STRUCTURAL AND LINGUISTIC PATTERNS IN THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL AND ANTI-NOVEL

Ever since Plato, the corruptive influence of literature on society has been a source of divisiveness and debate. Not only philosophers have concerned themselves with this problem, however, but literary writers as well. Thus, Spain produced its Don Quixote, France its Madame Bovary, England its Northanger Abbey – all novels dealing with literature’s corruption of society. They are part of a long and varied tradition of fiction attacking fiction, and this has sometimes earned them the name of “anti-novels”. The inventor of this expression is the seventeenth-century French author, Charles Sorel. In 1633, he published a satire of literature entitled L’Anti-roman. In this reedition of a work which he had brought out six years earlier as Le Berger extravagant, Sorel exposed the weaknesses of the novels popular in his day. Sorel’s hero, Lysis, is a pastoral Don Quixote who seeks to impose on the world around him the view of life he finds in fiction, and through his failures, he is held up to ridicule. Since Sorel feared his audience might merely be entertained and not grasp the significance of his anti-novel, he explained the meaning of each of the fourteen books, or chapters, in accompanying “Remarques”. Here, he cited the novels mocked through Lysis’ imitation of them and criticized them in essay fashion.

Already in the first sentence of his “Epistre aux lecteurs”, Sorel registered his most fundamental complaint against the novel: it lacked utility.

Ceux qui aiment les Livres pleins de doctrine et d'utilité se faschent de voir que plusieurs personnes perdent leur temps dans la lecture de ces autres Livres qui leur sont fort contraires que l'on appelle des Romans . . .1

It is easy to see that this emphasis on utility would affect one’s choice of a novel’s subject matter. Sorel indeed felt that whenever a moral lesson had to be made, it would be more effectively illustrated by a historical event than by a fiction. If it was necessary to link it to an invented story, the setting should be close in time and space to the lives of the readers, so that its relevance would be obvious. Details should be accurate, contradicting neither historical accounts nor natural laws. This conception of verisimilar subject matter, highly rational and subordinated to the criterion of utility, emerges quite clearly from a reading of the Anti-roman.

Sorel’s insistence on usefulness in a novel also had formal implications, however, and these are perhaps not as readily discerned. According to Sorel, order, facilitating memory and understanding, contributed to a book’s utility, and its absence could only detract from the profit the reader gained. He vehemently opposed convoluted plot lines and the interweav-
ing of secondary tales with the main story. He thus contrasts with his contemporaries, who took pleasure in manipulating their personae to involve them in a variety of episodes. Depending on how these characters were arranged and moved about, different patterns were formed. More conventional novelists sometimes achieved diversity by leading a single hero, or a single couple, from adventure to adventure to create an essentially linear structure for their work. They often added episodes ad infinitum and were not always careful to link them to one another by probability or necessity as Aristotle had recommended. Sorel was critical of this facile approach. Lysis is clearly laughable when he announces, "je m'en vay en Forests courir diverses aventures pour amplifier la matiere", and Sorel vehemently denounced the practice in his "Remarques".

Another way in which novelists built a framework capable of holding diverse episodes was to first laterally add personae and then vertically add adventures. This results in a more complex, planar pattern, which corresponds on a structural level to Woelfflin's baroque category "painterly". Different patterns are created, for example, if various lovers are arranged in a parallel fashion, if they form a triangle or a complication thereof, or if they are part of a chain in which A loves B, B loves C, etc. This chain may close into a circle if its last link in turn loves A. The chain of lovers was much appreciated by Sorel's contemporaries, who praised it in Nicholas de Montreux's Bergeries de Juliette. When a similar pattern is formed among the disguised "river gods" entertaining the metamorphosed Lysis, the latter is not astounded, for he has seen such situations in novels and knows that they always resolve themselves. Such diverse configurations may be considered variations in form.

When authors introduced numerous characters, their adventures could form variations on a theme, with each hero or couple encountering a somewhat different set of obstacles. In the seventeenth century, and probably in all periods of history, the most common themes were love and war.

Disguise, a favorite element in seventeenth-century novels, offered a pretext for numerous variations on the theme of love. These could be called variations in kind. For example, if a youth disguises himself as girl, the result may be an erotic friendship, as in the case of Céladon-Alexis and Astrée, an episode Sorel parodied in the Berger extravagant. Or love can assume homosexual overtones when another youth falls in love with the disguised "maiden". Sorel mockingly touched on this variation when Oronte's servant Marcel pretends to court Lysis-Amarylle, and when Alcidamas falls in love with Fontenay dressed as a girl. Another variant, narcissism, is exploited in pastoral novels such as Montemayor's Diana and in Caseneuve's Caritée. Sorel spoofed it in the Anti-roman when Lysis-Amarylle and Fontenay both fall in love with their mirrored image. Contrasting with the pattern formed when love is reflected back to a narcissistic person is the one created by the outward direction and...