

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*)

Philippe Sollers, *Nombres* (1968)

'*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.<sup>1)</sup> 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'.<sup>2)</sup>

For his part, Barthes had written on a number of occasions about Sollers between 1965, the year of the publication of Sollers' *Drame*,<sup>3)</sup> up to the

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1) '*Dialogue*', in *Sollers Écrivain* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1979). Translated and Introduced by Philip Thody as *Writer Sollers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987/London: Athlone Press, 1987), p. 35. In my opinion the title of the English translation should be *Sollers Writer* to capture Barthes' insistence that Sollers is first and foremost *un écrivain*.

2) Ibid.

3) Philippe Sollers, *Drame* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. '*Tel Quel*', 1965). Barthes

publication of *Sollers Écrivain* in 1979 at which time Sollers was continuing to produce his second innovatory text of what he called *l'écriture peccurante*, *Paradis*.<sup>4)</sup> Earlier in the 1970s Barthes had published twice on Sollers' first text of '*l'écriture peccurante*', *H*.<sup>5)</sup> First in *Critique* he published '*Sur l'épaule*' in 1973 and second '*Situation*' in *Tel Quel* in 1974.<sup>6)</sup> Five years previously, on the eve of the climatic 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*.<sup>7)</sup> 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.<sup>8)</sup> The belated appearance in English of *Sollers Écrivain*

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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 *Event* by Bruce Benderson and Ursula Molinaro (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.

- 4) Philippe Sollers, *Paradis* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. '*Tel Quel*', 1981). *Paradis II* was published by Éditions Gallimard in 1986,
- 5) Philippe Sollers, *H* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. '*Tel Quel*', 1973).
- 6) Roland Barthes, '*Sur l'épaule*', *Critique*, No. 318, November, 1973 and '*Situation*', No. 57, 1974. Both of these texts are republished in *Writer Sollers* as 'Over the Shoulder', pp. 75-92 and 'Situation', pp. 93-95.
- 7) Roland Barthes, '*Le refus d'héritage*', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, No. 181, 30 April, 1968. This review is included in *Writer Sollers* as 'The Refusal to Inherit', pp. 69-74. Philippe Sollers, *Logiques* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. '*Tel Quel*', 1967) and *Nombres* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. '*Tel Quel*', 1967). For Sollers *post festum* views on May 68 see his '*Printemps rouge*', Preface to Jean Thibadeau, *Mai 1968 en France* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. '*Tel Quel*', 1970), pp. 7-22.
- 8) Roland Barthes, *New Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) [originally published as *Nouveaux essais critiques* along with *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1972)]; *Camera Lucida: Reflections on*

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 our 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

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*Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang/London Jonathan Cape, 1982) [originally published as *La Chambre claire : note sur la photographie* (Paris : Éditions Gallimard and Éditions du Seuil, 1980)]; *The Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) [originally published as *L'Empire des signes* (Geneva : Editions Skira, 1970)]; *The Fashion System*, trans. by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1983) [originally published as *Système de la mode* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1967)]; *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-80*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) [originally published as *Le Grain de la voix : Entretiens 1962-80* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1981)]; *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) [originally published as *L'obvie et l'obtus : Essais critiques III* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1982)]; *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) [originally published as *Le bruissement de la langue : Essais critiques IV* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1984)] and *Criticism and Truth*, trans. by Katrine Pilcher, Introduction by Philip Thody (London: Athlone Press, 1987) [originally published as *Critique et vérité* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1966)].

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.<sup>9)</sup>

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'.<sup>10)</sup> 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.<sup>11)</sup>

Again, a Foucault reader has appeared in English translation.<sup>12)</sup> 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*

9) Colin MacCabe, 'Situation', in Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe and Christopher Prendergast (eds), *Signs of the Times* (Cambridge: Granta, 1971), p. 11.

10) See Susan Sontag (ed.), *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982/London: Jonathan Cape, 1982) and Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

11) Colin MacCabe, op. cit., p. 15.

12) Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Random House, 1984/London: Penguin: 1986). No reader of Lacan's work has been published in English. The first English translation of his numerous *seminars* translated in English was *Écrits*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W Norton & Co, 1982) [originally published in French with the same title by Édition du Seuil, Paris, 1966]. Note: the English translator, Alan Sheridan (under the surname Sheridan-Smith) translated Sollers' *Le Parc* in 1968. See note 17 below for publishing details.

*l'expérience des limites* which had been published in 1971; and this latter paperback text was a selection of the essays which had already appeared in *Logiques* in 1968.<sup>13)</sup> 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*.<sup>14)</sup> 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.<sup>15)</sup>

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13) Philippe Sollers, *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, ed. by David Hayman, trans. by Philip Barnard with David Hayman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)[original French edition: *L'Écriture et l'expérience des limites* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. 'Points', 1971).] The latter is a selection of essays from Sollers' *Logiques*.

14) Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981/London: Athlone Press, 1981). [Originally published as *La Dissémination* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1972).] And Julia Kristeva, 'The Novel as Polylogue', in Leon S. Roudiez (ed.), *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980/Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), pp. 159-209. [Originally published in *Polylogue* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1977) and before that in *Tel Quel*, no. 57, spring 1974.]

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 French 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 Lack (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'.<sup>16)</sup> 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.<sup>17)</sup> 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.<sup>18)</sup> Although in his 'Introduction' to this Reader,

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the 'Interview with Marcelin Pleynet' in *Parallax*, Vol, 4, No. 1, pp. 13-22 and, in the same issue, Stephen Bann, 'Marcelin Pleynet and the System of Painting', pp. 55-72. *Compact* by Maurice Roche has been translated by Mark Polizzati as *Compact* (Illinois University Press: Dalkey Archive Publishers, 1988). For Jacqueline Risset *The Translation Begins (Series d'écriture, no. 10)* (New York: Burning Deck Books, 1996). I have translated some of the poetry of Jacqueline Risset: cf. *Seven Passages From the Life of a Woman, Heretic 1* (London, 1977) [originally published in French as *Sept passages de la vie d'une femme, Tel Quel* and then in book form by Flammarion, Paris, coll. 'théâtre poésie', 1985] and *The Small Mark on the Stomach: 9 Poems of Mnemosyne and En Voyage, Heretic 2* (London, 1982) [originally published in *Tel Quel*, No. 90, Winter 1981, pp. 69-73].

16) Philip Thody, 'Introduction' *Writer Sollers*, op. cit., p. 18.

17) Philippe Sollers, *The Park*, trans by Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968/New York: Red Dust, 1969) [originally published as *Le Parc* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1961)].

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.<sup>19)</sup> 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.<sup>20)</sup>

At the time of the publication, then, of the English translation of *Sollers*

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18) John Fletcher and John Calder (eds), *The Nouveau Roman Reader* (London: John Calder, 1986/New York: Riverrun Press, 1986).

19) Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London: Elek Books, 1972/Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), Chapter 5, 'Philippe Sollers'.

20) Cf. Philippe Sollers, *Théorie des exceptions* (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, coll. 'Tel Quel', 1985).

*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*)<sup>21)</sup> - were out of print (apart from *The Parc*) and, significantly, Sollers had explicitly disowned both of them.<sup>22)</sup> 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 straightaway 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.<sup>23)</sup> 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

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21) Philippe Sollers, *The Challenge*, trans. by Jean Stewart in Pamela Lyon (ed.), *French Short Stories 1* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 215-65 [originally published as 'Le Défi', *Ecrire* 4 (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1957), pp. 3-29]. And *A Strange Solitude*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1959/London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1961) [originally published as *Une curieuse solitude* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1958)].

22) Cf. Sollers interview with Jean-Louis de Rambure in *Le Monde*, 29 November 1979.

23) Roland Barthes, *Sollers scrittore: La dissidenza della scrittura* (Milano : Sugarco, 1979).



*Drame* onwards<sup>24)</sup>

The fact that Sollers rejected the fictional works he had written before *Drame* (1965) is revealing when considering the reception of his *oeuvre* 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"'.<sup>25)</sup> 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.'<sup>26)</sup> In an anthology of eight short stories Sollers' '*Le Défi*' (for which he had been awarded the *Prix Fénelon 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.<sup>27)</sup> 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'.<sup>28)</sup>

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

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24) Philippe Sollers, *Dramma*, trans. by Jacqueline Risset (Turino: Einaudi, 1972); *Numeri*, trans. by E. Filippini (Turino: Einaud, 1973); *Paradisio*, trans. by G. Ernesti and F. Saba (Milano: Spirali, 1981); *Sul materialismo*, trans. by P. A. Rovatti (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1974) [originally published as *Sur le matérialisme: de l'atomisme à la dialectique révolutionnaire* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1974).]; *Visione a New York: Conversazione con David Hayman* (Milano : Spirali, 1981). [originally published as *Visions à New York : Entretiens David Hayman* (Paris : Bernard Grasset, 1981).]

25) Pamela Lyon (ed.), *French Short Stories 1*, op. cit., p. 274.

26) Ibid.

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.

28) Pamela Lyon, 'Introduction', *French Short Stories 1*, op. cit., p. 9.

note on Sollers that he had disowned both '*Le Défi*' and *Une curieuse solitude*.<sup>29)</sup> 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.<sup>30)</sup> 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 1* 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 percurrente*, *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.<sup>31)</sup> The perplexing factor regarding Sollers' practice of *l'écriture*

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29) Simon Watson Taylor (ed.), *French Writing Today* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968/New York: Grove Press, 1969), p. 351. This anthology contains 'Background' by Sollers, pp. 250-55 [originally published as 'Background' in *L'Intermédiaire* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. *Tel Quel*, 1963), pp. 137-47].

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 French

*percurrente* is this then: in the early 1980s, when he reverted to the writing of seemingly 'realist' novels *Femmes* (1983) and *Portrait du joueur* (1984), at the same time he continued to compose his on-going *Paradis*.<sup>32)</sup> 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.<sup>33)</sup> 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 *l'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.

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and Roland-François Lack (eds), *The Tel Quel Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 238-41. Lovitt's translation is of the extract of *Paradis* which appeared in *Tel Quel*, No. 62, Summer 1975, pp. 3-6. Similarly, only a short extract from Sollers' *H* has appeared in English translation. Cf. Inez Hege's translation in *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Fall 1974, pp. 102-5.

32) Philippe Sollers, *Femmes* (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1983) and *Portrait du joueur* (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1984). *Paradis II* was published by Éditions Gallimard in 1986.

33) Philippe Sollers, *Women*, trans. by Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

that it sunder flounder your death coma grossly inverted placenta cancer aureola from where i sit i see them drip drop by drop bazooka siphoned typhoon i'm back on the track bascule mask crackled states from forbears' portraits galleries pupils starred waxed flash foundation of aspiration trumpet pup passing on the quotient tidbit idiot famishing flashflood chromos of men sorrel bellows 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 farts 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 androgyn ball incubus succubus patched up settings they enter under their limboid lighting scarves of fog sashes of smog pleats of pus flabbied lamella fuzzy medusa look at this flood of lymph in globules narine sockets pinched upper lip in stiff pout possessing some say the ultimate extract of sperm boiled in ovule leucorrhoea wastes flowering basic wetting forever forgotten manna mob viscerated crust and crunch now they're packed tails plaited rats from plugged holes lead-coated molten shirt well then in the beginning was the waltz absurd gay harmonious java samba 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 rustle of willows in the silo winds winnowing pillows of wheat come tomorrow morn 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 leaves orangetrees laureltrees lemontrees what can it 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 filling up her mouth there aspirating the base balls figs tongue flickering length and breadth tell me when it comes make it come from even further down from the base of your bones<sup>34)</sup>

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 croulez sombrez votre mort coma grossé à l'envers placenta cancer auréole d'où je suis je les vois chutergoutte à goutte bazooka typhon siphonné j'ai de nouveau l'enfilade masque à bascule regards craquelés des portraits d'ancêtres galeries prunelles leur cirée entoillée fond d'aspiration pompe à trompe transmissions du quotient crétin au fretin affamant torrent chromos d'hommes cheval soufflet forge baleine bave naseaux mors babines velours 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 every moment. Diversion, integrated aphorism, effaced publicity, automatism, cut-up, routines, nursery rhymes, epiphanies, sequences-hinges in several disjunctive or contradictory space, reversed metrical fables, injected ellipses, rhetoric as far as the eye can see, saturated numberless stories.<sup>35)</sup>

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*allumé de fièvre il se sentent pourris dedans caviardés d'où ce grouillis vert étroit et caillé tube révolté sarbacane en pet car le rot en réalité se rôtit de vide il sonde la vésicule et le foie pour savoir si l'on est bien là vite un clin d'oeil sur ce bal masqué d'androgynes incubes succubes décors rapécés ils entrent dans leur éclairage limbique écharpes de brume foulards de brouillard plis de pus lamelles flasquées flous méduses regardez ce flot de lymphe en globules narines orbites pincées lèvres supérieur en moue rassurée possédant paraît-il l'extrait ultime de sperme bouille en ovule leucorrhée pertes fleurs blanches mouillure de base toujours oubliée manne tourbe croûton viscéral et crountch les violâ tastés queues tressées rats de trous en butoir plombé fondu merde or donc au commencement était la valse absurde gaie harmonieuse java samba ou bossa nova mais dieu fut jaloux et surtout sa dieue et elle prit son gode à souder et il avala sa potion bromure et ils se figèrent gâteaux dans la glace et depuis vagin suturé zizi ampoulé ils parlent en étant sexés comme si le sexe se laissait penser et violâ nos vies s'évanouissent odeurs sons couleurs et touchers glycines coins de noisetiers séve automne hiver bords d'été embrasse-moi mieux oui là plus bas non plus lèvres cerises foin cheveux dans la cave froissement d'osier au grenier tapis plancher viens demain matin dans ma chambre réveille-moi je veux être réveillé par toi ou encore soirs d'orage rendez-vous ou garage tiens ici couchés sur les feuilles orangers lauriers citronniers qu'est-ce que ça peut être pour elle ma queue durcie chaude qu'est-ce qui peut l'accrocher là chaque fois elle n'en finit pas de s'en barbouiller les joues les seins elle n'en finit pas d'y bloquer sa bouche aspirant le fond couilles figues frétilant la langue longuer et larguer dis-moi quand ça vient fais-le venir encore de plus loin depuis ton fond d'os*

35) Philippe Sollers, 'Deux interventions aux Etats-Unis', *Tel Quel*, No. 69, spring 1977, p. 8.

As thus characterized by Sollers himself what is this if it is not a veritable polymorphously perverse postmodern gallumafry!..perhaps only comparable with Joyce's incomparable poplymorphous 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'.<sup>36)</sup> 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'.<sup>37)</sup> 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 *délire* is transgressive in the following way:

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36) 'Vers la notion de Paradis', *Tel Quel*, No. 68, Winter 1976, p. 102. Republished in *Théorie des exceptions*, op. cit., p. 196. In a footnote Sollers writes: 'Courir à travers : per omnes civitates percurrat oratio mea...(la crainte se glissant tous les coeurs)' ['to run across: through all communities runs my discourse (fear penetrates all hearts)']. See also 'Vers la notion de Paradis (2)', *Tel Quel*, No. 75, Spring 1978, pp. 92-99.

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.<sup>38)</sup>

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 Défi*', taken from André Breton's *Nadja*, can help to throw light on the dilemma the uninitiated reader has to negotiate

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38) Ibid.