

Mythic Structures in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages*

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The French have been called "a nation of mythoclasts," a label that can be applied to Alain Robbe-Grillet who uses myths, ancient and modern, in his novels and films. In an interview with the *Nouvel Observateur* in 1970 (part of which was subsequently reprinted as a *prière d'insérer* for *Projet pour une révolution à New York*), Robbe-Grillet commented on his use of mythology, giving it a definition more flexible than is generally accepted: "... what do the generating themes of a work represent? Or another way of putting the question: how does one choose them? As for me, I am happy to pick them out from the mythological material which surrounds me every day. When I read the gossip column or the criminal reports, when I look at the shop windows and the billboards that make up the facade of any large city, when I take a walk through the corridors of the subway, I am attacked by a host of signs which constitute the mythology of the world in which I live."² Robbe-Grillet's understanding of myth resembles that of Roland Barthes, for whom myth is above all a "mode of signification, a form."³ According to Robbe-Grillet, two possibilities lie open to the writer faced with modern myths: either reject them in the name of some more sophisticated explanation of reality; or else, as he in fact does, acknowledge their presence and recognize that they can be part of a game. He therefore will take what he wants of these myths and use them structurally and thematically not because he believes that such an extension will reinforce the myth, nor because he feels that he needs to supply the reader with a prefigurative pattern which will help the reader move through his works, but rather, with the intention of distorting the perspective of both reader and myth, thereby creating a dynamic interrelation of myth and the non-mythological.

Robbe-Grillet began his literary career by consciously overturning the humanistic concepts which had dominated fiction at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, while his writings represent both evolution and revolution, they are nonetheless bounded by the perimeters of literary genres. Mythical referents, among others, are constantly present and indeed play a dual role: they introduce the familiar, which acts as a key or textual generator; and they simultaneously deconstruct the familiar. In deconstructing myth, genre and the preconceived notions of the reader, Robbe-Grillet inverts C. S. Lewis's statement that: "In life and in art . . . we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive"⁴ and makes of the "story," or in this instance the non-story, a net that in fact entraps protagonist and reader alike.

¹ Harry Levin, *Mythology and the Modern Novel: A Study of Prefigurative Techniques* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 5.

² Guy Dumur, "Le Sadisme contre la peur," *Nouvel Observateur*, 19-25 October 1970, pp. 47-49. All translations are our own.

³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 109.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, "On Stories" in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), pp. 20-21.

Les Gommès (1953), the first published novel of this writer, like all his works, may be read on various levels. As in a palimpsest, each uncovered layer reveals a new significance while traces of the others remain, adding both depth and distortion. *Les Gommès*, because it is the most obviously mythological in content of Robbe-Grillet's work, is the most interesting to study in the context of myth. More specifically, the story of Oedipus in both the historical and Jungian senses takes on a different perspective when viewed in the new network of sense created by the author.

Robbe-Grillet's use of the Oedipus myth in *Les Gommès* is not a convenient prefiguration which provides for the reader a simple parallel to guide him through the labyrinthine paths created by fragmented time or the lack of an omniscient narrator. Similarly, Robbe-Grillet's use of key referents in the Oedipus myth is not entirely innocent. When, for example, the drunkard accosts the protagonist Wallas with the first of his riddles, the reader, who has already been alerted to the presence of the Oedipus myth in the text, recognizes the figure of the sphinx. The first riddle, however, is not of the type we normally associate with that beast: "What is the difference between a railway-line and a bottle of white wine?"⁵ Robbe-Grillet has carefully baited the trap for the reader and now springs it, since the answer the drunkard offers is bathetic:

- The difference? The drunkard seems completely blank this time. The difference between what?
- Why, between the railway-line and the bottle!
- Ah yes...the bottle...says the other chap softly, as if he were coming back from far away. The difference...Why, it's enormous...The railway-line!...It's not the same thing at all...(p. 119)

To adopt the language of Derrida, the concept of the sphinx in *Les Gommès* is "under erasure." Thus while inviting the reader to see the correspondence, Robbe-Grillet indicates simultaneously that the correspondence is not to be seen. The title of the novel, *Les Gommès*, in addition to pointing to a Proustian-like reminiscence of a childhood he seems never to have experienced, also indicates the rubbing out of past errors. J. S. Wood⁶ has pointed out that the kind of eraser Wallas is looking for is known in French as *gomme-savon*, or "soap-eraser." In the context therefore of washing clean or erasing past faults, Wallas's search for that particular kind of eraser could be interpreted morally. Wallas, if he is Oedipus, has a sinful past to erase, but if he is not Oedipus, there is no reason to attribute such a meaning to the eraser. Another, more suggestive, possibility centers on the letters *di* which Wallas remembers seeing on an eraser of the type he is looking for. While they are obviously the central two letters of *Oedipe*, when reversed they form *id*, the unconscious part of Wallas's character upon which he is unable to focus. Wallas's search for the murderer turns out to be a search for himself, an interpretation confirmed on the level of plot when he unintentionally murders the victim of the supposed original murder which never took place—a victim who, it is suggested, could be his father.

This presence/absence of the Oedipus myth serves to structure *Les Gommès* in a dynamic manner. The framework of *Les Gommès*—Prologue, five chapters, Epilogue—is an obvious analogue of Greek tragedy. Yet the framework is empty since the progression of dramatic action in traditional statements of the myth follows a chronological order, whereas in *Les Gommès* it is precisely the confusion of chronological order which is presented. The framework of classical tragedy, like the

⁵ A. Robbe-Grillet, *Les Gommès* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1953), p. 118. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

⁶ *Les Gommès*, ed. J. S. Wood (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 8.

Oedipus myth itself (to the extent that one can speak of myth separate from its principal embodiment), operates in ironic opposition to the story of Wallas, because, as a prime example of predestined action, it is static; Oedipus's future is already contained in his past, and is thus closed. Wallas's future, on the other hand, is open and closed. If ultimately he kills the person whose murder he is supposed to be investigating, it is by accident that it happens, a consequence not of predestination but of the combination of freedom and situation. Convolution of plot and theme, where beginning and ending are the same, where like a Klein bottle in which interior and exterior surfaces are confused, this plot in double helix fashion winds upon itself to erase both beginning and ending. Wallas's situation is presented dramatically:

... as he walks he gradually unrolls the uninterrupted line of his own passing, not a series of illogical, unrelated images, but a smooth tape into which each element is immediately inserted, even the most fortuitous ones, even those which may at first appear absurd, or threatening, or anachronistic, or illusory; all of them place themselves one next to the other, and the fabric lengthens, without a gap or an overlap, at the steady speed of his step. For it really is he who moves forward; this movement belongs to *his* body, not to the backdrop that some stagehand is to wind past; Wallas can follow in his limbs the way his joints work, the alternating contractions of his muscles, and he is the one who governs the rhythm and the length of his stride. (p. 52)

The backdrop that is rolled past by the stagehand is an apt image of the predestined Oedipus. Oedipus mimes walking, staying on one spot, while the scenery is moved along behind him. His movement in time and space is illusory, separated as he is from any notion of human history. His fate, conceived by the gods, exists in eternity; all his actions are transformed into gesture. Wallas, on the other hand, constructs his own *durée*, directing his own path through the labyrinth of the unnamed city. While he may not have chosen his situation (he has been sent by the Bureau of Investigations), he initiates his own movements constantly asking for descriptions of the street plan of the neighborhood he is in, but following his own itinerary even at the risk of losing himself or of retracing his footsteps. For the narrator, and therefore for the reader, Wallas's temporal order is eminently human. The twenty-four hours between the two gunshots may have unfolded "in reality" according to the order of hours and minutes; but for the reader, Wallas's time is structured poetically, since the order of incidents is prompted not by reason but by intuition.

The human/inhuman opposition of the temporal order is repeated in a more subtle way in the two types of object to be found in *Les Gommés*: those which are presented geometrically or clinically in a pristine present, and those which are described according to the history of their making or of their use. The first description of the buildings in the business district runs as follows:

Severe façades, carefully laid rows of small, dark red bricks, solid, monotonous, patient: one penny profit made by the "Resinous Wood Company," one penny made by "Louis Schwob, Wood Exporter," "Mark and Lengler" or by the "Borex Corporation." Wood exports, resinous wood, industrial wood, wood for export, resinous wood exports, the district is wholly given over to this commerce; thousands of acres of pine forests piled brick on brick to protect the fat ledgers. All the houses are constructed on the same model: five steps lead to a varnished door, set in, with on each side black plaques bearing the name of the company in gold lettering; two windows on the left, one on the right and above four stories of similar windows. (pp. 47-48)

The geometric exactness leaves no room for the human—the process that

transforms forests into buildings seems to accomplish itself. Nothing particular distinguishes one building from another. The buildings have no history; nothing has happened to them. Employees may enter any one of them at random to carry out their mechanical work.

Similar geometric, impersonal qualities characterize the erasers that Wallas is offered as he searches for the particular brand that will suit him: "She rummages in one of the drawers and places before him a yellow eraser, longer than it is wide, with bevelled edges, a regular item for schoolchildren" (p. 65). By comparison, the eraser he is looking for is personalized; it has a history:

Wallas takes on again the job of describing what he is looking for: a soft, light, crumbly eraser which, when you press hard, does not lose its shape but reduces to dust; an eraser one can cut easily and whose cut surface is shiny and smooth, like mother-of-pearl. He has seen one, several months earlier, at the house of a friend who didn't know where it had come from. He thought he would be able to get a similar one without any problem, but he has been searching ever since in vain. It was in the form of a yellowish cube, two or three centimeters long with the edges slightly rounded—perhaps as the result of use. The maker's name was printed on one of the sides, but was too worn to be legible any longer: you could make out only the two central letters "di": there must be at least two letters in front and after. (p. 132)

Here the simple human/inhuman polarity invoked by critics such as Jean Alter⁷ is inadequate. Although the objects in the world of Robbe-Grillet are man-made (natural objects rarely figure) in most cases the history of their making and of their use has been omitted. These sterilized objects then present themselves to the protagonist (and the reader) as alien and alienating. The process is grasped intuitively by Wallas who purchases ready-made erasers while maintaining an ideal of the unattainable eraser which will already have its history of use. Wallas's search for that particular eraser may therefore be seen as a rejection of the ahistorical and alienating and all that it involves, including the traditional concept of myth as a necessary, chronological unfolding of plot. Instead he searches for an object which will embody the values of human memory, the past actions of real human beings.

The intricate network of relationships that Robbe-Grillet has established between myth and the modern text has ramifications that cannot be fully explored here. If superficially the Oedipus myth is indicated by only too obvious signs, this is not the only mythological element present in *Les Gommages*, or indeed in the author's works as a whole. Both the Theseus legend and its Jungian counterpart recur as does that of Narcissus, with its implied theme of self. However, it is clear from this brief analysis of Robbe-Grillet's use of myth in *Les Gommages* that the traditional attack of inhumanism or *chosisme* that is levelled at Robbe-Grillet is not justified. At the level of plot and detail, he is careful to indicate that it is the individual, integrated into a unique history and a world of personally appropriated objects, that forms the goal the reader is to seek. The mythical and the objectively historical, the geometric and the dehumanized constitute the forces which, without and within, threaten to eradicate the human. By introducing the element of play, the manipulation of text into the modern novel, Alain Robbe-Grillet invites the reader to invent and reconstruct text, genre, and, perhaps, self.

⁷ Jean Alter, *La Vision du monde d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1966), especially pp. 11-17.