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Posted on 06 September 2017 By Alain Robbe-Grillet

5 5 I can imagine the narrator being a well made robot, carefully noticing every detail of the object it is asked to supervise, but unable to put into words the emotions of the observer, let alone the purpose of the observation I get detailed summaries of the dinner seating arrangements of the narrator s wife and a friend of the family, Franck whose wife is absent for health reasons I get perfect descriptions of her movements, and plenty of rational ideas explaining why she might be running late when she is out I see the shadows change as the sun moves across the tropical mansion, and I register the sharp contrasts as well as the the smooth transitions of light I hear every noise, and I dwell on the possible causes for those sounds, but they remain inexplicable and unexplained The only reason I know it is a jealous husband, and not a robot, writing an anxious account of his wife s behaviour is that I make a linguistic, semantic connection between the blinds, les jalousies, that are opened and closed frequently to offer various degrees of transparency into the room of the observed woman, and the other meaning of the word la jalousie , jealousy. An interesting novel experiment, displaying human anxiety by consciously omitting any reference to it, by deliberately just showing the surface under which all emotions are hidden. The novel closes in the pitch darkness of a tropical night, crickets making an intense noise that envelopes the house and the garden Nothing strange about that. And yet, it is a chilling feeling As I close the novel, I am worried But like a robot just reporting the facts, I can t find any particular reason for that, or at least none that derives from the text and not from

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my own imagination, so I will close the review with the uncertain, unsure statement that NOTHING HAPPENED The shadow of the column, though it is already very long, would have to be nearly a yard longer to reach the little round spot on the flagstones From the latter runs a thin vertical thread which increases in size as it rises from the concrete substructure It then climbs up the wooden surface, from lath to lath, growing gradually larger until it reaches the window sill But its progression is not constant the imbricated arrangement of the boards intercepts its route by a series of equidistant projections where the liquid spreads out widely before continuing its ascent On the sill itself, the paint has largely flaked off after the streak occurred, eliminating about three quarters of the red trace The quote above is representative of the type of writing you will experience if you decide to read this novella The narrator is presenting information to us through the lens of a camera, leaving out any conjecture that we instinctively use to fill in what we can't see or understand He never refers to himself or use the word I The first time that I realize that he is in the frame of the scene being described is when there are two people being observed and a third plate on the table The bus boy brings three glasses further confirming for me that the narrator is actually present and not just bloodshot eyes peering through a window blind In French Jalousie means both jealousy and blinds The narrator is the husband of a woman referred to only as A The other main character in this drama is a neighboring plantation owner named Franck His wife Christiane is only referred to, but never enters the aperture of the scene The husband, objectively is recording what he sees for us as he tries to ascertain from minimal information what exactly is going on with his wife and Franck Because what he relates to us is so devoid of emotional coloring it is as if he is an alien presence and will require human intervention to make sense of what he is seeing As you can tell from the opening quote our narrator is aware of structure like an engineer or an architect would describe a man made structure Mathematics also plays a role, especially geometry The narrator is comfortable using mathematical terms to describe what he is seeing The base supporting the table consists of a slender triple stem whose strands separate to converge again, coiling in three vertical planes through the axis of the system into three similar volutes

In the Night Garden

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Little, Big

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Dark Lord of Derkholm

The Folk Keeper

The Wood Wife

The Golem and the Jinni

whose lower whorls rest on the ground and are bound together by a ring placed a little higher on the curve He over describes what he sees down to the most insignificant detail as if he is afraid of missing some miniscule nuance that will be the key to the puzzle He watches his wife comb her hair The brush descends the length of the loose hair with a faint noise something between the sound of a breath and a crackle No sooner has it reached the bottom than it quickly rises again toward the head, where the whole surface of its bristles sinks in before gliding down over the black mass again The brush is a bone colored oval whose short hands disappears almost entirely in the hand firmly gripping it Half the hair hangs down the back, the other hand pulls the other half over one shoulder The head leans to the right, offering the hair readily to the brush Each time the latter lands at the top of its cycle behind the nape of the neck, the head leans farther to the right and then rises again with an effort, while the right hand, holding the brush moves the opposite direction The left hand, which loosely confines the hair between the wrist, the palm and the fingers, releases it for a second and then closes on it again, gathering the strands together with a firm, mechanical gesture, while the brush continues its course to the extreme tips of the hair This scene goes on for several sentences revealing nothing that gets him closer to understanding if his wife is in fact cheating on him Most men when watching their wife comb her hair, especially long hair, would find it a sensual experience His objectivity is depriving him from even seeing her as a sexually desirable creature Roland Barthes writes an introduction to this book and does such a splendid job describing the writing structure of Alain Robbe Grillet His writing has no alibis, no resonance, no depth, keeping to the surface of things, examining without emphasis, favoring no one quality at the expense of another it is as far as possible from poetry, or from poetic prose It does not explode, this language, or explore, nor it is obliged to charge upon the object and pluck from the very heart of its substance the one ambiguous name that will sum it up forever. Alain Robbe Grillet I felt this growing unease as I continued to read this book The narrator wants to know if his wife is unfaithful, but it is unclear what that will mean to him beyond knowing yet another fact Is he violent Will the emotion unexpressed suddenly become uncontrollable I do know that

Solstice Wood

Uprooted

Seventh Son

he will continue to record what he sees, relentlessly, trying to find something that will let him assemble the facts into known truths A truly unusual reading experience that I found strangely invigorating I have no qualms about reading the second novella In The Labyrinth In fact I feel like I need to read just to fully comprehend what exactly Alain Robbe Grillet is trying to tell us.

La Jalousie The word *jalousie* the French title of this novel has two meanings one being *jealousy* which was given to the English title the other being *shutters or louvres* a blind with adjustable horizontal slats for admitting light and air while excluding direct sun and rain Both French meanings are equally vital to the appreciation of the novel To some extent, they've been lost in translation. A *louvre* is a shutter or blind We look through *louvres* They selectively submit and admit the objects of the outside world to our scrutiny They limit and shape our gaze. *Louvres* and *lovers* share their etymology Just as a *louvre* might be a blind, so might a lover be blind As Shakespeare said *Love is blind, and lovers cannot see* The pretty follies that themselves commit *Centipedes* and *Louvres*

The power of this novel is in the set up, rather than the character development or the plot. We see a colonial plantation farm house in almost forensic detail There's even a plan showing the location of rooms, doors, windows, even the furniture not to forget the dark stain left by a centipede squashed on the wall of the dining room The book could almost be stage directions for a theatrical work. Robbe Grillet places the characters in this house around meal time or cocktail hour We seem to observe them through the *louvres* However, someone appears to be missing There's a vacant seat in the lounge room and an empty place at the dining table Does it belong to the husband of the female protagonist Is she even married Is the husband the omniscient third person narrator Is he the one apparently looking through the *louvres* Is he spying on his wife Does he suspect she is having an affair Is he jealous of his married neighbour Franck whose wife never appears, because their young child is at home ill Does this ostensible illicit couple even do anything that suggests a relationship Do they only seem culpable, because we as vicarious peeping toms attribute blame to them

Onset  
Repetition Robbe Grillet carefully selects both the content and the sequence of his story telling to dramatise this set up. We

read the half dozen most significant aspects of his story several times He plays with repetition But each iteration preserves the old perspective and adds a new one Thus, meaning for the reader is cumulative, a result of accretion, even if at the end of the novel, we re still not sure what really happened or what the real meaning was Utter Unconnected FragmentsRobbe Grillet gives us a clue to his intentions in the narrator s comment on a native song being sung by a road workerThe singing is at moments so little like what is ordinarily called a song, a complaint, a refrain, that the western listener is justified in wondering if something quite different is involved The sounds, despite apparent repetitions, do not seem related by any musical law There is no tune, really, no melody, no rhythm It is as if the man were content to utter unconnected fragments as an accompaniment to his work By the end of the novel, these unconnected fragments have nevertheless cohered into a discrete work.Inevitably, for a piece of metafiction, there is also a story within the story, or a novel within the novel, an African novel or at least a novel set in colonial Africa.Two characters, the ostensible lovers, comment on it, while their own story seems to assume the shape of its narrative Franck, describes the husband in the novel in a sentence that we don t hear in its entirety, that tends to take apart or take a part or break apart , break a heart , heart of darkness , or something of the kind The novel is an exercise in style, one of fragmentation and defragmentation Can the reader reassemble what the author has disassembled The narrative isn t supplied to us pre digested and easy to consume or swallow Much is left unsaid Even is filtered out by the louvres, the blinds, la jalousie It is forever oblique, raw and uncooked We have to do our own mastication We are like one of the characters peering into its meaningHe seems to be looking at something at the bottom of the little stream an animal, a reflection, a lost object The novel doesn t so much tell a story as suggest one We re permitted to sit at the table We are silent eavesdroppers on the other side of the louvres What is absent and not described is just as important as what is present and described Inference is just as important as implication The imagination supplies what the senses don t A Proliferation of PossibilitiesLike the narrative and characters of the African novel, the twists and turns of the primary story

construct a different probable outcome starting from each new supposition. Other possibilities are offered, during the course of the book, which lead to different endings. The variations are extremely numerous; the variations of these, still so. They seem to enjoy multiplying these choices, exchanging smiles, carried away by their enthusiasm, probably a little intoxicated by this proliferation. Robbe Grillet's experiments proliferate in just over 100 short pages. They're likely to appeal to fans of post modernism. Readers have to tease out the meaning, and even then we don't know whether we're right. However, if we remain open minded, tolerant and patient, we too can be intoxicated.

**view spoiler** *The Letter* *The Pretty Follies* During the novel, the female protagonist receives and drafts a response to a letter from Paris. We don't see either letter. This is a fabrication of the letter she receives. Dear Anne Marie, While I've been here, alone, in Paris, for months, desperately trying to negotiate the sale of our plantation for our substantial and mutual benefit, as I'm sure you will appreciate, I continue to hear rumours that you have been taking Negro lovers in the port. At least you're not indiscreet enough to bring them home with you. What would the servants think I had hoped that your promiscuity would end when we left Paris and assumed the burden of managing the family's banana interests. I also hoped that we could put your youthful affair with Franck behind us. Little did I suspect that he'd soon follow us with his new bride. Fortunately, he has been a true and loyal friend to me while we've been in the colony. I just wish I could say the same about you. Frankly, though it pains me to acknowledge it in writing, I can't see any future for our marriage. It's best we part company when we both return to Paris. I am only grateful we have had no children. I will deal with you fairly, so you shouldn't ever have to worry about money. I have always loved you, but now I find that this letter is the only way I can and must express my love.

**Your husband** **hide spoiler**, *Nouveau Roman* *Jalousie* 33. A key text of the nouveau roman, an unnamed all-seeing eye narrator navigates his way around an African banana plantation, obsessively describing a potential affair between Franck and A in a state of continual present or present as Tom McCarthy quotes from Joyce in his introduction. In French *jalousie* refers to a window, making it harder in English to position the narrator as a jealous husband,

crucial for decoding the book. The detailed geometrical descriptions of the house and its inhabitants form its emotional nucleus one can imagine the distraught husband poised outside taking notes and embellishing details. This makes all the action and description unreliable, giving the book its detective novel reputation. Is it possible to make sense of all the repetitions, random scene breaks, contradictory sentences, squashed centipedes, apparent car fires and form a coherent plotline? Look upon it as an IKEA self assembly novel. Right now, I only have the scaffolding erected, I still have weeks worth of drilling hammering and screwing to do before anything satisfies. A woman and her male friend sit on her porch, having drinks and discussing a novel. Her suspicious husband watches them through a nearby window's Venetian blinds. Get it? *Jalousie* jealousy and a window with slatted blinds. Let's hear it for French puns. Husband fantasizes about the friend's death. Construction workers repair a decaying bridge on the edge of the property. Woman writes a letter. Friend comes over for dinner. Friend squashes a centipede. Woman combs her hair. Crickets chirp. Repeat ad nauseam in fragmentary, temporally disjointed ways, then mix in some nonsense about geometric arrangements of banana trees and the quotidian movement of a column's shadow and that's pretty much this novel in a nutshell. Unfortunately, I lost interest in cracking this nut around the 40 page mark meaning it was quite a long, irritating journey through the remaining 60. Before I continue, let it be known that I'm absolutely in favor of cryptic, challenging, experimental literature but this novel simply bored me. Any sort of fascination I might have developed toward its circular rhythms, its enigmatic understatements, its sinister atmospheres, was quickly stifled by Robbe Grillet's mundane repetitiveness and Sahara dry prose which was probably his intention. In his essay *Objective Literature*, Roland Barthes writes "By his exclusive and tyrannical appeal to the sense of sight, Robbe Grillet undoubtedly intends the assassination of the object, at least as literature has traditionally represented it. In literature, at least, we live, without even taking the fact into account, in a world based on an organic, not a visual order. Therefore the first step of this knowing murder must be to isolate objects, to alienate them as much from their usual functions as from our own biology." Robbe Grillet allows them a merely superficial relation

to their situation in space and deprives them of all possibility of metaphor he intends nothing less than a definitive interrogation of the object, a cross examination from which all lyric impulses are rigorously excluded. Robbe Grillet's purpose is to establish the novel on the surface once you can set its inner nature, its interiority, between parentheses, then objects in space, and the circulation of men between them, are promoted to the rank of subjects. The novel becomes man's direct experience of what surrounds him without his being able to shield himself with a psychology, a metaphysics, or a psychoanalytic method in his combat with the objective world he discovers. While these quotes help me to better understand the novel on a fundamental level, I must admit that the concepts don't appeal to me at all, and are at odds with what I crave from literature. I won't pretend to have a thorough understanding of the nouveau roman or of Robbe Grillet's place in the evolution of the modern literary novel, but I have a feeling that my emotional and aesthetic sensibilities just aren't meant to be in step with the proponents and enthusiasts of the aforementioned movement and author. In fact, the only positive remark I can make regarding this book is that there are times when it does an impressive job of conjuring its lone setting. It made me feel as though I had been transported to an exotic, albeit claustrophobic and disturbing, location somewhere beyond the limits of reality. This, to me, is priceless. Having read none of his other books, my only prior experience with Robbe Grillet's work had been in the realm of cinema. *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), for which he wrote the screenplay. This unnerving, dreamlike film does share some similarities with *La Jalousie* except for the fact that I loved it. Perhaps Robbe Grillet's experiments with temporality and objectivity are better suited to the visual possibilities of filmmaking. Someday I'll give his own directorial efforts a chance. Until then, it will take some rather hefty convincing to encourage my exploration of the rest of his literary output. What the hell did I just read? This is one of the most bizarre, tense, paralyzing novellas I've ever experienced. Lying in wait within these scant few pages are the noxious suffocation and claustrophobia inherent in jealousy, manifested in an extremely original, shockingly cumulative way. The reader is insidiously imprisoned, trapped in an endless circular labyrinth of stifling, oppressive stillness. This

confinement, however, rapidly becomes a perverse pleasure. It both enervates and intoxicates; there is no desire whatsoever to leave. The consuming addiction, the taut, closed loop of suspicion, is all. While reading this was exquisitely excruciating, now that it's over, I find that I'm suffering even acutely from the withdrawal. I need to get back into that singularly airless reality, to submerge myself in that relentless inertia once more. To borrow a word from David Foster Wallace, I'm completely aghast. Often, I'm not entirely sure what to make of experimental literature, but this, I can safely say, was a masterfully meticulous mind fuck of the first order. The sensation I had upon finishing it reminds me of what I felt after viewing *Eraserhead* for the first time. Read at your own risk. You may never truly escape. But then, you probably won't want to.

Le Narrateur De Ce Récit, Un Mari Qui Surveille Sa Femme, Est Au Centre De L'Intrigue. Il Reste D'ailleurs En Scène De La Première Phrase À La Dernière, Quelquefois L'Équilibre Le Cartouche D'un C.T. Ou De L'Autre, Mais Toujours Au Premier Plan. Souvent Même Il S'y Trouve Seul. Ce Personnage N'a Pas De Nom, Pas De Visage. Il Est Un Vide Au Cœur Du Monde, Un Creux Au Milieu Des Objets. Mais, Comme Toute Ligne Part De Lui Ou S'y Termine, Ce Creux Finit Par Être Lui-même Aussi Concret, Aussi Solide, Sinon Plus L'Autre Point De Référence, C'est La Femme Du Narrateur, A, Celle Dont Les Yeux Font Se Détourner Le Regard. Elle Constitue L'Autre Pôle De L'Aimant. La Jalousie Est Une Sorte De Contrevent Qui Permet De Regarder Au Dehors Et, Pour Certaines Inclinaisons, Du Dehors Vers L'Intérieur. Mais, Lorsque Les Lames Sont Fermées, On Ne Voit Plus Rien, Dans Aucun Sens. La Jalousie Est Une Passion Pour Laquelle Rien Jamais Ne S'Efface. Chaque Vision, Même La Plus Innocente, Y Demeure Inscrite Une Fois Pour Toutes.

ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

# LA JALOUSIE

*roman*



*LES ÉDITIONS DE MINUIT*