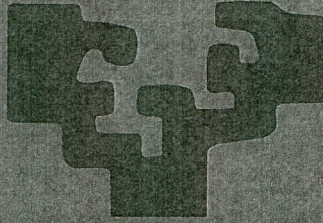


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**UNIVERSIDAD DEL PAIS VASCO
EUSKAL HERRIKO UNIBERTSITATEA**

**DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGIA INGLESA Y ALEMANA
INGLES ETA ALEMANIAR FILOLOGI SAILA**

TRANSVASES CULTURALES:

LITERATURA

CINE

TRADUCCIÓN

**Eds.: Federico Eguíluz
Raquel Merino
Vickie Olsen
Éterio Pajares**

Edita: FACULTAD DE FILOLOGIA
Dpto. Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Imprime: EVAGRAF, S. Coop. Ltda.
Alibarra, 64 - Vitoria
D. L. VI - 139 - 1994
I.S.B.N. - 84-604-9520-5
Vitoria-Gasteiz 1994

**THE LINK BETWEEN AVANT-GARDE AND POSTMODERNISM IN
WOMEN, BY PHILIPPE SOLLERS**

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The novel *Women*,¹ was a turning point in the literary career of its author, the French writer Philippe Sollers (born in 1936) who, after a brief early stage of autobiographical fiction, wrote hermetic experimental works from 1961 to 1972. The present novel, complete with humor and the recuperation of plot and characters, marks a shift in his works and is generally considered a postmodern text. But many characteristics of the novel also relate it to works of the historical avant-garde and, particularly, this essay will examine the techniques of juxtaposition and simultaneity, and the novel's complex nodal structure. Thus, *Women* can be a good example of Andreas Huyssen's theory which studies the line that connects the historical avant-garde with postmodernism.

In the last part of *The Banquet Years* (Shattuck, 1968), the classical study about the origins of the avant-garde in France, Roger Shattuck includes an essay entitled "The Art of Stillness," where he analyzes some important features of 20th century art. This chapter attempts a synthesis of what could be considered characteristic of art after the crucial period from 1885 to World War I, pointing especially to the breaking of the classical concept of unity: "The modern sensibility ... began to proceed not so much by untrammelled expansion of the unities as by a violent dislocation of them in order to test the possibility of a new coherence." (Shattuck, 332) Works of art began to coordinate and combine a variety of elements, as well as different times, places and moods. The way to put all these parts together was through juxtaposition: "setting one thing beside the other without connective. The twentieth century has addressed itself to arts of juxtaposition as opposed to earlier arts of transition". (Shattuck, 332) Instead of searching for connections, transitions and unity, art exploits fragmentation: "The work is no longer created as an organic whole but put together from fragments." (Bürger, 1984, 70)

In *Women* there is juxtaposition, which is easy to spot just in the typography of the narrative. The conventional punctuation is combined with ellipsis, which allows the narrator to jump from one item to another unrelated issue. The protagonist, an American journalist named Will who is writing a novel, mentions the technique, attributing it to his translator S.:

I show him what I've written ... He takes it away and brings me back what he's corrected and arranged ... We talk a bit ... About literary techni-

que ... I asked him if he isn't overdoing the dots in the French translation ... I know, Céline, but can someone else go that far? ... Yes, he says, anybody can do it now ... You have to move fast, and lightly. Either no punctuation at all, or that. You have to show that it's all in the voice hovering airily, dynamically, over the page. (Sollers, 1990, 73)

This matches Sollers's own theories, stated in the Program of his essay *Writing and the Experience of Limits*: "The theory, which applies only to texts is therefore, insofar as it reads them [les fait lire] in their "monumentality," the punctuation, the scansion, the spatial distribution of texts, it is by definition plural. It goes by the name logics." (Sollers, 1983 b, 8)

Juxtaposition in *Women* is not associated with the absurd or nonsense as in many of its precedents, it is not an attempt to create a non-organic work of art; it is more a matter of lack of transitions. In avant-garde works, there is often a juxtaposition of different elements, for example pieces of reality, such as fragments of a newspaper glued on the canvas in a cubist painting. These insertions lead to the need of montage, a technical procedure in film and an artistic principle in painting or literature. The only example in *Women* would be the list of treatments available at a beauty parlor, included in pages 324 and 325 and praised technically by Will: "I regard it as an example of a perfect paragraph. Linguistically and semantically." (324) What we have in *Women* is an attempt to depict simultaneity, something more complex than simple juxtaposition:

The term juxtaposition, which has served till now, finally breaks down. The "nextness" which it connotes reveals itself as an inaccurate description of the structure of the arts. Juxtaposition implies succession, even if it is at random or provoked by conflict. Exactly here one can go random astray. Had the montage form of art been concerned with a real succession of events, transitions would have been included rather than suppressed, for transitions supply the guided tour, an order of events. But since instead of transition we have contrast and conflict, the successive nature of these compositions cannot sustain itself. Ultimately it becomes apparent that the mutually conflicting elements of montage—be it movie or poem or painting—are to be conceived not successively but *simultaneously*, to converge in our minds as contemporaneous events (Shattuck, 345)

Women is composed of a superposition of elements: ideas, trips, cities, references to authors, to the novel in progress, sex scenes with women, etc. There is also a plot, but so feeble that it can be summarized in a paragraph in spite of the 559 pages of the book. Sollers does not want to simply put one thing beside the other, but wants to also imply that everything is happening at the same moment, so time and place are at the end not that important. Simultaneism is associated with a new kind of unity and coherence, a mixture between move-

ment (many different things) and stillness (happening at the same moment). In *Women*, the travels and the sex scenes, the cities and the women, are all different but, at the same time, they all look alike and seem to be the same. The progress of the action and the development of characters is no longer important, Will is the same person at the beginning and at the end of the novel, in spite of his promise of change: "At this moment Deb and Stephen [his wife and son] are arriving in New York ... Settling in ... On the East Side ... 90th Street ... I'm joining them there in three weeks' time ... I'll have my column on European politics ... We'll start a new life there." (510) But in the very last paragraph of the novel, as he is boarding his plane to New York, he is checking out a woman and as usual: "She's very good-looking ... Marvellous skin ... We're at a bit of a loss ... She pretends to be looking at something in her bag ... Smiles again ... Gray gleam ... Now boarding ... Red warning light Immediate boarding ..." (559)

Therefore, the use of juxtaposition and simultaneity links *Women* to the avant-garde period, as well as the fact that the metafiction issue calls attention to the novel's process of creation:

One of the decisive changes in the development of art that the historical avant-garde movements brought about consists of this new type of reception that the avant-gardiste work of art provokes. The recipient's attention no longer turns to a meaning of the work that might be grasped by a reading of its constituent elements, but to the principle of construction ... This kind of reception is imposed on the recipient because the element necessary within the organic work when it plays a role in constituting the meaning of the whole merely serves to flesh out structure and pattern in the avant-gardiste work. (Bürger, 81)

Accordingly, the construction and creation are more important than the meaning, the message. Again, this is related to Sollers's thinking. If he attempts to create more than a simple novel, he has to be careful with the structure, as he states in his theoretical works: "The book as 'spiritual instrument,' the book that would correspond to this necessity of the book, to its meaning, would be written by means of *transposition* and *structure*." (Sollers, 1983 b, 77) The adventures of Will, although superficially, present a great variety of settings and people, in the end more than an idea of mobility the reader has the sense that everything is the same, that the book doesn't really go forward, and nothing is so different, and this is due to the way it is written, not because of the contents. One example would be the treatment of the notion of traveling and the variety of cities where the action takes place. Due to his career as a journalist, Will travels a lot and in the short span of the narrative time he goes from one side of the world to the other, most of the time stopping in big cities. These shifts of settings do not seem to make sense unless they are considered in terms of "nodality," a theory developed by David Hayman to study James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*:

[T]he term “node” applies to a more or less clearly developed and displayed cluster of signifiers to which reference is made systematically in the course of the novel. Such clusters tend to generate, above and beyond the structure of chapters and sequences, a coherent but unhighlighted system of relationships. Beginning with the sketches, the compositional process generated many other nodal systems that together become at once a skeleton and scaffolding not only for the writer but also for the reader eager to control the mass of impressions to which he/she is being subjected. (Hayman, 1990, 37)

The same Hayman has analysed *H*, a previous novel by Sollers (1973), according to its nodal organization, and many of the things he writes about *H* can also be applied to *Women*. Both texts echo Joyce, an author well known by Sollers, and especially his work *Finnegans Wake*, which was being translated into French by him while he was writing *H*, although there is a difference between both books:

Sollers’s novel constitutes the negative for Joyce’s nodal structure by basing itself in the real and observable, the perception of which is systematically decomposed. If the text conveys the author in the process of writing himself as an integral part of the historical moment he documents, it does so by breaking up that moment and his personal interaction with it into a limited number of nodal strands. (Hayman, 1991, 239)

As *H*, *Women* also has its nodal structure based in the real and observable and the text also conveys the author at work, with all the references to the novel Will is writing. Several nodal series are interwoven to create the novel: death, sex, literature, religion, art, etc. Even the cities that Will talks about or visits constitute a system of nodes. Basically, *Women* takes place in Paris, where Will lives and works. From there he travels often to New York, and both cities appear in contrast many times, as well as other places. On the first page the narrator promises a sort of travelogue account: “I’m writing the Memoirs of a traveler the like of whom has never been seen before and who’ll reveal the secrets of the ages.” (3) There are quick references to cities on almost every page of the novel, but very few descriptions. There is more emphasis on the idea of motion, of going from one place to the other than in the settings themselves: “I pack my case ... I’m going away ... Can’t get a taxi on the telephone ... Someone rings up ... No! No! Boris ... NO! ‘So have you read my last editorial? Terrific, Eh?’ ‘Absolutely—but I’m sorry, I have a plane to catch ...’ ‘What? You’re going away? Again? What’s got into you?’ ‘This country bores me...’ ‘Pooh, its the same everywhere ...’ (127)

The beginnings of the books are typically a trip or a reflection about traveling, the way of avoiding complications for Will who, when things get rough in

a place takes a plane, and also a source of knowledge: “One of the advantages of spending most of your time traveling is that you see the shifts in the game better ...” (391) Sometimes he does not even know where he is, for example in a sex scene with Ysia: “Where are we now? Paris? Night? Shanghai? Peking? I, the tall White, get up in the dark at one point, go into the kitchen for a glass of water, glance out of the window at the plane trees in the courtyard, bare and black in the moonlight ...” (251) There is no clue even in the landscape, all seems out of time and space. That is why when he is in Venice and looks out the window he feels he can be anywhere: “What a year! I don’t know if the water is the water of the Hudson or the East River ... The Ile de Ré or the Adriatic ... The gulls are the same, though their cries are different ... The cupolas of the churches? Rome? Florence?” (510) Will is always heading for somewhere else or thinking about it: “Ten in the morning here, so it’s five in the afternoon in Paris (and already one tomorrow morning in Tokyo) ... I like to go to sleep thinking about the time zones, and day simultaneous with night on the checkerboard of land and sea ...” (138) He cannot forget this idea of time zones even when he is having sex with Flora: “It’s three o’clock in the afternoon here ... So still only eight in the morning in my studio back in the Village ... The best time of the day, on the balcony in the sun ... But an actor must be able to manage a change of scene, of setting and of role ... And of breathing ...” (164) This adaptability is characteristic of Will, a prototypical postmodern man.

In consonance with this indifference about places, the descriptions of the cities are very vague, even when he is asked specifically about it: “‘How are things in Paris?’ ‘The same as ever, thank you ... You know what Paris is like ...’” (365) He avoids describing the city: “Diane’s balcony had a view over Paris ... She used to give me coffee and honey at five in the morning...” (84) and has a violent attack of rage against it: “Paris! Yuck! City of light? City of shite! Capital of papier-mâché vice! The Great or rather Gross Tradition!” (288) A very different view from the long tradition of Paris in literature, although there is a precedent that links woman, death and the city as Sollers does, and comes from the father of modernity: “With Baudelaire, Paris for the first time became the subject of lyrical poetry ... It is the unique quality of Baudelaire’s poetry that the images of Woman and Death intermingle in a third—that of Paris.” (Benjamin, 1989, 170-1) This is exactly what is repeated as a refrain throughout the novel:

The world belongs to women.
In other words, to death.
But everyone lies about it. (3, 28, 173, 298)

He does something similar with New York, the other main setting, refusing descriptions and rejecting the singularities: “That’s what I like about New York. The way you can change sets whenever you like, the flexibility of space, the distances ... You raise your arm, hail a taxi, it’s dusk, anywhere else is the center

too ...” (8) Will goes very often from Paris to New York in the novel and Cyd, one of his many lovers, does the opposite. They make short and almost compulsory trips, with or without a excuse, just knowing where they are because of their sexual partners. The brief accounts of these displacements, along with the ones to other cities create a net that constitutes one of the nodal systems of the novel and can also be quoted as examples of stillness under the superficial mobility. The introduction of the other cities is an excuse for including digressions about topics more or less related to them: Milan and Saint Ambrose, Florence or Rome and Catholicism, Jerusalem and Judaism, Madrid and painting, Barcelona and Picasso; Venice is related to death and Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, etc. In the end all the cities mean the same to Will, who has just some strange images of each one: “Venice is pink, blue, black, all set on fire ... Jerusalem is mountainous, black, a mirror-image memory ... All in the palm of my hand ...” (536)

To examine the series of references to travel and cities in *Women* is to explore only one of the many threads that compose the complex system of nodality in the novel. What was the purpose of Sollers when he chose this technique? Probably to arrange all the “baroque” range of historical, cultural and fictional references that integrate the novel, trying to combine in this way diversity with unity or totality, as Hayman explains:

A writer of unplotted or counterplotted fictions is attempting, consciously or not, to elaborate something resembling a total experience/vision without lapsing into chaotic gibberish. He/she wishes to have it both ways, to present a view that is comprehensive *and* controlled. In general, nodality signals a refurbished and updated baroque sensibility, beleaguered but still vital. (Hayman, 1991, 239)

In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen argues that postmodernism is closely related to the historical avant-garde because both movements attack the categorial distinction between high art and mass culture — “The Great Divide.” According to Huyssen, the Great Divide periods have been the last twenty years of the past century and the two decades after the World War II. Both periods were followed by a reaction, the former by the historical avant-garde and the latter by postmodernism: “This second major challenge in this century to the canonized high/low dichotomy goes by the name of postmodernism; and like the historical avant-garde though in very different ways, postmodernism rejects the theories and practices of the Great Divide.” (Huyssen, 1986, viii)

In this sense, postmodernism would be a continuation of some of the projects launched by the avant-gardistes, and *Women* is a good example. It shares the avant-garde techniques of juxtaposition and simultaneity and can be well understood using the nodality theory, developed to make sense out of difficult, hermetic and revolutionary texts. Therefore, *Women* is not such an innovative text because its achievements, as so often happens with postmodern works, had

been tested before in the turn of the century period: "Postmodernism ... must be seen as the endgame of the avantgarde and not as the radical breakthrough it often claimed to be." (Huysen, 168)

Women presents a mixture of high culture (with all the philosophers and authors mentioned and the cultural-historical material) and low culture (with its links to literary subgenres as detective fiction or pornography) crossing in this way the Great Divide. Being a *roman à clef*, the reading process is also like playing a game, where the reader tries to discover who is behind each character. And the real counterparts belong to the highest hierarchy of thinkers: "*Femmes*, as a number of French critics observed, did for the Paris of the 1970s what Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins* had done for the Paris of the 1940s: it showed French intellectuals at work and at play." (Barthes, 1987, 12, taken from the introduction by Philip Thody) Moreover, Sollers' wife (the Bulgarian linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva) continued the game in her novel *Les Samourais* (Kristeva, 1990), which presents a similar combination of fictional and disguised real characters and covers the same time period.

Women uses the techniques of juxtaposition and simultaneity to present the bulky material. The contents show at first sight a great variety, although they are quite homogeneous and can be systematized in several strands of nodes. The product of the apparent mobility and all Will's travels is, in the end, a deep feeling of stillness. These characteristics associate *Women* with the work of the historical avant-garde, creating a bridge between that period and postmodernism.

NOTA

¹ Originally published in French (Sollers, 1983 a), although this essay is based on the English translation.

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