

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 Carcano 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 nov-

els 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—that unfortunately remains the only way

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



Reflecting on life's chaos. Claude Simon

LITERATURE

novelists' who have reached beyond academic circles—the other being Marguerite Duras, whose latest book *The Lover* is extremely popular and won the Goncourt 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 journalistic and academic critics soon labelled as the 'new novel', had one common feature: their rejection of the traditional novel form, characterised 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 iconoclastic at that time, are perfectly acceptable 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 techniques of shifting perspective and narration and he acknowledged his debt to Proust and Faulkner.

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

Let us take an example. His latest novel, *The Georgics* (1981), a long book 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 sentences 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', fighting 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 campaigns and to his farm supervisor instructing on farm work.

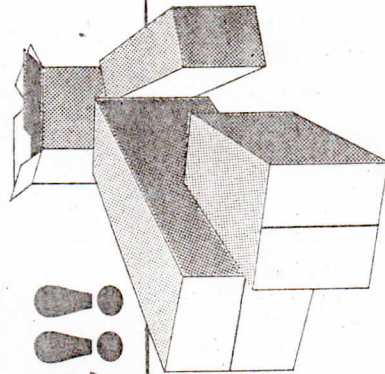
No link in time or plot exists among

these three characters. They act out their parts in isolated episodes, often differentiated 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 counterpoint are created relationships of similarities 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 delivered 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 world and history have no meaning, but man persists in trying to find one.

When one is aware that Simon himself, at the age of 23, fought for the revolutionaries in Spain, that he was taken prisoner by the Germans when his cavalry regiment was annihilated in 1940, and that the regicidal 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 collective history do not suffice to create a great work. Like in painting or music, it is necessary that the work has its own aesthetic 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, eroticism, nostalgia for physical union, are themes which recur in my novels. They have also been used by many other writers, either excellently 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 worthwhile. The persistent reader discovers that in reading a Simon novel, he is discovering 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 sentences, he attempts to capture the very progression 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 KRIPALANI



WHAT A PACKAGE!!

Is your product brittle, perishable, delicate or breakable? Then what you need is the high quality corrugated packaging that is our speciality.



Packard Industries
KOTTAYAM 686 003, KERALA

For excellence in packaging