Roland Barthes' *Sollers Écrivain* and the Problem of the Reception of Philippe Sollers' *L'écriture percurrente*

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(Ce qui vient vers vous... ne peut être réduit ou traduit)


'N'oublions pas Sollers' - 'Let's not forget Sollers'. So Roland Barthes insists at the outset of 'Dialogue', the short critical piece devoted to Sollers which appears first in his *Sollers Écrivain*. 'But you never hear about anyone else!', an unnamed interlocutor immediately replies. Barthes' intention in exhorting thus was to counter the superficial social imagery about Sollers which had been appearing in the French press in the late 1970s and to reassert against this reductionism the seemingly obvious fact 'that he's a writer, that he has written and does write'.

For his part, Barthes had written on a number of occasions about Sollers between 1965, the year of the publication of Sollers' *Drame*, up to the


2) Ibid.

publication of *Sollers Écrivain* in 1979 at which time Sollers was continuing to produce his second innovatory text of what he called *l'écriture percurrente*, *Paradis*.\(^4\) Earlier in the 1970s Barthes had published twice on Sollers’ first text of *l'écriture percurrente*: \(^5\) First in *Critique* he published ‘Sur l’épaule’ in 1973 and second ‘Situation’ in *Tel Quel* in 1974.\(^6\) Five years previously, on the eve of the climactic events of May 68, Barthes had written a full-page review in *Le Nouvel Observateur* of Sollers’ collection of essays *Logiques* and his ‘novel’ *Nombres*.\(^7\) It is interesting to note that *Sollers Écrivain* did not appear in English translation until 1987 seven years after Barthes death and eight years after its publication in France. During these dates all of Barthes’ other works were translated into English.\(^8\) The belated appearance in English of *Sollers Écrivain* responded to this work in ‘Drame, Poème, Roman’ published in *Critique*, 1965, and collected in *Sollers Écrivain*, pp. 40-67, with a brief note by Thody on the concept of *écriture*, pp. 39-40. *Drame* has been translated into English along with Barthes essay, as *Events* by Bruce Benderson and Ursula Molinario (New York: Red Dust Incorporated, 1987). Philip Thody, the translator into English of *Sollers Écrivain*, was unaware that this American translation was forthcoming in 1987 when his translation of *Sollers Écrivain* appeared.


was symptomatic, at the time, of a lag in the reception in the English-speaking intellectual world of a controversial contemporary French writer. In order to account for this symptomatic lag it is useful to refer to a text published in the wake of May 68 in England by an English critic influenced by French intellectual culture, Colin MacCabe. In 1971, in a short polemical essay entitled, 'Situation', MacCabe wrote:

In England, we are, to a certain extent, cut off, removed from the mainstream of continental thought. To pretend that this isolation is a purely accidental, intellectual, one would be obviously untrue. The fact that we have yet to read Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger is not merely...that out leading philosophers chose a different philosophical approach - it stems from a different history, a different space of development, a different, to use Raymond Williams' term, structure of feeling. The difficulty we have in tracing ourselves in the texts offered here (those of Barthes, Sollers and Kristeva) is not, therefore, simply a matter of intellectual stance but reflects a different mode of being. The interrogation needed to enter these texts is a self-interrogation; a process very different from the usual absorption of new material. Ideas, however, if not the answer

to this problem of difference are, because of the relative ease of location, the easiest way to start the traverse of the distance between our thought and that of Barthes, Sollers, Kristeva.9)

Since MacCabe drew attention to the difference in intellectual situation between England and the 'continent', between modern German philosophy, French theoretical-modernist culture and a distinctly English 'structure of feeling', the works of Barthes and Kristeva have become available in English translation in the form of 'readers'.10) At the end of his essay MacCabe wrote:

The effort now is to grasp the processes of the production of sense, to think through the work of Barthes, Sollers and Kristeva... as well as that of Foucault and Lacan, the possibility of a theoretical perspective from which we may begin to question our history, to read, let us say, our situation.11)

Again, a Foucault reader has appeared in English translation.12) But, in contrast, the avant-garde critical and fictional writings of Sollers, have experienced neglect at the hand of British and American publishers. However, in 1983 a selection of Sollers' critical essays appeared in English translation, in America, with the title Writing and the Experience of Limits. This was a translation of L'Écriture et

The paperback text was a selection of the essays which had already appeared in Logiques in 1968. It was Sollers as critic, then, and not his practice of avant-garde writing which had stimulated translation. It was surely a sign of the times at the turn of the 1980s in the English-speaking intellectual world that critical readings of Sollers' work produced by now famous names in the pantheon of French post-structuralism as Derrida and Kristeva were translated but not the works of Sollers which were the objects of their critical attention: in the case of Derrida, Nombres; in the case of Kristeva, H. Note should be made here that many of the poets/novelists/critics who inhabited the same Parisian intellectual milieu as Sollers have also not been sufficiently translated, or not translated at all, into English. To mention here some of the more well-known: Marcelin Pleynet, Maurice Roche, Denis Roche, Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean Thibaudeau and Jacqueline Risset.


15) Marcelin Pleynet's critical work, Système de la peinture has been translated into English as Painting as System by Sima Godfrey (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984) [originally published in Français as Système de la peinture (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, coll. 'Tel Quel', 1984)]. Works by Pleynet and Jean-Louis Baudry which appeared in Tel Quel are included in Patrick (French and Roland-Françoise Lark (eds) recently published The Tel Quel Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). See also
For Philip Thody, the translator of *Writer Sollers*, 'It is easy to see why *Sollers Écrivain* is the last of Barthes' works to appear in English translation. None of the works by Sollers which it discusses have so far been translated into English'.

At the time of the publication of the English translation of *Sollers Écrivain* in 1987 only one work of Sollers was listed in both American and British Books in Print as then being currently available: *The Park, Le Parc*, Sollers' second novel, was published in 1961 and translated into English in 1968. Was this early work of Sollers, published when he was only twenty-five years old, translated into English because it had won the *Prix Médicis* in France and thus afforded Sollers some celebrity at a young age? After the publication in English translation of *Le Parc* by John Calder and Marion Boyars, the enterprising publishing duo who commissioned it parted company but, still, both have developed prestigious lists of foreign authors in English translation. Sollers, however, is not included on either of their lists. In this connection mention should be made that Sollers was even omitted from Calder's *The Nouveau Roman Reader* which appeared in 1986. Although in his 'Introduction' to this Reader,


entitled 'The Post-Modern Situation', Calder mentions Sollers and *Tel Quel* in passing, when discussing the political involvement of French writers, and although Sollers' *Logiques* is cited under a brief list of 'General Criticism' in the Bibliography, Calder and his fellow editor John Fletcher obviously did not consider Sollers an important enough representative of the French *nouveau roman* to be included in their Reader along with the pantheon of Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Mauriac, Robert Pinget, Michel Butor and Jean Ricardou.

The absence of Sollers from this (note 'the') *nouveau roman* reader is interesting when compared to his inclusion in Stephen Heath's *The Nouveau Roman* which had been published fourteen years before *The Nouveau Roman Reader* came out. In this critical work, which includes studies of Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and Simon, Sollers is treated as developing beyond the respective approaches of this celebrated triumvirate of *nouveaux romanciers* towards the project of a 'materialist (realist) practice of writing'. Given the title of Calder's 'Introduction', 'The Post-Modern Situation', it might have been expected that Sollers would have been considered a representative exception at least to the approaches of Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and Simon. Unwittingly, but still significantly, Calder and Fletcher might have considered Sollers as unrepresentative of the French *nouveau roman* precisely because, unacknowledged by them, he has theorized various cases of literary exceptions and that his point of view is, so to speak, is applicable to himself.

At the time of the publication, then, of the English translation of *Sollers*
Écrivain (1987) there was a definite irony which characterized the absence in English translation of Sollers' avant-garde texts. In essence it is this: his two early works which had been translated into English - 'The Challenge' ('Le Défi') and A Strange Solitude ('Une curieuse solitude') - were out of print (apart from The Park) and, significantly, Sollers had explicitly disowned both of them. In contrast, his later experimental texts, which Sollers himself considers best represent his activity as a 'romancier', have not been translated. At the moment of the appearance of the English translation of Sollers Écrivain the early novels of Sollers continued to be issued in France. Une curieuse solitude was republished by Éditions du Seuil in 1985 in their 'points' collection with the advertising blurb that 'This is the first novel of Philippe Sollers which we know straightforwardly placed its author in the first rank of his generation'. The same publisher had also earlier reissued Le Parc in the same 'points' collection in January 1981 emphasizing that it had been translated into six languages. It is another irony of the translation reception of the works of Sollers that whereas Le Parc, the existence of which Sollers places a question mark against, had been translated, Sollers Écrivain, which deals with all the post-Le Parc 'novels' (but which does not mention this early novel once), had by 1987 only been translated into one language - Italian.

This was in 1979 within only a few months of the appearance of Sollers Écrivain in March in France. But the rapid production of this translation only typifies the speedy reception in Italy, of Sollers' work from


Drame onwards.

The fact that Sollers rejected the fictional works he had written before Drame (1965) is revealing when considering the reception of his œuvre in Britain and America. For example, the biographical note on Sollers which appears in French Short Stories 1 (1966) refers to Drame as ‘the latest “New New Novel”’. The editor, Pamela Lyon, even went so far as to lump Le Parc and Drame together when she wrote: ‘Perhaps, inevitably, Sollers came under the influence of the “nouveau roman” and both Le Parc and Drame...show a marked change of style.’

In an anthology of eight short stories Sollers’ Le Défi (for which he had been awarded the Prix Femina de la littérature in 1957) is placed last according to the criterion that this selection of short stories is arranged according to their approximate order of difficulty. Thus ‘La Plage’ (The Beach), by Robbe-Grillet, is placed first and the subsequent stories show, according to the editor, a wide range of novelistic writing ranging ‘from the stylized wit of Queneau to the beautifully written ambiguities of Sollers’.

Two years after the publication of French Short Stories 1 the editor of another anthology, French Writing Today, Simon Watson Taylor, stated in his biographical

26) Ibd.
27) The other seven authors, apart from Sollers, represented in this anthology mid-1960s anthology of modern French short stories in the order of appearance of their work are Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marcel Aymé, Jean Ferry, Henri Thomas, Marcel Jouhandeau, Raymond Queneau and Pierre Gascar.
note on Sollers that he had disowned both 'Le Défi' and Une curieuse solitude.29) The year of the publication of this anthology, 1968, saw the publication of Sollers' Logiques and Nombres. Both texts, critical and fictive respectively, announced a break with the dominant literary ideology of realism and both confirmed Sollers' distance from the nouveau roman at precisely the moment when his reputation in France as a difficult writer and iconoclastic young critic was being confirmed.30) In this connection, and with hindsight, a noticeable feature of Sollers' career can be discerned. 'Le Défi', which Sollers eventually came to disown, was considered the most difficult of the short stories anthologized in French Short Stories I by its editor. In comparison how much more difficult to read and make critical sense of are Sollers' texts from Drame onwards. Especially, except for non-virtuosi readers of French, Sollers' texts of l'écriture percorrente, H and Paradis, are inexorably unreadable; and even for the reader fluent in French unacquainted with Sollers' theoretical aesthetics these texts no doubt appear as defiantly unreadable if not pretentious nonsense. If H and Paradis were available in English translation the same confused and perplexed response would no doubt be provoked on the part of the educated monolingual English reader.31) The perplexing factor regarding Sollers' practice of l'écriture


30) For an early study in English of the reception of Sollers' work up to the early 1970s see the doctoral study by Roland Champagne, The Texts and Readers of Sollers' Creative Works from 1957-1973 (Ohio State University, 1974).

31) Only one 3pp extract from Paradis has been published in English translation. Cf. Carl Lovitt's translation in Triquarterly 38, January 1977, pp. 101-6. This short extract from Paradis was reprinted in Tel Quel, No. 70, Summer 1977, pp. 7-10 and in David Hayman and Elliot Anderson (eds), In the Wake of the Wake (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 101-6. Recently it has been anthologized in Patrick ffrench
percurrente is this then: in the early 1980s, when he reverted to the writing of seemingly ‘realist’ novels Femmes (1983) and Portrait du jour (1984), at the same time he continued to compose his on-going Paradis.32) Now it is not surprising that Femmes has been translated into English given both its accessibility to readers accustomed to the conventions of the realist novel and its interest in feminist themes.33) The translatability factor here certainly turns upon the amenability of Sollers’ novelistic writing in Femmes to recuperation by the dominant literary ideology of realism. The fact that Sollers was engaged in a double practice of novelistic writing is not, as it may easily seem, a sign of ideological duplicity. Rather this double textual strategy expresses a singular fictional praxis of challenging the novel form by way of exploiting it whilst going beyond it. The difference of Sollers’ project from orthodox novelistic practice resides in its deconstruction or metamorphic exploitation of the conventions which regulate realistic discourse: apparently real characters, with proper names, involved in more or less complex human relationships, living a story, which has a plot, in identifiable situations, societies, which have determinable histories. It is in the extreme semantically indeterminate form of his Écriture percurrente, however, that the undecidable character of Sollers’ practice of writing can be witnessed. Here is a lengthy extract from Paradis to illustrate the argument.


that it sound floundering your death coma grossly inverted placenta auricle from where I sit I see them drip drop by drop bazooka siphoned typhoon I'm back on the track bascule mask cracked states from forbehrs' portraits galleries pupils starred waved flash foundation of aspiration trumpet pup passing on the quotidian tidbit idiot famishing flash flood chronos of men sorrel bellow smith whalebone spit nostrils bit jawbones velvet it's the state of quarantine fortified with fever they feel putrid inside blacked-out whence this green slime slick and clotted disrupted duct blowgun of facts for the roast in reality is roasted on void it sounds the vesicle and lover to make sure we're there quick a wink at this masked androgen bail incubus succubus patched up settings they enter under their limboid lighting scarves of fog sashes of snoo pleats of pus flabbed lamella fuzzy modius look at this flood of lymph in globules marine sockets pinched upper lip in stiff posset possessing some say the ultimate extract of sperm boiled in ovule leucorrhoea wastes flowering basic wetting forever forgotten manna mob visceral crust and crunch now they're packed tails plaited rats from plugged holes lead-coated molten skirt well then in the beginning was the waltz absurd gay harmonious java amorosa or bossa nova but god was jealous and especially his shegod and she took soldering dildo and he swallowed he bromide potion and they froze cakes in the ice screaming and since then sutured vagina bulbed divining rod they speak fraught with sex as if sex submitted to thought and that's that our lives faint away odors sounds colors and touch glycines havens of hazeltrees sap autumn winter shores of summer embrace me better yes there lower now lower still cherry lips hay hair in the cellar rushe of willows in the silo winds winnowing plowrows of wheat come tomorrow mom to my room wake me I want to be awakened by you or else sweltering days meeting in the shelter look her hyping on the leaftrees laurel trees lemontrees what can I mean to her my hot turgid cock what is it hangs her up these each she's done smearing it on her lips her breasts she's never done tilling up her mouth there aspirating the base balls figs longue nickering length and breadth tell me when it comes make it come from even further down from the base of your bones34)

34) Cf. The beginning of the extract from Paradis translated by Carl R. Lovitt referred to in note 29 above. The French original reads as follows:

"c'est ça créole sombrez votre mort coma grossé à l'envers placenta cancer aurèle d'où je suis je les vois chausseguette à gauche bazooka typhon siphonné foi de monnaie l'omblil masque à bascule regarda craqué des portraits d'ancêtres galeries prunelles lieuèe créole font d'aspiration pompe à trompe transmissions du quotient créol en frein défendue rotond chrono d'hommes cheval soufflet forge halèine base navetons mors halèines relents c'est l'état quarantaine"
For the reader unacquainted with Sollers' Paradis (and H) some guidance from Sollers himself regarding the nature of his l'écriture percurrente will be helpful.

I speak of percurrent writing: that which is capable of retelling under the form of redoubled utterance what is said at which moment. Division, integrated aphorism, effaced publicity, automatism, cut-up, routines, nursery rhymes, epiphanies, sequencer-hinges in several disjunctive or contradictory space, reversed metrical fables, injected Ellipses, rhetoric as far as the eye can see, saturated numberless stories.\footnote{35}
As thus characterized by Sollers himself: what is this if it is not a veritable polymorphously perverse postmodern gallumaufry!...perhaps only comparable with Joyce’s incomparable polymorphous paranomasia in *Finnegans Wake*.

'Percurrent' writing, which Sollers first used in composing *H* (1973) and which he continued to develop in *Paradis* (1981) and *Paradis II* (1986), is not a ‘technique’ of writing as such but rather a radically different approach to the production and on-going reflexive and reflective interpretation of fictive sense. The dynamic of *l’écriture percurrente* is, for Sollers, one in which ‘the eye gives way to what the ear remembers’. Thus initiation into *l’écriture percurrente* requires a special kind of mimetic identificatory reading. The use of the intellectual imagination asked for, Sollers states, is to that ‘One must mime the flight of ideas in order to make the ideas flee before thought’. Hence the reader who is able to surrender to this mode of reading will realize that *l’écriture percurrente* is no mechanical process. That is it cannot be reduced to automatism, collage or cutting-up as if the textual material pre-exists the process of textual production. For Sollers the form of *l’écriture percurrente* is characterized by two simple principles: the absence of all ‘visible’ punctuation and a rigorously repetitive metric with rhymes. First and foremost Sollers wants to foreground and emphasize the *sound* of his ‘percurrent’ language thereby producing what he refers to as a certain kind of fictional ‘body’, whilst at the same time ejecting everything apparently corporeal. The clinical consequence of this gesture is to be carried out by bodily sex in its forbidden dimension. For Sollers this sexual *désire* is transgressive in the following way:

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37) *ibid.*
it is a matter of seeing through the bodies the way in which these bodies prevent themselves from seeing themselves as bodies, the way in which they squat on their body-hampered thinking, the terrible irony which swamps them in their sex, to which they cling as to the principle of mystification. Which is not to say more than that bodily sex forbids it to the body which clings to its sex: men one side, women on the other. There they are, they think they can see one another, each on his or her side, they hate one another mortally, they call life, thought, history, politics, events, love, the circulation of this death in death. 38)

Thus from the tremulous sexual human body to a planetary optic Sollers does not so much mix languages in Paradis; instead he 'gestures' (mimes/mimics) with them. His aim is to catalyze, to elicit, to provoke the thought which shows up the dissimulatory nature of all thought insofar as it is thought in language. Thus, for Sollers, we, the living, speak to disguise our thought but our thought disguises us even as we speak. For Sollers all human communication, then, involves power, secrecy, a 'whirlwind of hilarity and horror' and, if we appreciate the comedy in human intercourse through language, the salutary insight that we are subject in our experience to the endless transition of sensation which thought, through language, endeavours to catch but which it can never do so once and for all with certainty. Thus there is a tendentiousness in Sollers' practice of l'écriture percurrente in Paradis which concentrates on the continual passage of fragments of experience which are never ever experienced as such. Rather, to repeat, they have to be — can only be — mimed or mimicked. For Sollers, his 'paradise' is tragic precisely because it is comic according to the paradoxical Sadean formula that 'everything is paradise in this hell'.

It is another irony of Sollers' project of l'écriture percurrente that the quotation which he used as the epigraph for Le Deff, taken from André Breton's Nadja, can help to throw light on the dilemma the uninitiated reader has to negotiate

38) Ibid.
when trying to make sense of this apparently unreadable (because) unclassifiable mode of avant-garde writing. The quotation reads, in translation: 'It is by an extreme power of defiance that certain very rare beings, who have everything to expect and everything to fear from one another, can always recognize each other.'

Perhaps, then, it is only a certain kind of defiant reader who is able to 'enter' the Sollersian text? And, to state the obvious, such a reader is not one who rejects or says 'no' to Sollers' *L'écriture percurrente* because of its seeming difficulty. The defiant reader is rather one who reads Sollers in a different situation and with a different attitude from the reader who expects an immediate ideological recognition effect on encountering any fictional text - including even a difficult one. The defiant reader is patently not a reactive reader; that is, the half-knowing one who resents being faced with a seemingly obscure endless stream of writing with no punctuation. The defiant reader is one who does not succumb to resentment when confronted with experimental avant-garde writing. Indeed, the defiant reader is the reader who goes against the reaction and reductionism of the ideology of reading which, again, is based on the expectation of a more or less immediate recognition effect. The defiant reader resists the latter expectation and is able to engage in a transaction with the Sollersian text which is composed from a situation of writing which defies the comprehension of the reactive reader. The Sollersian text, comprising as it does an open and plural intertextual field, invites a mode of appropriation quite different from the imaginary one which characterizes the conventional mode of entry to the nineteenth-century classical realist text and its experimental progeny in the twentieth century. Sollers, thus, in Barthes' phrase, 'refuses to inherit'.

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I only know what I know because I write. A writer is someone who sometimes succeeds in putting himself in the impossible situation of undoing all family ties. This undoing of family ties is only experience consuming the fundamental belief in the possibility of incest.

The undoing of all family ties, which also includes the dissolution of all imaginary groupings and, thus, of identifications, introduces the writer...to a radical solitude of language, a sexual solitude...the two solitudes being equivalent and irreducible.41

For Barthes, Sollers refusal to inherit the past of French classical and realist writing 'is an act of denial, aimed at casting off the natural right of the old texts. It renders out of date the concepts of subject, reality, expression, description, story, meaning, according to which these texts were constructed and read'.42 Sollers denial has two main aspects: the rejection of the readability of the inherited selective tradition of French literature and the dismissal of representation as the raison d'être of literary writing. To understand the Sollersian text, then, demands that the reader approach it from a social position, marked by a radical solitude of language, which is commensurate with but irreducible to Sollers' changing positions as a writer. This is the stance indeed of Barthes vis-à-vis the work of Sollers throughout his Sollers Écrivain. For Barthes, as Sollers' avowed compagnon de route, is adamant: the writer in contemporary society is abandoned by both the old social classes and is unknown by new ones.

Hence he is more and more alone. In 'Dialogue' (the last short piece which Barthes devoted to Sollers but which is published first in Sollers Écrivain) Barthes says:

...the writer is alone, abandoned...His fall is all the more serious since he lives today in a society in which solitude itself, in itself, is considered a fault. We accept particularisms, but not singularities; types but not individuals.43

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For Barthes the interpretation and judgement of Sollers' work is fraught with difficulties and risks, the very evaluative enterprise itself being a testimony to the necessity to change the norms of criticism in and through the actual process of critical writing. Barthes holds to this position because he was well aware that there is no constituted critical metalanguage waiting to be put to use on Sollers' texts. Faced with the puzzle and challenge of the Sollersian text the critic needs to dissent from the traditional norms and expectations of criticism. It is surely not a coincidence in this connection to note that the Italian translation of Sollers Écrivain has the subtitle 'la dissidenza della scrittura' (see note 22 above).

At the end of his 'Introduction' to the translation of Sollers' L'Écriture et l'expérience des limites the American critic David Hayman writes that 'Sollers, like Derrida, like Barthes, and even Kristeva, to say nothing of Stephen Heath writing on Sollers, is writing through his subject towards facets of his own project. The reader is now free to turn back to the originals for a post-Sollersian reading, a logical one'. Similarly, Barthes in Sollers Écrivain is writing through his subject, Sollers, and the Sollersian texts post-Drame, towards his own

44) David Hayman, 'Introduction' to Writing and the Experience of Limits, op. cit. p. xxviii. Hayman has also written on Sollers H in 'Nodality or Plot Displaced: The Dynamics of Sollers' H, in Sub-Stance, No. 43, Vol. XIII, No. 2, 1984, pp. 54-65. Hayman has also conducted substantial interviews with Sollers. See 'An Interview with Philippe Sollers', The Interim Review, Vol 5, No. 4, Fall, 1974, pp. 25-54. This interview was reprinted in TriQuarterly 38, Winter, 1977, pp. 54-72 and in David Hayman and Elliot Anderson (eds), In the Wake of the Wake, op. cit., p. 122-41. This interview has also been translated into French by Philippe Milletzines with the title Flashback: Premier entretien (1975) and appear as chapter VI in the lengthy interviews Hayman conducted with Sollers published in Visions & New York, op. cit. For another interview with Sollers in English see Shushi Kao, 'Paradise Lost? An Interview with Philippe Sollers', in Sub-Stance, No. 30, Vol X, No. 1, 1981, pp. 31-50. See an interview which Sollers gave with Catherine Franchin on the subject of twentieth-century painting, in Flash Art, No. 129. Summer 1986, pp. 64-5.
project as critic qua being Soller's compagnon de route.45) But the difference between the reader reading Hayman's translation of L'Écriture et l'expérience des limites and the same reader faced with the English translation of Sollers Écrivain, is that, in the case of the latter, she is not 'free' to turn to a reading of Sollers' avant-garde texts from Drame onwards because these works are still not available in English translation. There is a major problem here regarding the reception of Sollers' work in the English-speaking world. The problem is that since the texts of l'écriture percurrente - H (1973), Paradis (1981) and Paradis II (1986) - Sollers has continued to add substantially to his oeuvre46) only one of which works has


been translated into English, *La Fête à Venise* \(^{47}\) Not surprisingly, as with *Femmes*, this work was undoubtedly selected for translation because it exploits realist literary discourse and therefore is *readable* and so a translation would for no other reason than this find an audience.

Also in recent years Sollers has received a higher profile in the English-speaking intellectual world on account of a number of studies which have been published on the history of *Tel Quel* through to *l’Infini*. \(^{48}\) Since the turn of the


1970s the academic literature on Sollers in English has also increased.49) But an

49) Reference should be made again here to the chapter on Sollers in Stephen Heath's *The Nouveau Roman*, op. cit. and the essays in translation by Derrida on *Nombres* and Kristeva on *H* (see note 14 above). Sollers was been treated as a significant writer in twentieth-century French literature by Leon S. Roudiez in his *French Fiction Today* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972), Chapter 14, but also in Chapter 15 on Jean Ricardou. Roudiez has also discussed Sollers in relation to *Tel Quel* in 'Twelve Points from *Tel Quel*', op. cit. Sollers' *Nombres* is considered by Roland A. Champagne in his 'Un Declenchement: The Revolutionary Implications of Philippe Sollers' *Nombres* for Logocentric Western Culture', *Sub-Stance*, No. 7, Fall 1973, pp. 101-11. See also Champagne's doctoral dissertation on the reception of Sollers' works up to the early 1970s (already referred to in note 28 above): *The Texts and Readers of Philippe Sollers' Creative Works from 1957-1973* (Ohio State University 1974). Champagne published an essay derived from his doctoral study entitled *The Evolving Art of Literary Criticism: Reading the Texts of Philippe Sollers from 1957-1973*, in Philip Grant (ed.), *French Literary Criticism* (South Carolina, 1978), pp. 187-96.

English translation of Philippe Forest's critical study in French of Sollers has yet to appear (duly updated) in English. Even with this higher intellectual profile the monolingual English-speaking reader of *Sollers Écrivain* is still confined to a *pre-Sollersian* reading. The logic of this situation for the reader who does not know French sufficiently to engage with Sollers' avant-garde texts is that *Sollers Écrivain* has the status of a *pre-text*, that is a text of criticism which assumes the reader is acquainted with the fictional texts, their author, and the conditions of production and reception which the critical text is about. But, as the reader is not, then the critical text takes on a life of its own at the same time that it invites the reader to engage with its object-texts. This was the case with Stephen Heath's pioneering study of the *nouveau roman* at the beginning of the 1970s, which has been symptomatically characterized then as a 'pre-text in Frenglais'.

Mention of Heath's book on the *nouveau roman* returns us to the moment

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when Colin MacCabe (a compagnon de route of Heath at the time at Cambridge University) wrote his 'Situation' text in which, to repeat, he emphasized that, 'The interrogation needed to enter these texts (those of Barthes, Sollers and Kristeva) is a self-interrogation'.51) This is also what Hayman means when he speaks of the critic 'writing through his subject towards facets of his own project'. It is also and crucially what Barthes means by insisting on Sollers being a writer in the affirmative association 'Sollers Writer' — that is one who practices this form of self-interrogation and writing through his elected topics towards composing, decomposing and recomposing his own writerly identity. L'écriture percursive is the practice of writerly self-interrogation at the limits of virtual writerly experience. As Barthes was able to identify, the solitude involved in this percurrent practice of writing is far removed from the lazy consumption of socially reductive images of Sollers circulating in the mass media. This is why, Barthes exhorted in the late 1980s vis-à-vis Sollers, "...a time comes when social images must be called back to order".52) This reordering of the socially reductive images of Sollers is again necessary in the face of the devastating critical striptease job carried out on Sollers in the public sphere by the late Pierre Bourdieu, himself the erstwhile controversial doyen of French sociology.

In a deliberate exposure of Sollers published in Libération in January 1995 entitled 'Sollers tel quel' Bourdieu accuses Sollers of being a pseudo-writer who has only produced the simulacrum of literature worth the name.53) For Bourdieu, Sollers bears a false air of culture and, being a latter-day Tartuffe-like figure without scruples, only mimes the gestures of great writers. Far from Sollers'

refusal to inherit the past of French classical, romantic, realist and even twentieth-century avant-garde literature being given the status of the ultimate transgressive act, Bourdieu accuses him of prostituting two centuries of struggle for the autonomy of serious literature. In promulgating a cult of transgression Sollers, Bourdieu says, has cynically reduced literary libertinage to its erotic dimension. Bourdieu's Sollers is really only a laughable media star who has compromised a truly radical political critique of the society of the spectacle. The image of Sollers, a vedette of the Parisian literary and media scenes, seems to be captured in what Philip Roth says about him in a review of the English translation of *Femmes*:

Anybody out for a good time should read Philippe Sollers. He's the sort of intellectual clown we don't breed in America — urbane, bestial, candid, effervescent, an impresario ejaculator of farcical wisdom, a master of good-natured malice, a kind of happy, lively, benign Céline. (cf. the back cover of the dust-jacket)

But, contrary to Roth's rather ingratiating and mischievous image of Sollers, Bourdieu insists that he is the victim of all the illusions and disillusions of the French intellectual scene and political life. The reality of Sollers' presenting himself as an exception, for Bourdieu, is that he is only the most banal example of the statistically average because he is the idealttype incarnation of the individual and collective history of the ambitions of a whole generation of writers who have sold out in one way or other to the system. Sollers' originality for Bourdieu still thinks Sollers has one is to have made himself into the theoretician of the denial of intellectual treason.

In defence of Sollers it can be said that Bourdieu's acid delegitimation of Sollers is an outright caricature because he fails to deal, at all, with Sollers' writings. Against Bourdieu's superficial imagism in a Parisian left-wing daily there

54) Ibid.
is Barthes' assertion — which again needs reasserted — of 'Sollers Writer'. It is surprising that such a master of ideology-critique as Bourdieu commits himself the ideological fallacy of dealing in images at the expense of conceding any apparent meaningful dimension to Sollers' practice as a creative writer and critic. Bourdieu's act of critical reseentiment directed against Sollers bears out the view that 'Despised or admired, Sollers is...a target for those who contest his image for want of having read his works'.55) Indirectly Sollers offers his own defence when he says that 'a good biography requires, at the same time, distance and precision'.56) Likewise any practice of criticism which has integrity requires knowledge of text and context, the writer and his works. In the case of Sollers this means Sollers qua écrivain-scripteur, that is Sollers the writer, 'Sollers Écrivain' indeed, who is produced in and through the practice of writing. Bourdieu's scornful attitude towards Sollers can be countered noting what Adorno said about the undialectical trait of all cultural practices cut off from the experience of their object:

Topological thinking, which know the place of every phenomenon and the essence of none, is secretly related to the paranoid system of delusions which is cut off from experience of the object...No theory, not even that which is true, is safe from perversion into delusion once it has renounced a spontaneous relation to the object. Dialectics must guard against this no less than against enthralment in the cultural object...The dialectical critic must both participate in culture and not participate.57)

There are implications of this understanding for the translator of Sollers' works. To his credit Philip Thody is aware of the key problem which the translator

55) Gregory Park, 'Le point de vue de Philippe Sollers', [http://www.mv.gale.org/gregfriani/Sollers5.html](http://www.mv.gale.org/gregfriani/Sollers5.html) 'Méprisé ou admiré, Sollers...est une cible pour ceux qui lui contestent son image, à défaut de savoir lire ses livres'.
56) Philippe Sollers quoted in Gregory Park, ibid: 'Une bonne biographie nécessite à la fois de la distance et de la précision.'
faces when approaching the texts of Sollers - and indeed of the French intellectuals who were associated with *Tel Quel*. The translator confronts a dilemma, a stark choice: either to produce a *semantic* translation which attempts to reproduce the sense and syntax (or apparent non-sense and deviant syntax) of the source text in the target text or s/he endeavours to render a *communicative* translation of the source text placing the emphasis in the translation on the readability of the final target text.\(^58\) Thody understands that with a semantic (that is more or less literal) translation 'the English version tends to present the uninformed reader with a text that is almost as difficult as the original French'.\(^59\) The danger of the alternative for Thody is that the translator, in aiming to produce a text which says what s/he thinks the French means, traduces the meaning of the original for the sake of the communicative clarity of the English translation. There is no rule of thumb solution to this dilemma. The actual practice of translation involves a complex negotiation between semantic detail and precision and communicative clarity and intelligibility, between placing the emphasis on the meaning of the source text or the readability of the target translation. What is certain, for Thody, is that 'It would - and this is the problem...be misleading to translate Barthes into ordinary language. For this would presuppose that you can separate the thing said from the way of saying; and this is an idea which the whole of Barthes' thinking about literature...sought to reject'.\(^60\) Aware of the difficulties involved in


59) Philip Thody, 'Introduction' to *Writer Sollers*, op. cit., p. 5. Thody's lengthy 'Introduction' to his translation of *Sollers Écrivain* greatly aids the reader unacquainted with the avant-garde texts of Sollers which Barthes engages with in this work. (Note: Thody's 'Introduction' is 30 pp with 2 pp of notes; the six essays of Barthes make up a total of 64 pp.)
producing a felicitous rendering, which is both cognizant of the meaning of *Sollers Écrivain* and sensitive to the need to communicate Barthes' ideas in as clear readable English as possible, Thody's *modus vivendi* is to have endeavoured to produce, as he puts it, a 'creative tension' between the two approaches. His preference, though, is towards the communicative pole of the translation spectrum.

The aim of this paper has been to consider the question why is it that *Sollers Écrivain* took so long to appear in English translation after Barthes’ death in March 1980? A second question implicated in the first is why is that, still, Sollers' texts of *l'écriture percurrent* have not been translated into English? My purpose, in answering these two questions, has been threefold: (1) to offer a critical response to Sollers' avant-garde writings; (2) to consider the mode of reading pertinent to engaging with Sollers' radical apparently non-expressive texts of ‘percurrent writing’; and (3) also to give attention to the problems involved in translating them.

60) Ibid, p. 29.
ROLLAND BARTHÈS의 SOLLERS ÉCRIVAIN에 관한 논의 및 PHILIPPE SOLLERS의 l’ÉCRITURE PERCURRENT의 문화적 수용의 문제*

Alec Gordon


이 두 논리들에 대한 답변을 제시하는 과정에서의 필자의 목적이 세 가지로 나누어 볼 수 있다. 첫째로 SOLLERS의 아방가르드 작품들에 대한 비평적 관점을 제시하고자 하며, 두 번째로 구체적 의미를 내포하지 않는 과학적 ‘비중립 형식의 글쓰기’로 쓰여진 SOLLERS의 텍스트들 다루는 데 있어 필요한 독별을 고찰해보고자 하며, 그리고 마지막으로 SOLLERS의 작품들을 번역하는 과정

* 영문초록은 국문으로 번역해 준 학생 조교 김용기에게 고마움을 전합니다.