

# 1. FICTION TODAY OR THE PURSUIT OF NON-KNOWLEDGE

*Reality, whether approached imaginatively, or empirically remains a surface, hermetic. Imagination, applied to what is absent, is exercised in a vacuum and cannot tolerate the limits of the real*

—Samuel Beckett

TO BEGIN: some thoughts, pieces of thoughts—for one never knows where one's thoughts originate, and when these thoughts merge with those of others, where one's language begins and where it converges with that of others within the dialogue all of us entertain with ourselves and with others.

1. In the beginning was not **MIMESIS** (the art of imitation), but the necessity to achieve **MIMESIS**.
2. Artistic activity begins when man finds himself face to face with the visible world as with something immensely enigmatical. In the creation of a work of art, man engages in a struggle with Nature not for his physical but for his mental existence.
3. The reality of imagination is more real than reality without imagination, and besides reality as such has never really interested anyone, it is and has always been a form of disenchantment. What makes reality fascinating is the imaginary catastrophe that hides behind it.
4. Contemporary works of fiction are often experienced with a certain anxiety, not because they threaten to extinguish the novel or the short story as recognizable genres, but because they challenge the traditional bases of both cultural and aesthetic judgment. Literature has most often been accepted as culturally significant to the extent that it

represents the external world, either through the depiction of a socio/historical situation, or through the verbalization of psychological states. Much of contemporary fiction does not relate the reader directly to the external world (*reality*), nor does it provide the reader with a sense of lived experience (*truth*), instead contemporary fiction dwells on the circumstances of its own possibilities, on the conventions of narrative, and on the openness of language to multiple meanings, contradictions, paradoxes, and irony.

In other words, at the center of the discussion (or perhaps one should say, the controversy) which has been going on now for more than four decades about **NEW** (innovative/experimental) **FICTION** versus **OLD** (traditional/realistic) **FICTION** is the problem of **REPRESENTATION**, that is to say the relationship of fiction to reality and life: **MIMESIS**.

As soon as a work of fiction refuses deliberately **TO REPRESENT** the world (*to mirror reality*), or refuses **TO EXPRESS** the innerself of man (*to mirror the soul*), it is immediately considered a failure, quickly labeled experimental, and therefore declared irrelevant, useless, boring, unreadable, and of course unmarketable.

According to the traditional view of fiction, there lies at the base of a text (a novel, a story), like an irreducible foundation, an established meaning (**A SOMETHING-TO-BE-SAID**) constituted even before the work is completed. This preexisting meaning affects two domains: the **SELF** and the **WORLD**.

The manifestation of this established meaning is thus divided into two parallel ideas: the aspects of the self are expressed, the aspects of the world are represented. Although still dominant today in much of literature, this concept of a text, with its two key notions of expression and representation, is highly inconsistent.

It rose to its height in a precise historical period: the nineteenth century—an era too recent for the still-innumerable believers of the **EXPRESSION/REPRESENTATION DOCTRINE** to see how they fit into a long and obsolete tradition, but already an era too distant for its believers to have maintained any freshness of vision.

As we learned in our schoolbooks, two literary movements dominated the nineteenth century: **ROMANTICISM** dealt with expression, **REAL-**

ISM with representation. To oppose these two movements, as it is too often done in literature courses, in term-papers, dissertations, and manuals of literary history, is to hide the fact that Romanticism and Realism are really two faces of the same coin. Both subordinate the literary text to an already established meaning present in the world even before the poem or the novel is written. It is not by chance that Victor Hugo's poems which were called "*mirrors of the soul*" find a parallel in Balzac's novels which he himself called "*mirrors that one drags along the road of reality*." [The sarcasm here is not meant to demean the greatness and the relevance of Balzac's novels or Victor Hugo's poems—these writers lived and wrote in the nineteenth century; we live and write in the twentieth century, in fact almost in the twenty-first century. Our relation to the world (however real or unreal it may be) has undergone radical changes].

This expression/representation doctrine is, of course, still with us, or at least it was the dominant and valid view of the literary act until the end of the **EXISTENTIALIST ERA** (sometime at the beginning of the 1950s). It is only with the advent of what has been called New Fiction, Antifiction, Metafiction, Postmodern Fiction, or what I prefer to call Surfiction, that this view began to be questioned, challenged, undermined, and even rejected.

In fact, one can consider the New Fiction that begins to take shape in the middle of the 1950s and which is still being written today in many parts of the world, as fitting into the **POST-EXISTENTIALIST ERA**, suggesting thereby that this New Fiction (*Nouveau Roman*, it was called in France in the 50s) turned its back on Reality, Life, and Man, or at least on the notion that fiction should only express or represent Reality, Life, and Man.

In order to understand how the New Fiction functions, and why it turned away from its own tradition, it is necessary to return for a moment to that **EXISTENTIALIST ERA**—that period which immediately preceded, traversed, and followed World War II—and examine its literary vision.

In 1947, Jean-Paul Sartre raised a crucial question for anyone seriously involved in literature as a creator, a critic, or simply as a student. He asked: **What is Literature?** (*Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*) Not only a question, but a lengthy essay which served first as an introduction to *Les*

*Temps Modernes* (the literary journal Jean-Paul Sartre launched in 1947), and which subsequently became the volume entitled *Situations II*. At the center of this essay Sartre argued the question of literary commitment—**engagement**.

The whole problematic of the *Nouveau Roman* in France during the 1950s, but also of all literary activities since World War II anywhere in the world, can only be postulated in function of Sartre's fundamental concept of literary commitment—what he called *la littérature engagée*.

What did Sartre propose?

1. An optimistic and rationalistic conception of literary activities.
2. The book as a means of communication.
3. Literature as *une prise de position*—a stance on all moral, social, and political questions.
4. The writer as participating in the shaping of history.
5. Writing as a form of liberation, a force that liberates others from moral, social, and political oppression.

This is certainly a most noble set of propositions. It means that the writer can function within this set of rules only if he participates in history in the sense of a universal event relating to individual freedom. Therefore, the act of writing is accomplished within the narrow space of a relative possibility. The writer fulfills the essential demands of his function and of his art only when he unmask our world—that world which is but an immense mechanism of injustices.

Since the writer cannot escape his time, he must embrace it. Literature, here and now, prepares the social and socialistic revolution [*one must remember that Sartre was writing at the time from a Marxist point of view*]. Literature, he went on to argue, becomes a conquest of total freedom for everyone. It prepares the freedom of the future.

These are indeed beautiful thoughts, and yet, in spite of their impact at the time, in spite of all the debates around them, the literature (and especially fiction) that followed these pronouncements, in France particularly, but everywhere else as well, did not respect Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas.

Instead of getting involved with the **CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE** and the **CRISIS OF CONSCIOUSNESS** which underline Sartre's proposal,

the literature of the last forty-five years concerned itself with itself, with literature, with the crisis of literature, with the crisis of language and of communication, with the crisis of knowledge, and not with social and political problems—except for a few rare cases in specific places and situations (in Germany, for instance, at least for a decade or so following World War II, in South Africa, or in certain Latin American countries). Everywhere else, the novel per se—that is to say the New Fiction—turned its back on Jean-Paul Sartre and the Existentialist vision.

In fact, that New Fiction [*poetry, of course, had already done so more than a century ago when it was declared useless by the Bourgeoisie*] moved from a moral and ethical purpose to an aesthetic and formalistic level to tell us, to show us, to repeat endlessly, that writers write simply to reveal the impossibility of writing in a postmodern era.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Robert Pinget, Georges Perec, Claude Simon, Nathalie Sarraute, and many others (including the great Samuel Beckett) in France; John Barth, John Hawkes, William Gass, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Ronald Sukenick, Walter Abish, and many others (including myself, I suppose), in the United States; but also Italo Calvino, Julio Cortazar, Jorge Luis Borges, Severo Sarduy, Jürgen Becker, Peter Handke, B. S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, and many others all over the world (the Western World), seemed to be more concerned with the problems of writing their books, of letting the difficulties of writing fiction transpire in the fiction itself, rather than commit themselves to the problems of Man and of the injustices of society.

But this is not new. This deliberate refusal to confront social consciousness in favor of the crisis of literature goes way back to the beginning of the century: to Marcel Proust, certainly, in fiction, and to Mallarmé, in poetry. Proust who wrote a fifteen volume novel (over three thousand pages) to ask himself what it meant to write a novel; Mallarmé who, in questioning the act of writing poetry, dismantled conventional prosody and brought poetry to an impasse of self-negation from which it has not been able to extricate itself. However, Proust and his contemporaries managed to escape the failure implicit in their undertaking, whereas the new novelists seem to make of failure an occasion, or, as Samuel Beckett so well exemplified in his work, to reveal that to be a writer is to be willing to admit the inevitability of failure.

But the fact that failure is an undeniable aspect of contemporary art had already been stated, quite forcefully and movingly, in 1923, by a young, unknown French poet in a series of letters he wrote to Jacques Rivière, the editor of a French magazine (*La Nouvelle Revue Française*) who had rejected some of his poems. I mean, of course, Antonin Artaud whose poems had been refused by Jacques Rivière. The correspondence between Artaud and Rivière remains an important set of documents concerning the crisis of literature in the twentieth century.

Artaud had written in one of his poems:

All communications are cut  
in front  
behind  
all around  
and the last ties which still cling to man must be cut  
we are without roots

And in one of the letters to Jacques Rivière he states: "I suffer from a frightening sickness of the mind. My thoughts abandon me—from the simple fact of thinking to the exterior fact of materializing thoughts into words, there is something that destroys my thoughts, something that prevents me from being what I could be, and which leaves me . . . in suspense."

Suddenly literature becomes the explanation of why the writer cannot write, why he constantly confronts the failure of expression and communication, why he can no longer represent the world faithfully and truthfully.

This is indeed the dilemma which many writers encountered throughout the first half of the twentieth century, especially those who were considered avant-garde: James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, André Gide, Thomas Mann, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and Jean-Paul Sartre himself. Even though these writers wanted to affirm human dignity, they were forced to do so at times in a somewhat fragmented and seemingly incoherent style. However, these writers, and many others too, starting with Proust, managed to transfer their dilemma to their characters, and not to the writing itself, as is the case in much of the New Fiction.

It is Edouard, the fictitious novelist of André Gide's *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*) who confronts the crisis of writing and as such becomes a pathetic, almost tragic figure, while Gide, the real novelist, pretends playfully to have relinquished his responsibility toward the novel and its characters. It is Philip Quarles, in Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, who struggles with the creation and failure of fiction while the real author laughs at him. And there are similar writers-protagonists in novels by Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Louis-Ferdinand Céline who confront the failure of their own fictitious world. Even Roquentin, in Sartre's *La Nausée*, eventually abandons out of despair the book he is writing.

But if Antonin Artaud expressed, in a kind of lucid madness, the writer's dilemma, if his own works, which he called "these incredible rags," reveal the obstacles, denounce the limits, pinpoint the lacks, expose the inadequacies of language, they do so with such lucidity, that ultimately Artaud found in failure a reason to go on writing. In other words, like many of his contemporaries, he pursued his work with clairvoyance in the most opaque region of imagination.

Nevertheless, from Proust to Beckett, there is a feeling that something is wrong with literature, something is wrong with the act of expressing. "There is no communication," writes Beckett in 1930 in his monograph on Proust, "because there are no vehicles of communication." And even Sartre points to this crisis of communication when he writes at the beginning of his 1947 essay:

*There has been a crisis of rhetoric, then a crisis of language. Most writers have now resigned themselves to being mere nightingales. Most writers now insist that the secret goal of all literature is the destruction of language, and to reach this goal one merely needs to speak to say nothing.*

Sartre, of course, is being sarcastic here, but this statement almost reads like a manifesto for the New Fiction. However, in spite of all the anguish, of all the anxiety of literature in the first half of the twentieth century in facing up to its crisis, it is the New Fiction (and to some extent the New Theater which received the unfortunate name of THEATER OF THE ABSURD) which made the most homogeneous effort to demystify and expose the problem, and destroy those social and cultural reflexes which kept literature blind to its own crisis.



How can the writer, then, in the light of what I have just stated, confront the human condition? How can the writer today cope with his subject? That is to say reality, Man, and social injustices. He can either follow Sartre's suggestion and become a social worker of literature, and simply write political pamphlets [or make speeches standing on top of a garbage can, as Sartre himself did in 1968, during the failed student uprising]; or else he can stop writing and become a politician [mayor of New York City, as Norman Mailer once tried], or Minister of Cultural Affairs [as André Malraux did in order to give Paris a face-lift], or flirt with the possibility of becoming a member of the government [as Günter Grass repeatedly attempted for the past forty years of so]. Or else, the writer confronts the real problem, the crisis of literature today, at the risk of losing his audience, and of locking himself into pure formalism.

Baffled by the world in which he lives, the writer is plunged into a state of anguish—intellectual anguish—because he does not comprehend that world any more, or rather because the more he knows about the world the less it makes sense. The writer knows nothing or comprehends nothing because there is nothing more to know or comprehend, or rather because there is too much to know and comprehend. In any event, absolute knowledge, like absolute truth, no longer exists. This does not mean, however, that the contemporary writer has become a nihilist, as many antagonistic critics of the New Fiction have claimed. Nihilism implies that there is nothing, and that's it. Whereas in our present state of intellectual anguish we realize that there is either too much to know, hence the confusion, or nothing more to know, hence the impossibility and futility of writing in the same old forms, but this is no cause for despair. In the impossibility of literature today, the writer also discovers the necessity of going on with literature, not simply to affirm a knowledge which is constantly slipping away, but to make of literature an act of survival.

Since the Greeks, literature has constituted itself as the vehicle of knowledge in the form of apologies, commentaries, amplifications on other texts, decorations or explanations of knowledge. In other words, literature was an affirmation of faith, of certitude in knowledge. Literature was in fact knowledge, and therefore:

*Most works of fiction achieved coherence and meaningfulness through a logical accumulation of facts about specific situations and, more or less, credible characters. In the process of recording, or gradually revealing*



*mental and physical experiences, organized in an aesthetic and ethical form, these works progressed toward a definite goal—the revelation of knowledge. To read a novel was to learn something about the world and about man.*

This statement is quoted from *Journey to Chaos* [a book I published in 1965, devoted to the fiction of Samuel Beckett], in which I go on saying that “Beckett’s novels seem to progress in exactly the opposite direction, retracting knowledge, canceling knowledge, dragging us slowly and painfully toward chaos and meaninglessness.”

This is also the case with most works of contemporary fiction known as avant-garde or experimental. The more pages we accumulate to the left as we read a novel, let’s say by Alain Robbe-Grillet [*Jealousy*, for instance] or Walter Abish [*Alphabetical Africa*], the less we seem to know. As we read we encounter repetition after repetition, the text circles upon itself, cancels itself, and instead of moving toward a resolution or a conclusion, it seems to stumble relentlessly toward a gap at the center of the book, toward a GREAT HOLE. Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* also leads us toward deliberate confusion and chaos. There are many such contemporary novels that make a shamble of traditional epistemology, and do so with effrontery and even playfulness, as for instance my own novel *Take It or Leave It*.

Therefore, the question can be asked: can there be a literature that refuses to represent the world or to express the inner-self of man? The entire oeuvre of Samuel Beckett is but that. Molloy (that grandiose figure of postmodern fiction, in Beckett’s novel by that title) seems to be speaking for contemporary writers when he says:

*For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters into the soul of the incurious seeker.*

Today’s New Fiction seeks to avoid knowledge deliberately, particularly the kind of knowledge that is received, approved, determined by conventions. In order to succeed (paradoxically one might say) in this **pursuit of non-knowledge**, the New Fiction invents its own reality, cuts itself off from referential points with the external world. The New Fiction affirms its own autonomy by exposing its own lies: it tells stories that openly claim to be invented, to be false, inauthentic; it dismisses

absolute knowledge and what passes for reality; it even states, defiantly, that reality as such does not exist, that the idea of reality is an imposture.

Ronald Sukenick, one of the leading experimental fictioneers in the United States, has one of his characters (himself a novelist) state in a collection of stories appropriately entitled *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*:

*Fiction constitutes a way of looking at the world. Therefore I will begin by considering how the world looks in what I think we may now begin to call the contemporary post-realistic novel. Realistic fiction presupposes chronological time as the medium of a plotted narrative, an irreducible individual psyche as the subject of its characterization, and, above all, the ultimate concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description. In the world of post-realism, however, all of these absolutes have become absolutely problematic.*

*The contemporary writer—the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is part—is forced to start from scratch: reality does not exist, time does not exist, personality does not exist.*

What replaces knowledge of the world and of man is the act of searching (researching even) within the fiction itself for the implications of what it means to write fiction. This becomes an act of self-reflection, and therefore fiction becomes the metaphor of its own narrative progress. It establishes itself as it writes itself. In other words, fiction now becomes a continual probing of its own medium, but a probing that cancels, erases, abolishes whatever it discovers, whatever it formulates as it is performed.

In his novel entitled *Out*, Ronald Sukenick [not the real author, but the mythical author-protagonist by that name] states: "I want to write a novel that changes like a cloud as it goes along." In my own novel *Take It or Leave It*, the narrator whose name is Federman replies to Sukenick: "I want to write a novel that cancels itself as it goes along."

These two statements suggest a kind of writing which negates whatever transitory conclusions it makes, and in fact both novels illustrate their own system of self-cancellation, and playfully acknowledge their denial of absolute knowledge—*Out* by a process of diminution and disap-

pearance, that of the count-down; *Take It or Leave It* by a process of digression and erasure, described in the novel as **the leapfrog technique**.

To some extent these novels function like scientific research whereby one experiment after another abolishes the truths of yesterday. And it is true that more and more we have come to recognize that modern art cancels itself as it is created. The Tinguely machine is set in motion in order to destroy itself in front of the viewers. The white canvas of Abstract Expressionism pretends to deny its own existence. Avant-garde music abolishes itself into discordance or silence. Concrete poetry empties itself of meaning, while New Fiction writes itself into nonsense and non-knowledge, or to play on the title of a Beckett text: fiction seeks LESSNESSness.

Modern Art and New Fiction reveal that we exist in a temporary situation, surrounded by temporary landscapes. Faced with this transitory aspect of life and of the world, literature confronts its own impossibility. But since writers go on writing (fiction or poetry) in spite of this impossibility, it can also be said that literature, nonetheless, continues to search for new possibilities. It searches, within itself, for its subject, because the subject is no longer outside the work of art, it is no longer simply Nature or Man.

As a result we now have poems of poetry, theater of theater, novels of novel. For instance, the poem/explication of John Ashbery and Francis Ponge; the play-within-the-play of Jean Genet; the novel in spiral [*en abîme*] that circles around its own interrogations of John Barth, Walter Abish, Michel Butor, Julio Cortazar. But going even further, novels are written without characters (George Chambers, Maurice Roche, Georges Perec), and even without pronominal persons (Philippe Sollers, Samuel Beckett, Raymond Federman). There now exists a literature that appropriates objects rather than inscribe subjects; a literature that plays tricks on its readers (Harry Matthews, Vladimir Nabokov, Italo Calvino); a literature that empties itself of all the old pretensions, postures and impositions; a literature that seems exhausted and yet refuses to die—a LITERATURE OF EXHAUSTION, as John Barth called it in his 1968 seminal essay.

This crisis, however, did not reveal itself in our time with the advent of the New Fiction. It began to be felt in the middle of the nineteenth cen-

ture—first as an existential crisis and then as an epistemological crisis. All the great thinkers and philosophers since the middle of the last century tried to offer means of solving the crisis—means of giving a sense of stability and continuity, and even a sense of permanence to a world that was falling apart: Darwin with the theory of evolution; the Positivists such as Ernest Renan and Auguste Comte with their affirmation of facts; Henri Bergson with the notion of intuitive thought based on movement and duration; Albert Einstein with his theory of relativity; Bertrand Russell with logical atomism; the Phenomenologists with their insistence on beingness; and closer to us the Existentialists with their idea that existence precedes essence. Nietzsche was perhaps the only thinker to admit a rupture, and to proclaim a fragmentation of the world and of man's vision of the world.

Many artists and writers too attempted to preserve that vision of the world as a continuous, stable, and fixed succession of events. Realism affirmed logical and sequential continuity of experience, and Naturalism went even as far as demonstrating how man is predetermined by heredity, environment, and climate. However, in some cases, the great artists and writers of the end of the last century and of the twentieth century used this crisis as a source of inspiration. Consequently, fragmentation, incoherence, discontinuity, montage, collage, nonsense, chance happening, automatism, abstraction, stream of consciousness, and so on, became the governing elements of great art in the twentieth century.

Painting, through Impressionism, Cubism, and Constructivism blurred the lines of the real, and eventually reached total abstraction, that is to say the total erasing of reality. In poetry, symbolist poets such as Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Mallarmé (at least in France) dismantled conventional forms and poetic language, and after them the Dadaists, the Futurists, the Surrealists, and the Imagists, forced the entire logic of discursive language to fall apart. In fiction the progress (or perhaps one should say the process) was slower, because realism (the great imposture of illusionism) held fiction captive, except in a novel such as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* which outrageously blurred meaning by dislocating words and syntax to become a gigantic verbal edifice of unreadability.

In other words, at the same time as the world becomes more and more unintelligible, artists, poets, novelists realize that the real world is per-

haps somewhere else—AILLEURS says the French poet Henri Michaux in a book by that title. And even if the world is not ELSEWHERE, it is a world no longer to be known, no longer to be expressed or represented, but to be imagined, to be invented anew.

The real world is now to be found in language, but not in the conventional, syntactical discourse that connected fiction to reality—the known world, the coherent, continuous, expressible world where, supposedly, words and things stuck to each other. On the contrary, the real world is now inside language, and can only be recreated by language, or what Rimbaud called *l'alchimie du verbe*. In our present world, words and things—*LES MOTS ET LES CHOSES*, as Michel Foucault so well demonstrated—no longer stick to each other, because language too is an autonomous reality.

Of course, not everyone is willing to accept this new conception of THE WORLD WITHIN THE WORD (as William Gass proposes in his collection of essays by that title), not all writers are willing to recognize a world without a preexisting meaning—a world of non-knowledge. The Positivists (and they are still very much present among us) want to stabilize knowledge, and consequently stabilize language at the same time. But this is a false premise. Logical Positivism wants to make sense out of the world, but faced with the limits of reality, it sets limits to language. “The limits of my world,” wrote Wittgenstein, “are the limits of my language. What cannot be said cannot have meaning.” Wittgenstein’s statement is obviously meant as an anti-metaphysical proposition, but nonetheless it rationalizes language.

The New Fiction, on the contrary, rather than accepting the limitations of the possible, proposes no limits for language into the impossible, even if that language becomes contradictory or irrational. Indeed, the language of the New Fiction reaches beyond the rational, where the real and the imaginary, past and future, conscious and subconscious, and even life and death are no longer dichotomous. The New Fiction no longer opposes what is communicable to what is not communicable, what makes sense to what does not make sense, for there is as much value in making nonsense as there is in making sense. It is only a matter of direction.

Many characters in the New Fiction—or what I prefer to call the WORD-BEINGS of fiction—exist beyond reality as we know it, beyond life even, in a kind of absurd post-life condition, and in a totally illogical tempo-

rality and spatiality, free of all contradictions. As they wander in this liberated time and space (in novels such as *Cosmicomics* and *T/Zero*, by Calvino, or *How It Is* and *The Lost Ones*, by Beckett), these characters no longer need to rely on reason or memory to govern their activities since they exist only as beings made of words—the words of their fiction.

The impossible becomes possible in the New Fiction because language escapes analytical logic. It is a language which accepts and even indulges in contradictions; a language that plays with repetitions, permutations, neologisms, puns; a language that dislocates conventional syntax while designing a new typography, and in so doing renders the world even more unintelligible.

How, then, can the contemporary writer be *engagé*—socially and politically committed—since to be *engagé*, in the old Sartrean sense, there must be an intelligible and recognizable world, a world of stable and accepted values? To a great extent, the reason why Sartre's idea of a literary commitment failed is because he wanted all writers to agree on a system of moral, social, and political values, therefore denying the possibility of exploration and innovation into other systems. However, the one aspect of Sartre's thought that remains valid today is that of freedom, but a freedom which is not strictly and necessarily inclined socially, politically, or morally. It is above all, for today's writers, a linguistic freedom—a freedom of speech, one might say—a freedom to be able to say or write anything and everything, in any possible way. In this sense, this linguistic freedom to explore the impossible becomes as essential and as subversive as what Sartre proposed some forty-five years ago.

Of course, one can always argue that since there is nothing to know, then there is nothing to say. Or, as Robert Pinget once put it: "What is said is never said since one can always say it differently." And it is true that much of the New Fiction builds itself out of its own linguistic incapacity to express what cannot be expressed, and as such seems to make itself while unmaking itself. But since nothing is said, since nothing can be said, or since it can always be said differently, writers are now freed from what was denying them, what was negating them, and what was determining how they should write.

As far back as 1956, in a controversial essay entitled "A Future For the Novel," Alain Robbe-Grillet emphasized the absurdity and the impossibility of saying the world:

*The world is neither significant nor absurd. It IS, quite simply. That, in any case, is the more remarkable thing about it. And suddenly, the obviousness of this strikes us with irresistible force. All at once the whole splendid construction collapses; opening our eyes unexpectedly, we have experienced, once too often, the shock of this stubborn reality we were pretending to have mastered. Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things ARE THERE. Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, intact, neither suspiciously brilliant nor transparent. All our literature has not yet succeeded in eroding their smallest corner, in flattening their slightest curve.*

Suddenly in this impossibility of saying the world appears the incredible possibility that everything can be said now, everything is on the verge of being said **anew**. This explains why in much of New Fiction one finds long meandering sentences, delirious verbal articulations, repetitions, lists, questions without answers, factured parcels of words, blank spaces where words should have been inscribed—an entire mechanism of linguistic montage and collage. It is as though the language of fiction was taking an inventory of itself in an effort to grab things as they are, to reassess the world, but without imposing a pre-established signification upon it.

That is why much of the New Fiction often appears like a catalogue of **WHAT IS** in the world, or **HOW IT IS** (as Beckett entitled one of his novels), and no longer what we thought we **KNEW** of the world. There is, therefore, behind this project an effort of sincerity—a search for a new truth; a genuine effort to reinstate things, the world, and people in their proper place—in a purified state. That, in my opinion, is also a form of literary commitment. This extreme exigency of truth constitutes the honor and the purpose of the New Fiction at a time when literature (or what passes for literature on the best-sellers lists) remains all too often an inconsequential network of illusions that perpetuates an obsolete vision of the world.

This lucidity, this search for a new truth was already present in the work of Artaud in the form of self-consciousness which forced him to reply to those who reproached him for attaching too much importance to language:

*You don't see my thought . . . I know myself because I am my own spectator, I am Antonin Artaud's spectator . . . I am the one who has most*



*clearly felt the bewildering confusion of his language in its relation with the world. I am the one who has best marked the moment of its most intimate, imperceptible shifts.*

This questioning of one's existence and one's language becomes in the New Fiction its highest justification—if a justification is needed.

Reduced to non-sense, non-signification, non-knowledge, the world is no longer to be known or to be explained, it is to be **EXPERIENCED** as it is now recreated in the New Fiction, but no longer as an image (a realistic representation) or as an expression (vague feelings) of what we thought it was, but as a newly invented, newly discovered reality—a real fictitious reality.

