Philippe Sollers

H

Translated by
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EQUUS
Note on the Text

This English translation follows the text of the second edition of *H*, published by Gallimard (Paris, 2001). It preserves the formal idiosyncrasies of the original – including its suppression of punctuation, paragraph breaks, quotation marks and capitalisation of any sort (in English, this additionally affects the first-person pronoun).

The translators have also followed the original in resisting the modernist temptation of turning the text into a pedagogical tool and providing it with critical notes and/or lists of bibliographical references. Not only would these go against the spirit of the original project, but in our post-electric age, they would also be rather superfluous. Let the work of following, tracking down and comprehending the text’s many historical-cultural references, quotations and allusions, form part of a reading process responsive to Sollers’s writing project. Let *H* speak for itself.

This decision has nonetheless made it necessary to introduce one change to the typography of the original. All words that are in English *already in the original*, whether brief phrases (e.g. “yes sir” on the very first page) or extended quotations (e.g. the *Finnegans Wake* quote on the last one), thus appear italicised. This is a decision, we realise, that is far from perfect, but still better in keeping with the nature of Sollers’s project than introducing quotation marks, and more elegant than appending an unwieldy scholarly list of them. Quotations and phrases from all languages other than French and English appear as they do in the original.

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V. S. & D. V.
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Against “Polite Conversation”: Heresy, Hallucination, Hashish & the H-Bomb

LET’S ADMIT IT – the novel has become a subject for polite conversation. […] This critic defends eternal classical values; that writer denies them with equal sincerity – at which point both sit down at the same round table, and the gratified listener may confidently assume […] that literature has finally become synthesis and self-consciousness itself.

Philippe Sollers,
“The Novel and the Experience of Limits”

One might as well start before the beginning. On the front cover, in lieu of the conventional genre-descriptor “roman”: Giordano Bruno’s *Figura Intellectus* (published in Prague, 1588). Its intersecting circles representing the intellect, which sees and distributes everything, yet which has no main or single organising principle at the centre. Instead, many satellites with their own centres, forming a polygon. “H,” then, for heresy.

On the back cover, “background language” (“langue de fond”) called upon to bring together the “two [people] here, in the night.” The one the writer, the other the reader, for “a work exists by itself only potentially, and its actualization (or production) depends on its readings and on the moments at which these readings actively take place.”¹ “H,” then, for hybridity. On the first page of the text which doesn’t start with a capital letter, a mention of “hallucination.” “H,” then, for “hashish” or “heroin,” for “to read my texts you should be in a state something like a drug high. You’re in no condition to decipher, to perform hermeneutic operations […]”. The language of the text is a base over which something slides.”²

² David Hayman, “An Interview with Philippe Sollers,” *TriQuarterly* 38
On the last page, in the penultimate line of the text which doesn’t end with a full-stop, a mention of “hydrogen,” connecting backwards/forwards with the “bomb” of the first page. “H,” then, for “H-bomb.”

Inspired by the May 1968 Paris student/worker uprising, Philippe Sollers’s novel *H* (1973) performs a revolution in its own right against much that has been (and still is) taken for granted in the *belles lettres* – “a revolution in the conception itself of the exception.”\(^3\) Described variously as “a music that is inscribed in language, becoming the object of its own reasoning,”\(^4\) as a “wall of words, an extremely active mass of language,”\(^5\) and as word-produced “material fullness of pleasures” where “everything is organized into a splendid series of irrelevancies,”\(^6\) *H* is a text that – more than forty years after its publication – continues to pose some fundamental questions about what it is to write, to think, to read.

Sollers’s loud cry of protest against “the novel [becoming] a subject for polite conversation”\(^7\) can best be understood in terms of its immediate context. *H* continues the process of reflecting on the goings-on of May 1968 by means of textual and stylistic fragmentation (begun in *Nombres* [1968] and *Lois* [1972]), and its immersion in questions political (Maoist) and religious (Catholic) presages Sollers’s next project, *Paradis I & II* (1981-6), in many respects a turning point in his career.

\(^{\text{(Winter 1977): 129-30.}}\)


BEFORE \textit{H}

It is difficult to overstate Sollers’s importance for \textit{Tel Quel}, a journal he co-founded, edited and used as his mouthpiece for the 22 years of its existence (1960-82), disseminating his fiction, criticism and theory, but also propagating his political beliefs. These were far from unified and consistent, and so accordingly, \textit{Tel Quel}’s political and poetic tenor underwent a multiple-stage (r)evolution. From the \textit{nouveau roman}, structuralism, and Derrida’s deconstructive poetics into formalist exercises subverting the ideologies of bourgeois and capitalist ways of thinking; from opposition to Sartre’s purported Marxism to alignment with the French Communist Party (PCF) to a clean break with the French Communism following May 1968. The lesson drawn by Sollers from the PCF’s failure to lead through a time of crisis was that the political tide was turning eastward, especially toward Chairman Mao’s Communist China, and for the better part of the 1970s \textit{Tel Quel}’s politics were radical Maoism. Inevitably, Sollers’s vehemence and despotism in his advocation of Mao were what ultimately brought about \textit{Tel Quel}’s demise – in the words of the author of the first book-length study of Sollers in English, by the end of the 1970s, "Sollers became aware that he was himself guilty of what he had earlier attributed to a bourgeois mentality."\footnote{Roland A. Champagne, \textit{Philippe Sollers} (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 22.}

The inception of Sollers’s literary career predates the founding of \textit{Tel Quel} by two years. At the time of the publication of his first novel in 1958, the name “Sollers” was a \textit{nom de plume}, a mask behind which to hide his real name Philippe Joyaux. Hailed by François Mauriac and Louis Aragon, \textit{Une curieuse solitude} addresses the issues of masculinity and secrecy surrounding erotism – combined with the fascination for pornography as a means to desacralise sexuality – that will continue to inform Sollers’s writing throughout his entire oeuvre. After two texts further exploring, in a vaguely new-novelist fashion, the nature of subjectivity and linguistic
representation of space (Le Parc and Drame), came a striking new departure in Sollers’s writing and its experimental peak between 1968 and 1973, with the three hybrid, visually and conceptually innovative texts: Nombres, Lois, and H.

Nombres (1968) announces Sollers’s turn eastward by employing Chinese ideograms that punctuate its text throughout. Although these ideograms merely repeat what has just been mentioned in French, they operate as a provocation to the non-versed reader, whose “reading” thus oscillates between the readable and the unreadable. The title suggests the mathematical realm from which set theory is also derived, the word “numbers” referring to “digits,” but at the same time, Nombres is also the French title of the Biblical book of Numeri, the census of the Hebrew nation, and thus an accounting of the constituent tribes. The text is constructed in the sequential alternations of four voices, identified by the numerals one through four, in twenty-five repetitions, with the first three voices speaking in the imperfect tense while the fourth voice is in the present tense. The plural voices of Nombres are the first conscious attempt, on Sollers’s part, to undermine the “novel” as merely the perpetuation of such (“bourgeois”) values as a unified subject in control of its speaking voice. This destabilisation is furthered by the text’s radically intertextual nature – Nombres is a patchwork of quotations from an array of variegated sources and belonging to a multitude of discourses.

Lois (1972)9 was written during a personally trying period for Sollers, the aftermath of the death of his father in 1969, after which he rewrote this whole text. Continuing the fragmentation of Nombres while adding the important aural dimension, Lois performs a repudiation of “laws” in favour of unhindered action, textual as well as political. In Lois, Sollers presents a text working as much on the level of sound/rhythm as on a conceptual level.10 Sollers devises an interesting mode

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10 Patrick Ffrench has noted that “written mostly in decasyllabic phrases,
of structuration by using the opening sentence “NE FACE A FACE NIANTE LA MEMBRANE L’ENTREE” as a sort of verbal acrostic whose individual words stand at the beginning of each of the six “books” that form Lois. The history that forms the subject of Lois is far removed from that of schoolbooks, as the focal point of Sollers’s examination of the various discursive strata forming the official historical accounts is the taboo of incest, its “prohibition or rather subtilized recommendation” regarded as the inaugural moment of civilisation and its organising principle.

Lois relies on a series of mythical narratives and allusions that provide the narrative framework for the text, and engages in a kind of parodic appropriation of their styles and discourses, matched by a deformation on the level of the signifier that brings them into mutual interaction. This happens to such a degree that the critical element entailed in parody gives way to the undifferentiated blend of the pastiche. The minimal reference, the elementary particle out of which Lois is construed, and the most common target of its playful variations, is the proper name: “Buongorno giordano! Guten tag friedrich! A nous la transmute, l’éternieretour par le sous détour. C’est pas tous les jours. Au permier qui mute. Farewell ezra! welcome jimmie! C’est l’aurore monsieur isidore” (L IV.12, 87). Giordano Bruno, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ezra Pound, Joyce and Lautréamont – there are many more other passages in which Sollers expresses his admiration for and alliance with these writers/thinkers. Added to these is Hesiod, whose Theogony forms the intertextual scaffolding of Lois – disguised in passage such as “lui dont le cadavre hésitant sentant l’iode a été porté par les dauphins dans un cortège marin” (L I.2, 8, my italics). This paragrammatic dispersion of an author’s name is a common strategy in Lois.

A second-type reference is formed by Sollers’s rewritings of famous quotations, oftentimes with a parodic oppositional twist, functioning as both homage and ridicule; cf. “My little sleep is rounded by a life” (L VI.6, 130) or “Le reste n’est jamais silence” (L VI.8, 81), in terms of Shakespearean parody. A third-type reference is Sollers’s punning, whether via paronomasia or the portmanteau. To take but a few examples: “Jasons, jasons, il en restera pour nos argonotes” (L VI.9, 136); “Progressant dans sa conne essence!” (L II.2, 27); “Mordre! Femmille! Patrie!” (L III.9, 54). Then there are the many passages in which the textual flow breaks up into isolated exclamations, as in the following passage from the age of the dinosaurs to the Neolithic age: “Débuts rageurs cavernés caveurs. Chimie-tic! Anthro! Dinobronches! Iganonde! Ptérodoctes! Azor! Popo! Pipi! Tec! Tec! Paleo! Neo! Et au lit! Tic-Toc!” (L I.5, 15-6). Or, finally, passages in which articulated language breaks down altogether:

broum schnourf scrontch clong pof pif clonck alala toc toc
toc cling skock bing glup burp snif pout pout paf crac pot clic
crac tchhhh hé hé guili sluiiirp aaa mhouh mmouhou mouh
plouts gnouf snoups tchi tchit chiiiiii ê ê ê ê slam ga hou gnin
hop drelin drelin braang fochlouour badabang! (L V.10, 107)

The taboo of incest is “the key by which intelligibility is conferred upon social network,” the mechanism by which “the infant is inscribed into an Oedipal triangle,” out of which there is no escaping, which is instead perpetuated through the generations (L I.3, 11). Sexuality is part of all this because both men and women, in their multiform quests for each other, repeat the traditional roles passed on by their society. So in Lois the text stages its own search for a form appropriate to the struggle for social renewal, as incomplete and transitory as so many of Lois’s contestations of the laws of conventional literary discourse. From Nombres, Lois takes over the idea that the writing of any text takes place with/