



# Philippe Sollers, Secret Agent

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:  
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The protagonists of Philippe Sollers' last three novels, *Studio*, *Le secret*, and *La fête à Venise*, are secret agents. In the five before them, from *Le lys d'or* back to *Femmes* in 1983, the heroes engage in a figurative espionage which is expressed in their writing: writing becomes an underground activity. Underlying the myriad of themes that super-nourish these eight novels, secret agency is like the musical ground, the persistent figure that determines all progression on the levels of both form and content.

Sollers is nothing if not controversial. Few are his champions, many his detractors, and the evolution toward a clandestine mode is very likely a response to this fact. For Sollers, secret agency figuratively designates the writer who has something new to say -- and that can apply even to a Balzac, whom Sollers describes as an immense writer able to organize himself to write, with his secret police and his private information network. More and more insistently, in these novels, all autobiographical, Sollers poses his protagonist in the position which he himself has assumed: the writer who has organized his life like a clandestine operative with a purpose. In the strong language of the Preface to *La guerre du goût*, a brilliant collection of essays and critical pieces, Sollers rejoins: "Que l'auteur ait été tenu tour à tour, et parfois de façon réversible, pour précoce, classique, moderniste, maoïste, insignifiant, farceur, imposteur, schizophrène, paranoïaque, infantile, nul, libertin, papiste, voltairien, et j'en passe, n'a pas grand-chose à voir avec ce qu'il se propose de faire entendre" ("The fact that the author has been considered in turn, and sometimes reversibly, as precocious, classical, modernist, Maoist, insignificant, jokester, impostor, schizophrenic, paranoid, infantile, nonentity, libertine, papist, and Voltairian, to name a few, has little to do with what he intends to make known").

Sollers is a key person in the French avant-garde. His influence on the intellectual and artistic milieu of Paris since 1960 simply cannot be ignored. Author of seventeen novels and at least twenty other books on topics including literary and interpretive theory and art, and of hundreds of articles and interviews; editor of the journals *Tel Quel* and *L'Infini* and of two book series; media presence and film and video maker; social critic and conscience of the declining twentieth century, Sollers has been leaving an indelible mark on the past forty years. This is the man of whom Bernard-Henri Lévy has written: "In the panorama of our renewed late twentieth-century letters . . . Sollers has a stature, whether we wish it or not, which honors and obliges him, that of the greatest of contemporary writers." My readings in the Sollers opus have convinced me that this claim deserves a serious critical assessment.

His is the voice of the social critic typically scolding the milieu (French intellectuals) for generally failing to *think*, in the strong, Heideggerian sense of the term. His is the voice of a relentless gadfly stinging his contemporaries into reading strong writers such as Marcel Proust truthfully and fully and without repressing the stunning discoveries that Proust's writing represents. A profound humanism motivates his writing, under cover of an ironic manner. Sollers has always used his novels to pursue his social criticism. He has claimed that the works from the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s--*Drame*, *Nombres*, *Lois*, *H*, *Paradis*--are to be read as counter-arguments to the "society of the spectacle" whose intense presence dominates the period, as Guy Debord has shown. The later novels, *Femmes*, *Portrait du*

*joueur*, *Le Cœur Absolu*, *Les folies françaises*, "may be the only novels that systematically critique the spectacular in its entirety [in spite of the fact that] they are simultaneously understood, deformed, and 'unrealized' by the surveillance of the spectacular," Sollers has written. In spite of their recuperation, this critique from within the spectacle has intensified with the novels written since 1989: *La fête à Venise*, *Le lys d'or*, *Le secret*, and *Studio*. Sollers uses all of his novels to argue his theses about society, a...

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