Writer who broke rank

Claude Simon, the 1985 Nobel laureate, was obscured by his novel ways

One day, French novelist Claude Simon had "nothing to say." So he sat at his writing desk, pen in hand and a packet of cigarettes and an ashtray within reach. Simon looked at the balcony grill of his window and a square building beyond and wrote The Battle of Pharsalus, from these isolated elements.

Quite a long time ago, the stream of consciousness novelists in Simon's tradition broke away from the chronologically ordered plot and laid emphasis on shifts of perspective and narration. To them, such techniques were in fact another way of attempting to portray psychological reality, which can be initiated from any unspecified point and go on to exist by its own inner structure and development.

One of the most original of modern writers, this 72-year-old precursor of the nouveau roman (new novel) is this year's Nobel Literature Prize winner. Though almost all his works since Le Vent (1957) have been translated into English (The Wind), Simon is almost unknown in India, except to a few French departments of some universities.

Though Indians do not know Claude Simon, Claude Simon knows India. He was in India in 1975 to attend a few conferences in Delhi, Madras and Bombay.

Recently, French writer Tony Cartero said: "In a way, and at the risk of shocking some, it does not seem paradoxical to me to say that Claude Simon is the most South American of the French literary giants of the 20th century." If that be the case, ignorance of Simon's work in India is partly fortuitous. For, these days third world authors have transcended national boundaries to reach third world readers. India is showing keen interest in the contemporary literature of other countries, especially in fiction and poetry of South America. Indian readers should be able to relate to Simon's The Flanders Road, The Palace, Histoire and The Battle of Pharsalus. If that has not happened so far, the Nobel Prize would do that.

Then how does Simon relate to French thinking? Admittedly, his 15 novels have certainly not reached print runs equal to a Georges Simenon. Simon's works are neither traditional nor popular. But in terms of official recognition—

To judge it from here—Simon does not lag behind. The Flanders Road won the L'Express Prize and Histoire the Prix Medicis. Simon is one of the only two "new..."
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novelists' who have reached beyond aca-
demic circles—the other being Marguer-
tine Duran, whose latest book The Lover is
extremely popular and won the Gon-
court Prize of 1984.

Simon is so identified with the 'new
novel' that without understanding the
latter, one cannot understand Simon.
The group of writers brought together by
Jerome Lindon for his publishing house,
Editions de Minuit, in the 1950s, and
whose works journalist and academic
critics soon labelled as the 'new novel',
had one common feature: their rejection
of the traditional novel form, charac-
terised by its lineal and chronologically
ordered plot, its assumed representation
of reality and its psychological and moral
analysis. The 'new novelists' felt that the
traditional novel overlooked the very
process of writing.

These stands, though regarded as ico-
noclastic at that time, are perfectly accep-
table today to the majority of the truly
creative novelists. (Perhaps, that is why
Simon had to wait this long to get the
Nobel Prize.) Simon was influenced in
the early stages of his career by the tech-
niques of shifting perspective and narra-
tion and he acknowledged his debt to
Proust and Faulkner.

Let us not forget that Simon's first
love was painting. He adored making col-
lages, putting together things according
to their form, colour, material and their
relationship to one another—the con-
trasts and similarities. Such elements
combine to form his novel.

Let us take an example. His latest
of more than 400 pages, is a kind of sum
of all his works. One finds in it all the
themes of his previous novels as well as
his various stylistic techniques (long sen-
tences without punctuation, use of the
present participle as Faulkner used, use
of quotations etc.), all assimilated in a
subtle structural framework. There are
three principal characters: A young man
fighting in a cavalry regiment during the
catastrophic Flanders battle of World
War II, in 1940; an Englishman "O", fight-
ing in the Spanish civil war in Barcelona
on the side of the revolutionaries, in 1936;
and an old nobleman, who had become a
general of the empire at the beginning of
the 18th century, and who writes letters
to his superiors about his military cam-
paigns and to his farm supervisor in-
structing on farm work.

No link in time or plot exists among
these three characters. They act out their
parts in isolated episodes, often differen-
tiated by their typographies. But in the
three different types of sequences, there
exist similarities in certain expressions on
the one hand and, themes on the other
like, the night, the soil, the seasons,
wanderings, sleeplessness and doubt,
disintegration, history...From this coun-
terpoint are created relationships of sim-
ilarities and of opposition, and a
structure begins to develop, giving rise to
a meaning. But what is most important is
that this meaning is not a message deli-
vered by the author to a passive reader.
The reader participates actively by trying
to understand these relationships and
their developments into a total meaning.
The word and history have no meaning,
but man persists in trying to find one.

When one is aware that Simon him-
self, at the age of 23, fought for the revo-
lutionaries in Spain, that he was taken
prisoner by the Germans when his
cavalry regiment was annihilated in 1940,
and that the regidical nobleman was one
of his ancestors, one can imagine the
strong emotional power of some of the
episodes of the book. But of course, mere
emotions, memories and personal or col-
lective history do not suffice to create a
great work. Like in painting or music, it is
necessary that the work has its own aes-
thetic coherence and enables the reader
to perceive the world differently. Simon
does not fail here. Says he: "No doubt, we
can say...that death, degeneration, eroti-
cism, nostalgia for physical union, are
themes which recur in my novels. They
have also been used by many other writ-
ers, either excelsently or atrociously
according to how they were written: But
they were not my subjects, which are the
way in which my various books have
been written."

Simon, admittedly, is very hard 'to
get into'; but the experience is worth-
while. The persistent reader discovers
that in reading a Simon novel, he is dis-
covering something about how he really
thinks and feels and proceeds. Simon is
appreciated for the broad historical
scope of his vision and the originality of
his working techniques. Through his
unpunctuated, often 1,000-word senten-
ces, he attempts to capture the very pro-
gression of life, though the novel might
be dominated by a chaotic disintegration
of all order. But then, reality is not easy to
read. That's the Gallic logic.

—MARIE CLAUDETTE KIRPALANI