *Film Form*, p.30.



*Unbearable Lightness of Being* is built around Beethoven's last string quartet and the leitmotif "*Muss es sein?*".

In his cinematographic research, Barthes points to the potential application of Eisenstein's methods in textual construction, indicating the limited use made of photomontage in popular fictional genres. The potential expansion of novelistic frontiers by the use of image-montage is similarly suggested by Calvino:

The comic genre (...) has given our century an entirely new way of story telling, with the combined use of drawing and writing (or, better, graphic invention linked to spoken and onomatopoeic language). (...) A true study of the genre as an art in itself has still to see the light.<sup>26</sup>

It is regrettable that Barthes's essay, "Le Troisième sens", written two years after *Ecoutez-voir*, points to a novelistic technique that Triolet had already investigated but of which Barthes would seem to be unaware. There is at present no evidence that Barthes had read Triolet's text. Jakobson, however, whose involvement with the Formalists had grounded him in cinematic avant-garde techniques, was also a close friend of Triolet. He recognises her textual and theoretical foresight:

Tension dialectique entre création et traduction contrainte des mots dérangeurs, immolation volontaire du poète, logique déboussolée du roman, collision du discours avec image et musique.<sup>27</sup>

Barthes's critical reaction to Eisenstein, however, is enlightening for its clear, theoretical discussion of a technique that *Ecoutez-voir* had explored fictionally. Barthes demonstrates how montage, from a meeting of communicative and symbolic levels, gives way to "the third meaning" which is the level of significance and individual cognition. It exists beyond the limits of language:

Le sens obtus est un signifiant sans signifié; d'où la difficulté à le nommer.<sup>28</sup>

This intellectual multiplication of the signifier's permutational play is defined by Eisenstein as the vertical reading, a definition which recalls Triolet's metatextual self-analysis:

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26. *The Literature Machine*, p.80.

27. Telegram sent by Jakobson on hearing of Triolet's death, 1971.

28. "Le Troisième sens", *Cahiers du cinéma*, no.185, p.16.



Certains de ses faits et gestes, sentiments et pensées, apparaissent tout seuls, comme dans les mots croisés d'avoir trouvé certains mots à l'horizontale, en fait apparaître d'autres à la verticale, sans qu'on ait à les chercher.<sup>29</sup>

This third meaning is defined by Barthes as the "passage du langage à la signifiante". He maintained that this meaning could be located theoretically, but that it could not be described. There is a firm resemblance between this extra-verbal truth that cannot be accurately defined but which we know instinctively to be there and Triolet's desire to define the essence of art. It is perhaps also here that we can situate the "soul" of the work, the element sought by Christo before he decided to express that which he could not define verbally by creating his "tableau vivant". The difference is that Barthes located this third meaning, "l'acte fondateur du filmique même"<sup>30</sup>, within a specifically visual context limited to the cinematographic arts, whereas Triolet's novels consciously strive by thematic, structural and formal innovation to indicate the third meaning inherent in perhaps all cognition.

The structural originality of *Ecoutez-voir* is reminiscent of the theoretical discussions lead by Butor who described the vertical and horizontal planes of the novel. He also drew attention to the untapped resources of typographical variation and the visual dimensions of the page. An interesting rapprochement of his and Triolet's separate aesthetic preoccupations can be seen in his dream of a theatre-novel:

J'ai de plus en plus envie d'organiser des images, des sons, avec les mots. A cet égard d'ailleurs on peut considérer le livre comme un petit théâtre.<sup>31</sup>

The iconographic role of images also reinforces the mythological background to creativity in which the present creative moment is visually related to past aesthetic experiences. It points as much to the origins of communication and imagination as it does to the positive, vital embracing of the perspectives of the future.

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29. *La Mise en mots*, p.38.

30. "Le Troisième sens", p.65.

31. Butor, *Répertoire II*, p.297.



The use of "éléments préfabriqués" demonstrates the dialectical process of creation, at once desperately individual and yet shot through with canonised works, influences and themes echoing through the artist's mind:

Les oeuvres des grands maîtres m'accompagnent dans la vie pas à pas  
comme une autre réalité.

(Author's preface, vol.36, p.9)

Anaïs Nin, who was also attracted by collage and photo-montage in fictional structures, voices this imprecise division between past works and present individuality through her protagonist Varda in *Collages*:

Je suis un artiste. Je ne cherche que des fragments, des restes, que je  
coordonne d'une manière différente.<sup>32</sup>

The artist is thus aware of being part of an already speaking voice, one which s/he joins and that will continue speaking when the current voice fades. Foucault describes this effect at the beginning of his *l'Ordre du discours*. We are again reminded of the immense, if incalculable, aesthetic background to a creator's work, shaping the evolution of its themes and structures in each of its embryonic stages.

### **L'Art de L'Avenir**

The use of mixed media techniques to invigorate outworn traditions is brought to its inconclusive conclusion in the closing pages of *La Mise en mots*. It is interesting to note that, just as Regis died before writing his planned work "où tout aurait été véritablement faux", in which he would have attempted to say everything about the vast illusions of "le mentir-vrai", Triolet too describes her conceptualisation of the novel she would never write. The planned novel was to be called *Opéra*, perhaps the closest of all art forms to the most entirely artistic in its use of theatre arts, voice, music, generally mythological or classical stories and stylised performances. This dreamt novel would transcend its own dimensions far more wholly than did *Ecoutez-voir*. The text's visual vitality in Triolet's plans,

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32. *Collages*, p.268.



where "le texte écrit, couché, au son de la voix, se lève et marche"<sup>33</sup> again reinforces the striking parallel between her originality and Butor's creative research:

Si nous voulions faire une théorie du théâtre (ou de l'opéra, c'est tout un) il nous faut faire intervenir évidemment autour des mots l'espace visuel, parfois décor, mais aussi nous rappeler qu'il y a bien longtemps que l'homme a inventé l'écriture et que par conséquent, les mots ne sont pas seulement matière sonore mais aussi matière visible.<sup>34</sup>

The evocations of the setting, aesthetic effects and characters of Triolet's novel are presented as fantasies. But the inclination towards vastly expanding the traditional novelistic world is far-sighted, serious and potentially rewarding:

*Opéra*. Lustres, musique immense. Rêve qui veut, rêve qui peut. La baguette magique du chef d'orchestre, phalène pris dans un faisceau lumineux, êtres chantants, pantins sonores.(...)

Un roman qui s'appellerait *Opéra*. Je connais mes personnages actants: soprano, ténor, contralto...L'homme ressemble à ces voix.<sup>35</sup>

From the dreams of a vast, aesthetic novel, Triolet directs our attention towards the creativity of the future, towards the "sentiers de création" that have yet to be explored. At this point of synthesis, we may recall the deliberate ambiguity of Triolet's "art de l'à venir" and "l'art de l'avenir" with which she illustrates in the forewords to the *Oeuvres Croisées* the close interweaving she conceptualises of creating the future and creating new means of artistic expression.<sup>36</sup>

This fantasy-novel also offers another vital indication of the novel's structures. *Opéra* illustrates, even as a "roman intérieur" that will not be written, the indivisible verbal and visual unity of a text. To write *Opéra* as a modern text is not to take the "condensé" of another text so as to put it to music, in the traditional method of subordinating one genre to another:

En tirer un opéra, comme pour en faire une pièce, un film, le réduire à l'essentiel, quand l'essentiel dans le roman est aussi bien dans ce qui ne l'est pas.<sup>37</sup>

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33. *La Mise en mots*, p.114.

34. *Répertoire III*, p.390.

35. *La Mise en mots*, p.118.

36. See for example the Preface, vol.14, p.20.

37. *La Mise en mots*, p.119.



We are therefore returned to the monistic ensemble, not the engulfing of one form by another but a desire to juxtapose two individual media that will, in their confrontation, give way to a third, intellectual understanding and an original, invigorating genre. It would not suffice to describe a picture, or summarise a text to take its main features. As Tolstoy said:

If I were asked what Anna Karenina was about I would have to write the novel all over again.<sup>38</sup>

The novel is as much about its own structures and composition as it is about a certain chronicle. Themes, text and inter-texts, characters, images and prefabricated external structures are assembled in a collage which will always say more in its synergetic unity than do the individual units from which it is made.

I have analysed the synthesis of time present with time past and the aesthetic vision towards time future textually, verbally, pictorially. They figure as modern myths, illustrating the symbolic references implicit in language and the aesthetic experiences which make up our individual and collective imaginations. Triolet's innovative exploration of new paths for novelistic creation can be seen to link as equally to the past as to the future, as Aragon indicates:

Ecrire et peindre: un seul mot signifiait l'un et l'autre dans l'Ancienne Egypte.<sup>39</sup>

Triolet's exploration of new paths of expression is achieved by embracing thematically the scientific discoveries contemporary to her work - see *Le Cheval Roux*, and *L'Ame* for example. This is reinforced by formal investigation into the very fabric of her texts which has an ethical and aesthetic purpose:

...la dialectique image-texte est donc d'abord une nécessité historique et formelle, correspond à une réflexion de type idéologique sur la transformation du monde et sur la représentation formelle de cette transformation.<sup>40</sup>

In her novelistic inclination towards the future, her texts bear structurally and thematically towards a belief in the redemptive nature of art, which should

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38. Shklovsky cites Tolstoy in *O Teorii Prozy*, p.60.

39. Aragon, Préface, *Collages*, p.1.

40. Gouaux, "Ecoutez-voir, ou la peinture dans les mots", p.25.



demonstrate a perpetual belief in progress and indicate the values and humanity of a particular society. An epoch not illuminated by the value and truth of art is sterile, unproductive and destined to anonymity. As Mayakovsky wrote defiantly in *Order to the army of art*:

It's a small thing to build a locomotive:  
Wind up the wheels and off it goes.  
But if a song doesn't fill the railway station  
Then why do we have alternating current?<sup>41</sup>

Like Mayakovsky in *De Ceci* and *Les Bains*, Triolet's novels investigate the meeting of figurative space and time in a fourth dimension. It is not mystically metaphysical but represents, in the words of Mireille Gouaux, "une autre réponse à l'angoisse historique."<sup>42</sup> As Madeleine Barthélemy-Madaule explains:

La quatrième dimension de l'oeuvre d'Elsa, ce n'est pas la religion, ni la métaphysique, ni les mythes, mais c'est la grande question de l'homme sur l'homme qui véhicule les mythes, les philosophies et les religions. C'est la question portant sur un grand pays inconnu dans lequel on entre lentement et qui sera tout autre qu'on ne peut l'imaginer au départ.<sup>43</sup>

Triolet's texts refuse both the complacency of present satisfaction and the sterility of despair. Rejecting the lure of contentment or happy endings with intransigence, she maintains that mankind can progress towards a fairer, more civilised future, but not towards some predestined and facile paradise:

Oui, je suis très chatouilleuse quant à l'emploi du mot bonheur et au concept bonheur. C'est cette promesse du bonheur dans le socialisme ou, à courte échéance, après une grève victorieuse, ce mensonge doré, qui m'irrite, plus grave que le happy end, "et ils eurent beaucoup d'enfants".<sup>44</sup>

The principled aesthetics to which she aspires mean that the artist cannot seek transient self-satisfaction in an ivory tower paying attention neither to the horrors of the mid-twentieth century nor to the scientific progress beyond. As the essay, "Un romantisme lunaire" demonstrates, rhetorical questioning and investigation underlie her works:

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41. Quoted by Jakobson in *Major Soviet Writers*, p.30.

42. Gouaux, "Écoutez-voir ou la peinture dans les mots", p.29.

43. "La Quatrième dimension" *Europe*, no.506, June 1971. p.135.

44. Letter to Maxwell Adereth, 4th May, 1969.



Quel sera l'homme de l'avenir proche, lointain?<sup>45</sup>

Her novels are myths of discovery and faith in this unknown "à venir", where her quests do not lead to a closure, but are question marks that point beyond. Faced with a modern "démence humaine", her art accelerates to keep up with and overtake the epoch of its creation. The recurrent images of travelling, distance, speed and space all illustrate this preoccupation that has as artistic and historical prototypes the wanderers and travellers of the past. The direction of her quest, however, is captured in the reproduction of Klee's perspective, (page 89) or the medieval etching, (page 16) where the illusion of perspective hurls the onlooker towards a scarcely perceptible door at the end of the space ahead. The fictional illusion that Triolet inaugurates is thus not merely preoccupied with literary introversion, nor does it provide facile reflections of the present but it looks towards and embraces the art beyond, in an original conceptualisation of science/fiction.

L'illusion romanesque (qui) ne renvoie pas à notre ère mais à l'art et au delà.<sup>46</sup>

The frequently evoked myths of flight, best illustrated by Blanche Hauteville as a modern Icarus, point to the escape from the labyrinths of modern thought. It will be recalled that, in the metaphor of the bell-jar discussed earlier, Triolet remarked that in an unquenchable desire for clarity, "je me remets à m'agiter, à me briser les ailes et la tête contre la paroi transparente". The metaphors of flight and imprisonment are given their full meaning in *Ecoutez-Voir*. The bird image is found most significantly in the recurring print of the veiled woman (pp. 73, 143, 343) holding two doves in her hands. This detail figures metonymically at the end of *Ecoutez-voir*. The veiled woman has become synonymous with Madeleine - anonymous, eroded by the work of time, and perpetually moving. The bird is, as Mireille Gouaux reminds us:

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45. "Un Romantisme lunaire", *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, p.379.

46. Gouaux, "Ecoutez-voir", p.30.



le symbole icarien d'élévation au-dessus du cauchemar labyrinthique.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, the experimental and original character Madeleine is a metaphor for the new novel that is being explored and discussed within the work. Madeleine and the flight symbolised by the bird are the signs of escape from the labyrinth imprisoning the artist, the character and the epoch according to the illustrations I have given during this study. Flight in the Icarus legend is not merely the means of escape from the labyrinth of Minos but a scientific achievement bringing man closer to the gods. According to Triolet's use of the legend, therefore, the work of art is a means of escape from a pitiless present as well as a creative urge towards the future.

The literary work completed, a new space is achieved in which human imagination and potential are liberated. Such a faith is reminiscent of the challenge delivered in Hans Arp's poem, *Geländer*, where he maintained that the person who can bear the shock of being thrown into the abyss may then grow wings and learn to fly.

The future Triolet moves towards is indefinable and unimaginable but an artistic vision is maintained as truer and more desirable than the reality of the present. As Triolet says in *La Mise en mots*, "Créer, c'est aussi difficile qu'être libre". It is also as important. This study has underlined the conceptual association of human freedom and artistic creation. Triolet emphasises firmly the relative nature of freedom, because, as she asserted in the preface to *Personne ne m'aime*:

Rien n'est jamais accompli, ni tout à fait, ni pour toujours.(vol.9, p.58)

The writer (in this case) thus has an eternally renewable task of constructing and illustrating a belief in human freedom. Vercors defined this as follows:

Je considère l'art comme une des définitions mêmes de l'être humain. Pour moi, l'art c'est bel et bien une "déclaration d'indépendance", celle de l'humanité par rapport à l'univers.<sup>48</sup>

In the tradition of Chekhov and of Apollinaire, Triolet maintains that, like science, art should not be pessimistic about its powers nor excessively modest about its

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47. Gouaux, "Ecoutez-Voir", p.32.

48. "A quoi servez-vous?" *La Nouvelle critique*, no.120, p.107.



future capacity. This perpetual leitmotif within her texts is illustrated in *L'Âme*, the last in the series *L'Âge de Nylon*:

Trois éléments dominant dans ce roman, bras dessus, bras dessous comme l'air, l'eau et la terre: ce sont la science, l'art et l'âme. Ou, plutôt, la quête de l'âme dans la science à venir et dans l'art qu'il soit passé, présent ou futur.<sup>49</sup>

The writer's commitment becomes a contemporary equivalent of Pascal's wager. If she is mistaken, the writer along with her pessimistic, annihilating society are destined for extinction. She has lost nothing as an individual, but history and civilisation lose everything. If correct, however, art may still save us from the sorcerer's apprentice-style monstrosities maintained by power structures and fear. The artist's role as a herald in an era, "où les jeux divins de la vie et de l'imagination donneront carrière à une activité poétique toute nouvelle"<sup>50</sup>, may yet be realised. The present moral which we can extract from the social and historical waifs who wander desolately through Triolet's novels is the perspective ahead suggested by their meanderings. Similarly, in the closing image of Chaplin's *Modern Times*, the only two live spirits in a world of automatons are a tramp and an orphan setting out along the road ahead. The perspective is engulfed by the evocation of distance, but their journey rejects the total negation of the present by moving beyond. The artist is not blindly confident of his or her role and significance, but refuses all the same to be defeated. The artistic hope is reinforced by the images of movement, of becoming rather than being.

La tentative d'Elsa Triolet va donc, au niveau modeste d'un seul roman, dans le sens de l'élaboration d'un nouveau système de signes destinés à dépasser les modalités spécifiques (signes écrits ou picturaux hérités du passé) pour ressaisir dans une nouvelle trame imaginaire la richesse, la diversité, voire l'éclatement de la vie humaine au XXe siècle.<sup>51</sup>

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49. "Postface à l'âge de nylon", O.C. vol.32, p.262.

50. Apollinaire, "L'Esprit Nouveau", p.XIV.

51. Gouaux, "Écoutez-voir", p.33.



## Conclusion

Je te vois qui me regardes avec ironie et tout ce que <sup>je</sup> dis te semble manquer de sérieux...mais quand je passe à côté de la forêt que j'ai sauvée, que j'ai plantée de mes mains, je deviens conscient du fait que le climat aussi est un peu entre mes mains et que, si, dans mille ans, l'homme doit être heureux, cela sera un peu de ma faute à moi aussi.<sup>1</sup>

According to Bergson in his work, *L'Intuition philosophique*, the great writer has only one thing to say, and his entire oeuvre amounts to persistent efforts, by circling around his subject, to express this central insight. Leaving aside the qualitative judgement of "great", I have sought in this study to demonstrate the aptness of Bergson's notion when applied to Triolet's literary works. Her novelistic world can indeed be seen as the literary equivalent of the musical theme and variations. The metaphor is as fitting for the individual novels as it is for her work as a whole. In keeping with the form of theme and variations, linear development is expanded by cyclical expansion. If the novels' structure, material and introversion demonstrate increasing maturity and craft, the original theme of the artist in exile is maintained and developed. It returns in the novelistic equivalent of the musical recapitulation.

The first novelistic sketches of the mostly autobiographical *Fraise-des-bois*, the travel journal *A Tahiti* and the searing, wistful novel-in-exile *Camouflages* introduce Triolet's theme of the artist and his/her creative activity and social utility. *Bonsoir, Thérèse* can be read not only as the first novel in French, but also as an already mature study of solitude and aesthetic experience. It develops the impulse towards creativity precisely as a means of escaping alienation and the absence of communication. The inner form of theme and variations is most clearly

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1. Tchekhov, *L'Oncle Vania*, Acte I. p.96.



visible in this novel, where the work itself is divided into coherent self-sufficient parts that are assembled in a montage structure to complement each other. The final novel, *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* displays the same use of a clearly visible inner structure. Here, the novel and its internal narrator reminisce about aspects of the work and aspects of the artist's former aesthetic activity which is also constantly referring back to the preceding works. The musical, or architectonic unity is striking.

We should also recall the vast thematic and structural unity interweaving Triolet-as-artist, constantly seeking new expression for her works and examining her artistic materials, with the artist-protagonists portrayed in their creative struggles seeking to understand and fulfil their creative destinies. The novels and the entire "oeuvre" can be read as quests: the search for new material, new means of expression and the search for an identity. And these aspects of her novelistic quest are drawn together in a perspective towards the future. Neither text, materials nor form are examined and deconstructed for the purely aesthetic aim of novelty or narcissism. Rather, formal experimentation and the textually recurrent figures of artists are aimed at bringing creativity to the forefront of progress and the ethical shaping of humankind. The artist-protagonist is not just a creative adventurer, but, in the tradition of Ford Madox Ford and Conrad's hero in *The Inheritors*, is seeking originality in terms of structure and perspective to bring the novel into keeping with modernity. "Comment exprimer l'inexprimable?", "rêver à une lune nouvelle" are the preoccupations of author and characters and the creative activities of both. And these preoccupations recall Apollinaire for whom the artist's imagination is both entirely liberated and experimental. It is also an indication of the potential of the future, which should be richer and more principled:

Je dirai plus, les fables pour la plupart s'étant réalisées et au delà, c'est au poète d'en imaginer de nouvelles que les inventeurs puissent à leur tour réaliser. L'esprit nouveau exige qu'on se donne à ces tâches prophétiques.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Apollinaire, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, p.XIV.



Formal introversion and experimentation are means by which the artist links his/her destiny to that of Icarus: "il est Icare, il veut voler au-delà de son art, il a ce courage insensé". For example, we have seen how for Triolet, as for Butor, the structural innovations of the novel function also as aspects of its realism:

N'a-t-on pas vu ailleurs que dans le roman de très grands artistes essayer de mettre à l'unisson leur art avec une nouvelle conception du monde?<sup>3</sup>

The technical research within the novel reflects as much on its aesthetic possibilities as on its social function:

L'invention formelle dans le roman bien loin de s'opposer au réalisme comme l'imagine trop souvent une critique à courte vue, est la sine qua non d'un réalisme plus poussé.(...) la littérature se met à apparaître non plus comme simple délassément ou luxe mais dans son rôle essentiel à l'intérieur du fonctionnement social et comme expérience méthodique.<sup>4</sup>

Triolet's works and her creative environment bring together the possibilities of the imagination and realism, of creative freedom and social ethics. Eichenbaum brings the reader's attention to:

les sources culturelles à partir desquelles elle-même travaille, associant dans une synthèse très lucide les expériences de l'avant-garde russe à celles de l'avant-garde française au vingtième siècle.<sup>5</sup>

The theme which is constantly reworked is not just that of artist, but foreigner and artist. Whilst conceived and destined for the French public, Triolet's novels refer persistently back to Russia. This is not in setting but in cultural tradition and poetics. The Formalists' innovations and research are surely an essential aspect of her structures, just as the poetic imagination of her creative tradition recalls Mayakovsky, Chekhov and Gogol. The only contemporary tradition within which we may unhesitatingly place her is that of the bi-cultural, bilingual writers such as Nabokov, Troyat, Kundera and Romain Gary. Their approach to reality and imagination is shaped differently; for them, every traditional delineation of home, nation and the mother-tongue has been overthrown by their uprooting and adoption

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3. Appendix I, vol.14, p.192

4. *Répertoire I*, p.11.

5. Eichenbaum, *Théorie de la littérature*, p.575.



into an unfamiliar, often inimical language, cultural tradition and social environment. It is interesting to note that Triolet, who rarely associated her writing with any particular tradition or genre, herself drew attention to the linguistic misfits who have adopted and been adopted by a new cultural tradition and linguistic apparatus in the "Preface au mal du pays". (vol.27, p.15). The significance of their linguistic otherness and exile is striking. For each of these writers, we can consider their writing to be an expression of their isolation. And yet writing does not solve this loneliness; it can only fix it and perhaps give it meaning.

The Russian "authors of the author" help explain the otherwise contradictory aspects of Triolet's attraction to socialist realism, although she remained a writer of the imagination, fantasy and the interior monologue. As we have seen throughout, the wistful, reflective principles of Chekhov or the burlesque, phantasmagoric realism of Gogol, or the fervent crusading poetics of Mayakovsky offered her a creative formation where the imagination was an essential aspect of reality and where artists were unashamedly aware of the ethical demands of their profession and the social conditions exterior to their writings. Triolet declares and maintains her faith in art, in the artist, in the hope for a fairer, kinder future inspired by the morality of art. She asserts the ultimate truth of the artistic impulse when every other received idea is being undermined by progress, scepticism or research. Her artistic destiny is thus as picaresque as are her novels, in which her artist-protagonists are ever moving ahead, motivated only by an aesthetic aim that they know instinctively to be true whilst admitting that they cannot define it. The movement of the texts, the picaresque characters and the dynamic, idiosyncratic structures of the novels point confidently towards a future that will witness the synergy of "la science, l'art et l'âme", (vol.32, p.262). In an era where the notion of "l'âme" has long since been considered superstitious, sentimental or mystical, Triolet's novels speak out bravely, demanding that the soul which inspires the artist to refuse the stagnating present, that the soul that has accompanied mankind in the tremendous progress of civilisation, may once more



be celebrated as the creative urge which is both individually modest and collectively ambitious. It was not fortuitous that Anna Konstantinova's *Journal d'une jeune fille de Kachine* was translated by Triolet, for in her preface she brings attention to the poignant, principled aesthetics of the young writer killed in 1944. Konstantinova's words provide, perhaps, the most satisfying conclusion to this quest for artistic and human freedom:

Il faut faire de la sorte que cela ne soit pas la vie qui me fasse passer par où elle veut mais que ce soit moi qui lui fasse prendre la direction qui m'agrée. Il n'est que comme ça que j'aurai acquis le droit de m'appeler un être humain.<sup>6</sup>

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6. Anna Konstantinova, *Journal d'une jeune fille de Kachine*, p.6.



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