The novel’s main point of reference is an episode during the 1939-1945 war: the end of the Blitzkrieg, the French débâcle of May 1940, the rout of the French army in Flanders and, specifically, an attack upon a cavalry squadron when Captain de Reixach dies (a death which may or may not have been desired, an accident or a form of suicide). This episode constitutes part of the past life of one of the characters (Georges) who is also the narrator of the novel (‘‘I’’). Several years after the war, during a night spent with de Reixach’s wife, Corinne, he reflects back on these events. Other memories are mixed with them, either his own or those of other characters, comrades from his squadron such as Wack, Blum and Iglesia, the captain’s orderly. Concurrently the brief story of Georges and Corinne is unfolded, not in the past but in the present, ending with the departure of Corinne and their separation.

Briefly, the events in the novel relate to a very varied time scale and are presented in actual speech which is defined only by the present – the present of their utterance, of the narration. One can therefore see the following plan in the work: there are events which have occurred and which are presented as being definitely past. These events belong to a very extensive temporal space, from the Revolution of 1789 to some years after the 1939-1945 war. There exists in the text a narrator who describes the events with regard to a present situation and gives them their character since he is contemporaneous with the time of writing.

In outlining such a plan, one must beware, however, of two factors: primarily, of relating this novel to an image of romanesque narrative inherited from earlier novels; secondly, of integrating it into an established scheme of reading obtained from a series of texts which show the principle of generation but which cannot take account of a new principle of generation of a written text, be it poetic or literary.

Indeed, a novel is not a natural entity obeying laws which are slow to evolve, but a cultural phenomenon whose laws are such as the relationships of strength in any given general situation dictate. That is why a demonstration of the evolution of these ‘‘laws’’ or principles of generation, cannot be attempted. Nor can one rely on a reducing operation, which in spite of everything, would render Claude Simon’s novel comprehensible by applying the methods of reading and analysis applied to former novels. It is only to make one’s reading easier that the above plan has been offered, though C1. Simon makes such a method of reading materially impossible at the level of the written sentence on the page. He disturbs any system of stratification.

Let us now outline some of the main features of the novel. It is a narrative built around a narrator who occupies an unstable role alternating between ‘‘I’’ and ‘‘Georges’’. The narrator does not co-ordinate the
different elements of the novel from one single viewpoint, as in Proust. Instead he is sometimes a narrator ("I") and sometimes a character; like all the others, conceived in the same manner as they: by another narrator, external to the action.

The novel seeks a structural existence outside the development of the story; often adopting a circular construction as in many detective novels which also record a pursuit. Reality is indecipherable; it is not reorganised as the novel proceeds on its circular course. Within this structure, evocative words and images predominate and their obsessional value can, moreover, contribute to producing a structural circularity. In *La Route des Flandres* we have the recurring image of the horse, the filly and the intermingling of the images of the two de Reixachs. Here we see the discovery of an essentially linguistic reality in the novelist's art.

The narrative continually returns to the same episodes. It winds back upon itself, often passing through the same involvements, terminating by rendering itself void: "Mais l'ai-je vraiment vu ou cru le voir ou tout simplement imaginé après coup ou encore rêvé, peut-être dormais-je n'avais-je jamais cessé de dormir les yeux grands ouverts..." (p. 314).¹

The novel is a continual process of decomposition and recomposition. Decomposition in the historical defeat, decomposition of the social and military order; destruction of the meaning of words in puns, destruction of syntax, punctuation, chronology and logic. There is recomposition of reality into a different, abstract order – a mental and erotic order.

There is a struggle against death, unexpressed by memory, a search for death and, if necessary, its "creation" as in Georges' trying to know and to relate "how it was". Eroticism also has a role in this struggle against destruction, as in the episode with Corinne which is set in the present. From the opening of this scene, the memory returns of that which is not yet completely dead. Yet memory also destroys the present. The attempt to reconstruct what is past, destroys the tentative present and entails fresh decomposition.

Essentially this novel has a dualist structure in the sense of a duel. It is a combat in many senses of the word. It is a combat between two orders, on both the literal and interpretive levels.

These brief observations do not attempt a complete study of the novel, least of all to define its structure. They merely indicate some elements which contribute to its structure. It is to be understood that the structure can be fully grasped only within the dynamism of the text.

At this point, let us consider some traditional elements of the novel, those of time and characterisation. (One could also include space). The choice of these elements is justified since they form the traditional basis of the novel and not because they are fundamental to C1. Simon who, in fact, subordinates them to a material work of language. Nevertheless, it would be useful to consider them, for that aspect constitutes part of our usual reading; furthermore, because in his work Simon uses them as elements