

# The Independent Robert Pinget 27 August 1997

Robert Pinget trained to be a lawyer, had ideas of becoming a cellist, tried to live in Paris as a painter, and ended up being a novelist, one of the most artful, distinctive and enjoyable novelists to have written in French since 1945.

A great first influence, and a friend, was Samuel Beckett, who liked what Pinget wrote and even translated some of it into an Irish English. They were alike in their famous reticence, their anxieties and their saving humour; and in writing above all in loving imitation of the human voice.

Pinget was soon associated with the writers of the "nouveau roman" (the "New Novel"), much brasher figures than himself, who had broken fiercely away from the dead (as they believed) conventions of straightforward plots and well-formed characters. In his unassuming way, he joined the avant-garde, though he would

take no real part in its propaganda for itself.

As stories, his novels never add up, because they are full of hilarious backtracking and contradictions; and he creates no graspable characters, only hauntingly garrulous voices, forming the most unreliable and inventive of choruses – understandably, he was drawn to write also for the radio, and produced some memorable radio plays. Language, not events, is what obsesses Pinget, who said, in one of the rare accounts he ever gave publicly of how he worked, that in each new novel he was trying to find and maintain a certain "tone".

This was one reminder of his expertise in music; another was the actual title of one of his best books, *La passacaille* (1969), which is a transposition into prose of that complicated musical form, and evidence that, random though they could easily seem, Pinget's novels are

made with the utmost care and artistry. Strict in form but wild in subject-matter, they are without exception a delight.

Largely, too, they interlock, being located in the one imaginary French province "between Fantoine and Agapa" as his very first title (1951) has it, where melodramatic and usually rather nasty things are forever happening (or are said to be happening). This unholy district is fertile in legend, scandal and criminality, even if nothing of what gets said there is ever finally confirmed as fact.

Pinget's masterpiece in this mock-epic genre is his longest novel, of 1961, *L'inquisiteur* ("The Inquisitory"), which is offered as the transcript of a forensic investigation that uncovers a glorious variety of local turpitude, with so many ramifications that it rambles to a close only because the inquisitor is too exhausted to continue.

Pinget's chosen territory is not at all a nice place, seeing what great malevolence most of its inhabitants feel towards one another, and what a lot of not necessarily comic death it contains.

He did not take a cheerful view, in fact, either of human life or of what it ends in, so that there is a thoroughly sombre edge to his comedy. In his later novels he is writing, I suspect, as a religious believer, for whom the Logos had at last come to seem a uniquely credible voice, sounding somewhere above the futile human cacophany.

Pinget remained to the end a writer ill at ease in the world and shy of publicity, a man "of inconceivable modesty" in the words of his own publisher. He seems even to have worried that he had given himself to literature for unworthy reasons, as an evasion, when he should have been doing something more useful in life, or more serious.

His readers – and there should be more of them – can be forever grateful that he chose to spend his time as he did, writing.

**John Sturrock**

*Robert Pinget, novelist and dramatist; born Geneva, Switzerland 19 July 1919; author of Fantoine et Agapa 1951, Mahu et le matériau 1952, Le renard et la boussole 1955, Graal-Flibuste 1956, Baga 1958, Le fiston 1959, Lettre morte 1959, La manivelle 1960, Clope au dossier 1961, Architruc 1961, L'hypothèse 1961, L'inquisiteur 1962, Quelqu'un 1965, Autour de Mortin 1965, Le libera 1968, La passacaille 1969, Fable 1971, Identité, Abel et Bela 1971, Paralchimie 1973, Cette voix 1975, L'Apocryphe 1980, Monsieur Songe 1982, Le harnais 1984, L'Ennemi 1987, Théo ou le temps neuf 1991; died Tours, France 25 August 1997.*