The Framework of La Route des Flandres

la route torse, la route sur laquelle le pied sent les pierres, la route qui retourne en arrière, c’est cela la route de l’art. Le mot rapproche le mot, le mot ressent le mot, comme la joue fait avec la joue. Les mots se disloquent, et au lieu d’un ensemble unique – mot prononcé automatiquement, jeté comme l’est une tablette de chocolat par un distributeur automatique – naît un mot-son, un mot-mouvement articulatoire.

V. Chklovski, Sur la théorie de la prose

I NARRATIVE FRAME

The dilemma facing the reader of La Route des Flandres has been succinctly described by Bernard Pingaud in an article which appeared shortly after the novel’s publication:

Ce récit qui ne distingue pas, ne se distingue pas non plus, si l’on peut dire, de lui-même. Il n’est pas vraiment situé. Il n’a pas un foyer, mais plusieurs, et semble amalgamer au moins trois discours différents: un qui serait tenu pendant l’exode, un qui daterait de la captivité, un troisième qui se déroulerait après la guerre. D’où l’égarement du lecteur; nous échouons à reconstituer l’histoire, non pas seulement parce que les interprétations y occupent plus de place que les faits, mais aussi parce qu’il n’existe pas de point fixe autour duquel ces perspectives diverses puissent s’ordonner.

The apparent chaos and confusion facing the reader of this novel defies reorganisation and recuperation. There is no fixed point for

M. Evans, Claude Simon and the Transgressions of Modern Art
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the reader surrounded by the swim of textual multiplicity. Most conventional novels include some sort of interpretative support for the reader, providing a particular angle of approach, a way of making sense out of the material at hand. The most common device is the delineation of point of view either through the authoritative presence of a narrator or, as Uspensky shows with regard to War and Peace, through the guiding influence of the narrative framework itself. The reader of La Route des Flandres, however, cannot rely on the narrator to help him 'reconstitute' an order out of the multiple interpretative possibilities suggested by the text since the narrator too is constantly, and unsuccessfully, trying to do the same. Acknowledging this 'impasse', Pingaud abandons analysis of the novel's narrative structure and turns to its thematic content for the underlying meaning or 'vérité particulière qu'elle [. . . ] doit révéler'. But the conclusion he reaches, namely that the underlying truth is the theme of time, is, to say the least, unsatisfactory. Certainly such a theme does play a part in the novel, but for the reader to be able to detach it as easily as Pingaud does would imply that despite the fact that the novel's narrative structure is indistinct, disordered, and ambiguous, its themes are, on the contrary, distinct, ordered, and unambiguous. Form and content are thus peeled apart and held to be mutually independent. But is it possible to separate narrative and theme in this way? Surely, if the one is riddled with doubt and complexity so too is the other? Furthermore, it seems perverse that the critic should eschew the problems relating to La Route des Flandres's narrative framework when they are so emphatically foregrounded throughout the novel. The reader, in fact, has no choice but to approach the novel by way of its narrative structure, though in order to make any headway he must first shed all pretensions at being detective or excavator digging for truths.

As Pingaud says, there is not one strand of narrative discourse in Simon's novel but three. The reader is made conscious of these three distinct (yet inextricably entangled) discursive strands at their moment of birth: three moments of 'éclat de narration' when the time and place from which the narration seems to be constructed are radically displaced. Thus, the novel begins in the first person narrative:

Il tenait une lettre à la main, il leva les yeux me regarda puis de nouveau la lettre puis de nouveau moi, derrière lui je pouvais