

**Paradigm and Deviation: The Role
of *Vraisemblance* and Self-Referentiality
in the Comic Novel**

by
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The three comic novels which will be analyzed in this study, *L'Histoire comique de Francion*, *Le Roman comique*, and *Le Roman bourgeois* are works which, through the centuries, have defied classification. Antoine Adam alone refers to them at various times as realistic, comic, burlesque and anti-novels. Indeed, the works themselves offer contradictory cues since in each there are claims made at various points, and through various explicit narrational ploys, that the narratives are historically accurate documents and represent universally accepted truths—at least within the parameters of the "universe" of seventeenth-century France. Yet, these works appear to subvert these claims as they expose the "fictional" components of the work, and underscore the originality or uniqueness of the text. The three texts, then, are apparently supporting two opposing literary aims. On the one hand they assert a respect for the standards of *vraisemblance*, the cornerstone of the classical doctrine. But on the other hand, since they expose the mechanics of fictional creation and explore the processes and functions of the text, they appear to be self-referential. This apparent contradiction recalls Paul Ricoeur's observation the "narrative literature, among all poetic works, is a model of practical actuality by its deviations as much as by its paradigm" (80). This study will address the problematics of both the deviations and the paradigm of the comic novel in the context of seventeenth-century French fiction.

Let us begin by defining and contrasting self-referentiality and *vraisemblance*. Generally, the objective of a self-referential work is, as has been mentioned, the exploration of its nature as fictional

construct, which is effectuated in a broad sense, through representation of creation, in this fictional context. Self-referential fiction, according to Michael Boyd, is born from the recognition "that the relationship between reality and its representation in fictional discourse is problematic...[and thus it] seeks to examine the act of writing itself" (7). Not only does the self-referential text play upon the problematic of textual creation, but it also implicates reception of the text, since the reader of a self-referential text is forced to confront the fact that s/he is participating in a "fictional," and not a "real", world. At this point his/her willing-suspension of disbelief, which is necessary to the reading of "realistic" or "*vraisemblable*" texts, cannot be sustained (Boyd 7). This is further complicated by the fact that in many texts the reader is called upon to participate or become creatively engaged in the production of the text (Hutcheon 5). The reader is forced to deal with a particular level of mimesis which traditionally is not analyzed, which Ricoeur calls "mimesis₂," or the mimetic operation of emplotment and the process of ordering (65). In self-referential fiction the components which make the work an "emplotted ordering" or dictional construct are emphasized, with the "as if", to use Ricoeur's term, functioning as the primary object being represented (64). Essentially, what we have is mimesis of the process of literary creation, which can be opposed to the more traditional "mimesis of product," or representation of empirical reality (Hutcheon 36-47).

The various aspects of self-referentiality which are present in *Francion*, *Le Roman comique*, and *Le Roman bourgeois* which will be explored in this study are: the tendency to expose or comment upon the act of writing or the act of retelling a story, which in turn draws attention to the process of emplotment; the emphasis on the narrator narrating, functioning as the voice or agent of representation whose primary role is that of teller and not necessarily that of character within the story; the recurring intertextual criticism, often negative, of other authors and their works; and the manner in which inconsistent, arbitrary ordering of

events makes the narrative "unbelievable" or *invraisemblable* for the reader.

These elements seem to be fundamentally opposed to other elements in the same texts which seem to uphold the more "traditional" or "classical" Aristotelian model of Art, since these comic novels also make the claim that their purpose is to educate and correct the faults of the reader. They also claim to be "true," historically accurate accounts, and thus *vraisemblable*.

The French seventeenth-century notion of *vraisemblance* is based on the Aristotelian model where Art is understood to function as mimesis, the imitation of Nature. The purpose of Art is to teach and delight, to represent universal truths in such a manner as to edify the reader (Zebouni 63-73). Boileau reiterates this scheme in his preface of 1701, "L'esprit de l'homme est naturellement plein d'un nombre infini d'idées confuses du vrai, que souvent n'entrevoit qu'à demi; et rien ne lui est plus agréable que lorsqu'on lui offre quelqu'une de ces idées bien éclaircie et mise dans un beau jour" (21). This process is effectuated through, or mediated by, Reason, which is understood to be a universal constant which determines standards, since according to Boileau, "La raison pour marcher n'a que souvent une voie" (Chant I). Reason, then, functions as a determinant in setting the standards of *vraisemblance*. René Bray explains the dependency of *vraisemblance* on reason as follows, "...[vraisemblance est] la règle essentielle de notre doctrine. dictée par la raison, fondée sur la fin morale assignée à la poésie, elle contient l'interprétation véritable du naturalisme classique" (192). Bray also states the *vraisemblance* does not depend on scientific possibility or history, but instead on the reception of the work, which is to say on public opinion (148). This echoes Boileau who offers the following warning to authors:

Jamais au spectateur n'offrez rien d'incroyable:
Le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas
[vraisemblable. (Chant III)]

For seventeenth-century philosophers and authors mimesis generally consists of the representation of like essences, of Nature itself. That fiction and empirical reality are not essentially similar, and that the Aristotelian model may be problematic, is a question that few critics have explored.¹ One only has to read Bray's work to note that much more has been written on the function of *vraisemblance* than on its exact definition. Also there were many different opinions as to the requirements of *vraisemblance* (Bray 140-158). It would then seem that instead of setting absolute standards or acting as fundamental determinant of the classical doctrine, *vraisemblance* arguably functions itself as a product of its own historicity and of the literature which it is "supposed" to mold. Indeed, Boileau's spectators seem to enjoy a privileged position in determining acceptable standards: "N'offrez rien au lecteur que ce qui peut lui plaire" (Chant I). That literary standards are themselves literary products is the conclusion reached by Jeanne Haight in her study of reason of the seventeenth century. She states that the attributes of reason for seventeenth-century French literature must be found in the literature itself. Thus we can argue that reason, and by extension *vraisemblance*, which is "dictée par la raison," should not be considered as enjoying primacy over literature, or as defining literary standards, if they themselves are literary constructs.

To continue in this train of reasoning, then, one could argue that the line separating *vraisemblance* and self-referentiality becomes blurred since both appear to be defined through, and produced by, fiction itself. This would support the position taken by various critics that all literature is to some degree self-referential, metafictional, or reflexive, since to some degree all literature explores its own nature as a dictional construct (Boyd 16; Hutcheon 7; Alter 1-29). Thus the analysis of what constitutes self-referentiality in the seventeenth century becomes a compelling task. As Robert Seigle states in *The Politics of Reflexivity*:

...the fact [is] that reflexivity is a basic capability of narrative exercised in every period, historical schematizations notwithstanding. Reflexivity has always been with us and is not just a function of the modern novel's reflection of the breakdown of cultural consensus... [Reflexivity] is everywhere in narrative, in all periods and forms, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, always revealing the conceptual puddle over which fiction gallantly casts its narrative cloak so we can cross untroubled by the fluidity of our footing. (3-4)

As has been briefly mentioned in the introduction, the three comic novels treated in this study demonstrate a playfulness toward fictional creation which results in an ambivalent attitude toward *vraisemblance*. We find the likes of Scarron going on record as being confined by the dictates of *vraisemblance*, when he states:

...mais, par malheur ou par ma faute, je n'ai pu empêcher mon héros d'être condamné à être pendu à Pontoise, et cette pendrie-là est si vraisemblable que je ne crois pas la pouvoir changer en quelque autre aventure sans donner une mauvaise suite à mon roman et faire une faute de jugement. (15-16) (emphasis mine)

Similarly, in their works Scarron, Sorel, and Furetière and/or their narrators lambast the *invraisemblance* or excesses of the herioc and pastoral novels. For example Francion laments "...de la negligence et de l'infidelité des auteurs de ce siècle" (153). In another passage Francion makes a less antagonistic accusation when he states:

C'estoit donc mon passe-temps que de lire des Chevaleries, et faut que je vous die que cela m'espoïnçonnoit le courage, et me donnoit des desires nompareils d'aller chercher les aventures par le monde. Car il me sembloit qu'il me seroit aussi facile de couper un homme d'un

seul coup par la moitié, qu'une pomme. (172)
(emphasis mine)

In what may be viewed as a contrary stance to the exaggerations or inaccuracies of certain texts, there is the criticism often levied against the heroic or pastoral novels for their interminable descriptions. Scarron's narrator indirectly alludes to this "fault" when he states that he will not fall into the same trap: "...j'en pourrais dire cent choses rares, que je laisse de peur d'être trop long" (72). Later he adds: "Je ne vous dirai point exactement s'il avait soupé et s'il se coucha sans manger, comme font quelques faiseurs de romans..." (90). The tone becomes even more sarcastic in the following passage:

Je ne vous dirai point si les flambeaux que tenaient les demoiselles étaient d'argent...et la salle était la plus magnifique du monde et, si vous voulez, aussi bien meublée que quelques appartements de nos romans, comme le vaisseau de Zalmandre dans le *Polexandre*, le palais d'Ibrahim dans l'*Illustre Bassa*, ou la chambre où le roi d'Assyrie reçut Mandane, dans le *Cyrus*, qui est sans doute, aussi bien que les autres que j'ai nommés, le livre du monde le mieux meublé. (94)

In a similar example *le conseiller* says:

...il n'y a rien de plus divertissant que quelques romans modernes, que les Français seuls en savaient faire de bons... Et il conclut que, si l'on faisait des nouvelles en français, aussi bien faites que quelques-unes de celles de Michel de Cervantés, elles auraient cours autant que les romans héroïques. (185)

Roquebrune immediately raises an objection:

Il dit fort absolument qu'il n'y avait point de plaisir à lire des romans s'ils n'étaient composés d'aventures de princes, et encore de grands

princes, et que par cette raison-là l'*Astrée* ne lui avait plus qu'en quelques endroits. (185)

In what proves to be an important and unusual twist, this objection is considered frivolous by *le conseiller* as well as by Le Destin, who takes issue with Roquebrune's criticism of *Don Quixote* by countering: "Prenez garde...qu'il ne vous déplaie par votre faute plutôt que par la sienne" (185). This passage affords an interesting alternative to what had been the tendency in the *Roman comique* to engage in intertextual author-bashing. Here we find a text, *Don Quixote*, which is actually lauded. What is remarkable about this particular text is that it is considered to be the earliest self-referential text or "modern" text of western literature (Alter 1-29; Boyd 17). Is it then a coincidence that it is acclaimed in a text which itself, as is being argued here, is another example of a self-referential text?

In the *Roman bourgeois* we once again find many other examples of criticism of the traditional, heroic or pastoral novels. The author/narrator of this is much more aggressive in his criticism of the excesses of earlier texts. He claims that the tradition of Virgil and Tasso has become totally worthless:

...depuis que feu Virgile a chanté Enée et ses armes, et que Le Tasse, de poétique mémoire, a distingué son ouvrage par chants, leurs successeurs, qui n'étaient pas meilleurs musiciens que moi, ont tous répété la même chanson, et ont commencé d'entonner sur la même note. (29)²

As another example the author states in the preface of Book Two: "N'attendez pas non plus que je réserve à marier tous mes personnages à la fin du livre, où on voit d'ordinaire célébrer autant de noces qu'à un carnaval" (167). The author/narrator of this novel goes further than those of the other comic novels in criticizing heroic and pastoral novels as he states:

Que si vous êtes si désireux de voir comme on découvre sa passion, je vous en indiquerai plusieurs moyens qui sont dans l'Amadis, dans l'Astrée, dans Cyrus et dans tous les autres romans, que je n'ai pas le loisir ni le dessein de copier ni de dérober, comme ont fait la plupart des auteurs, qui se sont servis des inventions de ceux qui avaient écrit auparavant eux. (66)

He demonstrates a determined resistance to incorporate literary clichés into this text, omitting elements "car je les ouï dire mille fois" (72). He continues later: "...vous devez savoir 20 ou 30 de ces entretiens par coeur, pour peu que vous ayez de mémoire. Ils sont si communs..." (156).

He goes a step further and takes on the voice of the authors whom he criticizes, or at least his version of what that voice might be:

Un autre auteur moins sincère, et qui voudrait paraître éloquent, ne manquerait jamais de faire ici une description magnifique de cette place [la place Maubert]. Il commencerait son éloge par l'orgine de son nom; il dirait qu'elle a été anoblie par ce fameux docteur Albert le Grand, qui y tenait son école, et qu'elle fut appelée autrefois la place de M^e Albert, et, par succession de temps, la place Maubert. que si, par occasion, il écrivait la vie et les ouvrages de son illustre parrain, il ne serait pas le premier qui aurait fait une digression aussi peu à propos. Après cela il la bâtirait superbement selon la dépense qu'y voudrait faire son imagination. Le dessin de la place Royale ne le contenterait pas; il faudrait du moins qu'elle fût aussi belle que celle où se faisaient les carrousels, dans la galante et romanesque ville de Grenade. (30)

So not only is there a criticism of the excessive detail and description of previous works, there is also quite an explicit example of how the representation of

"physical reality" can be distorted by representation through language in literature. He even goes one step further in this commentary: he claims that this sort of distortion of "fact" and "reality" is presented as institutionalized in the narrative tradition since it is not the exception but rather the rule. This can be viewed as yet another reason why the comic novel is considered as realistic: because of its opposition to the standards of previous literary texts and idealized characters, the inconceivable and worn-out plots, and the excessive length.

In opposition to this comic tradition, authors claim to naively represent the reality which surrounds them. Sorel, in the *Advertissement d'importance aux lecteurs*, states: "...je me donne bien la licence d'estimer que j'ay représenté aussi naïvement qu'il se pouvoit faire, les humeurs, les actions, et les propos ordinaires de toutes les personnes que l'ay mises sur les rangs..." (46). Furetière echoes this claim in the preface to Book One: "Au lieu de vous tromper par ces vaines subtilités, je vous raconterai sincèrement et avec fidélité plusieurs historiottes ou galanteries arrivées entre des personnes..." (30).

The ultimate goal of this "faithful" and "accurate" representation of "reality" was essential in upholding the Aristotelian notion in which the purpose of Art is to teach and delight. This is the stated aim in each of the texts. In *Francion*, the author states in the *advertissement*: "Jamais je n'eusse fait veoir ceste pièce, sans le desir que j'ay de monstrier aux hommes les vices ausquels ils se laissent insensiblement emporter" (45). The *Roman comique* has basically the same stated aim: "...j'instruirai en divertissant de la même façon qu'un ivrogne donne de l'aversion pour son vice et peut quelquefois donner du plaisir par les impertinences que lui fait faire son ivrognerie" (111). The very first lines of the preface of Book One of the *Roman bourgeois* read as follows:

Ami lecteur, quoique tu n'achètes et ne lises ce livre que pour ton plaisir, si néanmoins tu n'y

trouvais autre chose, tu devrais avoir regret à ton temps et à ton argent. Aussi je te puis assurer qu'il n'a pas été fait seulement pour divertir, mais que son premier dessein a été d'instruire. (23)

These claims are not, however, supported by other positions taken in these same texts. For example, from the preface of *Francion*, the earliest of the comic novels, there is the expressed skepticism of language to act as a conduit of meaning:

...je me doute bien que comme ceux qui ont un verre peint devant les yeux ne peuvent veoir les choses en leur propre couleur, presque tous ceux qui liront mes escrits ayant le jugement offusqué feront toute une autre estime de mes opinion, qu'ils ne devroient. (45)

The preface to the *Roman bourgeois* offers the following warning to the reader of how language can obscure rather than illuminate meaning: "Je sais bien que le premier soin que tu auras en lisant ce roman, ce sera d'en chercher la clef, mais elle ne te servira de rien, car la serrure est mêlée" (24). These authors demonstrate the skepticism characteristic of the seventeenth century—one has only to think of Descartes, Gassendi, and Pascal, and Port Royal—which in this case extends to language and language's capacity to represent.

In addition to the stated instability of language to represent, there is a distinction made even within the parameters of the limitations of language, that history is "truer" and more powerful than fiction. In *Francion* fiction is presented as actually incapable of effectuating any influence in the course of history. It is therefore completely powerless: "...et lors que je me representois que tout cela n'estoit que fiction, je disois que l'on avoit tort néanmoins d'en censurer la lecture" (172-173). In the *Roman comique* the task of an historian is presented as being much more rigorous than that of an author: "Quoiqu'un fidèle et exact

historien soit obligé à particulariser les accidents importants de son histoire et les lieux où ils se sont passés, je ne vous dirai pas fort juste en quel endroit de notre hémisphère était la maisonnette où Ragotin mena ses confrères futurs..." (304). The silence in the text is rendered meaningless because there can be only one hemisphere in question. However, it does underscore the different rules under which historians and authors of literature are compelled to write. In the same vein the playfulness of this passage opposes the "seriousness" or "rigidity" of historical texts.

For Art to function as mimesis in literature, language must, on the one hand, be capable of completely representing Nature. When Scarron compares the quality of the representation in fiction to visual representation, he deems language to be inferior, as he states: "Au défaut de la peinture, je m'en vais te dire à peu près comme je suis fait" (49). And he proceeds to give a detailed description of himself as if the reader were examining him visually.

There are many other aspects of representation which are problematized. Instead of acting as a unifying agent, the act of representation is seen as a corrupting force. For example, in the *Roman bourgeois*, in spite of the criticism levied by the author/narrator against other authors who distort the truth, and in spite of his claim to naively represent Nature, the author/narrator admits: "Nos amants n'étaient point de condition à avoir de tels officiers, de sorte que je n'en ai rien pu apprendre que ce qui en a paru en public...mais j'en ai appris un peu de l'un et un peu de l'autre, et, à n'en point mentir, j'y ai mis aussi un peu du mien" (66). In fact the narrator demonstrates his manipulation of the text to such an extent that he emerges as the novel's main character. From one moment to the next he may be a literary critic, a moralist, a satirist, or an historian. He plays upon these various identities and contradicts himself to such a degree that he eventually subverts his own function in the novel, which is that of storyteller. He

becomes the playmaker, as the fiction-making process goes wild.

In the *Roman comique*, representation is not immediate. There exists instead a temporal gap between the moment of the "original" act and the point of recounting it. This is evident from the first chapter where "...l'auteur se reposa quelque temps et se mit à songer à ce qu'il dirait dans le second chapitre" (67). This same situation is repeated, and thus emphasized, at the beginning of chapter XVIII where the author/narrator states: "J'ai fait le précédent chapitre un peu court, peut-être que celui-ci sera plus long; je n'en suis pourtant pas bien assuré, nous allons voir" (167).

This gap is present throughout *Francion* since the narrator's role is that of narrator of his life story, much of which he represents through past events. He is thus representing himself as Other, different than he is at the moment of re-telling. Among the differences which distinguish Francion-character from Francion-narrator is a naive reader of fiction, believing that all fiction is historically accurate:

...que ju croyais que toutes les fables de Poètes qu'ils racontoient, fussent des choses véritables...mesme je croyais que tout ce que l'on disoit des tranformations fut véritable... Je n'estois pas tout seul abusé, car je sçay de bonne part, que quelques un des Maistres avoient une opinion semblable. (217-218)

Thus as a reader of fiction Francion-narrator has been transformed into an avowed skeptic. There is a larger case to be made, however, since what Sorel presents to us is a *mise en abyme* of the act of reading, which serves ironically as a warning to the reader not to believe the narrative which s/he is in the process of discovering. The *Roman bourgeois* offers the same warning but in an explicit manner: "O! que les pauvres lecteurs sont trompés quand ils lisent un poète de bonne foi, et qu'ils prennent les vers au pied de la

lettre! Ils se forment de belles idées de personnes qui sont chimériques, ou qui ne ressemblent en aucune façon à l'original" (126).

Another manner by which the comic novels oppose the standards of *vraisemblance* is over the question of the relationship of form and content. Following the classical notion of *vraisemblance*, language must be transparent and not detract from that which is being represented. According to Boileau, in any good work of literature content determines form (Chant I). Therefore form and content should blend harmoniously as dictated by the standards of Reason. Yet if we look at the names of some of the titles in the *Roman comique* we see how form predominates over content. Chapter V is entitled "Qui ne contient pas grand-chose," chapter VIII is entitled "Dans lequel on verra plusieurs choses nécessaires à savoir pour l'intelligence du présent livre," chapter XI is entitled "Qui contient ce que vous verrez, si vous prenez la peine de le lire," chapter I of the second part is entitled "Qui ne sert que d'introduction aux autres," chapters XI and XII are entitled respectively "Des moins divertissants du présent volume" and "Qui divertira peut-être aussi peu que le précédent." Finally the third to last chapter of the book is entitled "Qui n'a pas besoin de titre." Indirectly *Don Quixote* is evoked once again as a standard to be respected, or gently parodied, since these chapter headings are reminiscent of those of the *Quixote*: "The amusing way in which he is dubbed a Knight;" "The terrifying and unprecedented adventure of the Windmills...;" "The conversation that took place between Sancho Panza and his master Don Quixote, together with some adventures worth recording;" "The quaint and delightful adventure that befell the curate and the barber in the same Sierra;" "Other strange adventures at the inn." In each text the framework of assigning titles to chapters is exposed, as well as the value system established by the author to critique his own text. The role of the author is thus expanded to include that of literary critic.

At the end of the *Roman bourgeois* we find another salient example of how form can achieve dominance over content, as the plot of the novel fades into growing obscurity and is finally reduced to a description of an inventory of books left by the dead poet Mythophilacte. This inventory has been scorned by critics who view it as fragmenting and disrupting the narrative (Döring 401-424). However it appears that a case can be made for the inventory itself to be interpreted as a model of the *Roman bourgeois* in that on one level they both appear as independent, fragmented narrative elements assembled under one title. Yet on another level, in the inventory in particular and the novel in general, the notion prevails that Art is born from a concern for monetary gain and a desire for glory. The last entry in the inventory is: "Somme dédicatoire, ou examen général de toutes les questions qui se peuvent faire touchant la dédicace des livres, divisée en quatre volumes" (234). The "somme dédicatoire" essentially reduces literature to a profit-making venture, with this entry underscoring the importance for the author to be well versed in the style of writing book dedications. Money and profit are central concerns throughout the *Roman bourgeois*. As is stated in the preface of Book One, the book only exists because the publisher is motivated to make money through the sale of the book. This desire motivates him to become "author" of the preface; it becomes the impetus to the act of writing. In the same way the act of reading is caught up in economic implications. It is not a gratuitous act in that to be a reader of the book one must first buy it: "Ami, lecteur, quoique tu n'achètes et ne lises ce livre que pour ton plaisir...tu devrais avoir regret à ton temps et à ton argent" (23). So according to the publisher, money becomes a measure of a competent reader, who will "get his money's worth" by reading for more than just pleasure. We have come very far from the Aristotelian model where literature exists on a superior plane, where it serves to correct faults of the reader while affording pleasure and moments of reflection on moral, ethical, or spiritual issues. Instead what the

reader is reminded of in the *Roman bourgeois* is the "bottom line."

Indeed Furetière's novel chronologically marks the end of the cycle of comic novels, but more importantly this novel is the most radical in its difference from the heroic and pastoral tradition. To recall Ricoeur's observation that narration distinguished itself as much by its deviation to the paradigm as by its upholding the paradigm, we find that in the *Roman bourgeois* deviation becomes the rule. Through textual subversions and lack of a coherent plot structure, the mechanics of creating fiction is laid bare, not masked by the illusion that it represents anything other than fiction itself.

So how is one to reconcile the problem posed at the beginning of this study where on one hand these comic novels claim to be *vraisemblable* but on the other, through various textual antics destroy this illusion, as they become more explicitly self-referential. Through the self-referential text's questioning of language's capacity to represent, it sets itself apart from empirical reality. Through the self-referential text's insistence on form, where the "process" of fictional creation overshadows representation of a "product," it makes a commentary on its own nature as fiction. Through having the narrator in a self-referential text exercise full freedom of creation, it allows for the exploration of a manner in which fictional constructs take form. It would appear, then, that a self-referential work has as its objective the representation of fictional creation. In that way a self-referential text can be viewed as *vraisemblable* since it represents the process of how meaning is generated and identities are established in fiction.

Conversely, *vraisemblance* should be considered as self-referential since it is itself a literary product. And thus, by extension, its commentary on literary standards cannot itself serve as a definitive standard, since there appear to be many different ideas of what *vraisemblance* should be, and since, more importantly,

vraisemblance is itself a literary construct. In this way the distance between *vraisemblance*/paradigm and self-referentiality/deviation ultimately vanishes.

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Notes

¹A most notable exception is Selma Zebouni in "Classicisme et vraisemblance."

²For a more focused study on the narrator in the *Roman bourgeois*, see my article, "Framing the Narrative: the *Roman bourgeois* as Metafiction" in *PFSL*, Vol. XVI (1989), 179-184.

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