



University  
of Glasgow

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>

Theses Digitisation:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/research/enlighten/theses/digitisation/>

This is a digitised version of the original print thesis.

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study,  
without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first  
obtaining permission in writing from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any  
format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author,  
title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>  
[research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk)



ProQuest Number: 10753944

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10753944

Published by ProQuest LLC (2018). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

THE FICTION OF  
NATHALIE SARRAUTE

A study of her work from Tropismes to  
Vous les entendez?

by

Sheila Margaret Bell

Thesis submitted  
for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Glasgow  
February 1976



Thesis  
4368  
Copy 2.



# Contents

|   | <u>page</u> |
|---|-------------|
| Acknowledgements  | 3           |
| Declaration   | 4           |
| Introduction  | 5           |
| Chapter 1. <u>The substance of the novels:<br/>psychology and art</u> | 28          |
| Chapter 2. <u>Tropismes</u>   | 57          |
| Chapter 3. <u>Portrait d'un inconnu</u>                               | 80          |
| Chapter 4. <u>Martereau</u>   | 129         |
| Chapter 5. <u>Le Planétarium</u>                                      | 159         |
| Chapter 6. <u>Les Fruits d'or</u>                                     | 189         |
| Chapter 7. <u>Entre la vie et la mort</u>                             | 222         |
| Chapter 8. <u>Vous les entendez?</u>                                  | 251         |
| Chapter 9. <u>Nathalie Sarraute: twentieth-century<br/>novelist</u>   | 280         |
| <u>Bibliography</u>   | 298         |
| I <u>Works by Nathalie Sarraute</u>                                   | 299         |
| II <u>Works on Nathalie Sarraute</u>                                  | 302         |
| III <u>General</u>  | 305         |

### Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to Professor A. M. Boase who supervised this thesis in its early stages, to Professor R. D. D. Gibson for advice and encouragement during its final stages, and to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland which financed my post-graduate studies in Paris and in Glasgow. My grateful thanks are also due to Madame Nathalie Sarraute for her willingness to answer questions and for her friendly interest in, and appreciation of, my work.

### Declaration

Some sections of this thesis, in particular the greater part of the chapter on Tropismes, have been published as an introduction to an edition of Tropismes published in 1972 by Methuen Educational Limited in their Twentieth Century Texts series.

2

Introduction

7

Nathalie Sarraute's reputation as a writer is a well-established one. It is over forty years since she began hesitantly to write her first work and well over thirty since she found - with difficulty - a publisher for it. Sartre's famous preface, which presented her work as experimental, as one of a new breed of novels for which he chose the term 'anti-romans', appeared, with Portrait d'un inconnu, in 1948. Already in 1963, the year of the publication of Les Fruits d'or, a reviewer could write of her as follows: 'Elle est, si l'on peut dire, un classique de l'avant-garde.'<sup>1</sup> The judgment was confirmed in the following year by the award of the Prix international de littérature, a short-lived but prestigious prize.<sup>2</sup> The description was doubtless intended to affirm Nathalie Sarraute's achievements as a writer and to underline her peculiar status among the nouveaux romanciers, a status which she continues to be accorded. It is confirmed for example by her appearance on the first day of the décade held at Cérisy in 1971, or again by the pride of place she occupies in the list of new novelists who figure in Réal Ouellet's Les Critiques de notre temps et le nouveau roman.<sup>3</sup> It is the status not so much of a leader, but rather of a writer whose earliest work predates that of any other nouveau romancier and who, with that earliest work, established the field of endeavour within which she has continued to operate throughout her career.

At the same time, the particular phrase which François Erval chose, might be seen as expressing a certain ambivalence towards Nathalie Sarraute's work on the part of her critics. Sartre himself is of course one example

---

<sup>1</sup> François Erval, 'La grande tradition', L'Express, 25 avril 1963, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Fellow prize-winners were Beckett and Borges.

<sup>3</sup> Paris, 1972.

of this. His preface, at least on its second appearance (in 1956 when Portrait d'un inconnu was re-edited by Gallimard), was a factor in the establishment of Nathalie Sarraute's reputation and laid the basis for much of the constructive criticism she has received; yet he is also responsible for one of the most serious adverse criticisms which has been made of her work. In an interview published in 1960, he radically modified what he had written in 1948:

J'ai toujours trouvé remarquable (...) ce que fait Nathalie Sarraute. Mais elle croit atteindre par les échanges protoplasmiques qu'elle décrit, des relations inter-individuelles et élémentaires, alors qu'elle ne fait que montrer les effets abstraits et infinitésimaux d'un milieu social très défini: aisé, bourgeois, un peu mondain, où le travail et l'oisiveté ne se différencient jamais.<sup>4</sup>

For him at that time, her latest novel, Le Planétarium, is a 'livre de femme', by which he means 'un livre qui refuse de prendre à son compte ce que font les hommes'.<sup>5</sup> Thus Nathalie Sarraute herself falls victim to the fate which befell Proust and other early moderns and which she describes in ironic terms (their irony has too often gone unperceived) in L'Ere du soupçon:

Les gens intelligents, les esprits avancés à qui un auteur imprudent oserait avouer - mais qui l'ose? - son goût secret pour les 'endroits obscurs de la psychologie' ne manqueraient pas de lui dire avec un étonnement apitoyé: 'Ah! parce que vous croyez encore à tout cela? ...' Depuis les romans américains et les grandes vérités aveuglantes que n'a cessé de déverser sur nous la littérature de l'absurde, y a-t-il encore beaucoup de gens qui y croient? Joyce n'a tiré de ces fonds obscurs qu'un déroulement ininterrompu de mots. Quant à Proust, il a eu beau s'acharner à séparer en parcelles infimes la matière impalpable qu'il a ramenée des tréfonds de ses personnages, dans l'espoir d'en extraire je ne sais quelle substance anonyme dont serait composée l'humanité tout entière, à peine le lecteur referme-t-il son livre que par un irrésistible mouvement d'attraction toutes ces particules se collent les unes aux autres, s'amalgament en

---

<sup>4</sup> Madeleine Chapsal, Les Ecrivains en personne, Paris, 1960, pp. 213-14.

<sup>5</sup> loc. cit.

un tout cohérent, aux contours très précis, où l'œil exercé du lecteur reconnaît aussitôt un riche homme du monde amoureux d'une femme entretenue, un médecin arrivé, gobeur et balourd, une bourgeoise parvenue ou une grande dame snob qui vont rejoindre dans son musée imaginaire toute une vaste collection de personnages romanesques.<sup>6</sup>

Le Planétarium becomes a study of bourgeois mores, Les Fruits d'or of literary small-talk, Martereau revolves around the issue of the hero's honesty or dishonesty.

More recently the critical uncertainty concerning Nathalie Sarraute's work has taken a somewhat different form. In the course of the 1960s, the position of the nouveau roman at the forefront of experimentation in the novel was taken over by a number of novelists frequently referred to as the nouveaux nouveaux romanciers and including Jean Ricardou, Philippe Sollers, Jean Thibaudeau, Jean-Pierre Faye and others. 1961, the date of publication of Jean Ricardou's first novel, L'Observatoire de Cannes, may be taken as a point of departure. The development of the nouveau nouveau roman should not be identified with the founding of Tel Quel in 1960 or with the growth through the decade in the influence and prestige of that journal; nonetheless the ideas and the personnel of the nouveau nouveau roman overlap with those of Tel Quel to a considerable extent. The political and the psychoanalytical concerns of Tel Quel are lacking (or are at least less prominent) in the nouveau nouveau roman but the idea of

---

<sup>6</sup> L'Ere du soupçon, Paris, Gallimard, 1956, pp. 83-4. Editions of other works by Nathalie Sarraute used in this study are as follows: Tropismes, Editions de Minuit, 1957, and, all published by Gallimard, Portrait d'un inconnu, 1956, Martereau, 1953, Le Planétarium, 1959, Les Fruits d'or, 1963, Entre la vie et la mort, 1968, Vous les entendez?, 1972, Isma suivi de Le Silence et Le Mensonge, 1970. Page references hereafter are to these editions, unless otherwise indicated, and are given in brackets after each quotation. Where other material is concerned, the practice adopted is as follows: after the first occasion we limit our references to the title of the article where Nathalie Sarraute is concerned, the author and op. cit. for a critical study, the interviewer (or, where appropriate, the title) for an interview and the author for a critical article. This practice is modified only where confusion might otherwise arise. Full details will of course also be found in the bibliography.



the text as an autonomous artefact, having its sources and its principles of organisation not in the 'real' world but in language, is central. The novel becomes a 'jeu de construction'.<sup>7</sup> The impact of these ideas on the original nouveau roman has been considerable. The writers of the fifties have tended to move towards this new, or at least more radical, position in their more recent works and in some cases to reinterpret their earlier works in a new light. Robbe-Grillet is of course the outstanding example: having acted as a kind of catalyst in the formation of the nouveau roman group in the 1950s, he now occupies a similarly prominent position among the nouveaux nouveaux romanciers. The décade held at Cérisy in 1971 under the title Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui<sup>8</sup> attempted to examine and clarify this development, but equally made it clear that Nathalie Sarraute (along with Michel Butor and perhaps Robert Pinget) to some extent at least stood apart from it. In her concluding remarks, Françoise van Rossum-Guyon appeared to express a general opinion:

A l'exception peut-être de Nathalie Sarraute dont les opinions sont légèrement différentes de celles des autres, en ce qu'elle maintient l'idée d'un monde préalable à l'écriture que celle-ci s'efforce de découvrir (mais ce monde est inconnu, seule l'écriture le révèle), et de Michel Butor qui maintient la représentation (mais par des moyens nouveaux), les écrivains ici présents rejettent la conception traditionnelle de la littérature comme représentation, expression et communication.<sup>9</sup>

At the outset, Nathalie Sarraute herself expressed unease over her participation in the colloque:

<sup>7</sup> The phrase in Claude Ollier's. See Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II Pratiques, Paris, 1972, p. 236.

<sup>8</sup> The proceedings of the colloque were published under this title in two volumes, I. Problèmes généraux and II. Pratiques by the Union générale d'éditions in the 10.18 series, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, I, pp. 404-5.

Tout d'abord, il faut que je vous avoue que j'ai beaucoup hésité à participer à ce colloque. Sans l'aimable insistance de Jean Ricardou je crois que je ne m'y serais jamais décidée.

Si j'ai tant hésité, c'est que je savais que je me trouverais ici de nouveau, comme j'ai été si souvent au cours de ma vie, dans une situation assez singulière. Dans un certain isolement dont d'ailleurs je ne me plains pas - il m'a probablement été nécessaire - mais enfin il n'est pas assez agréable pour que j'aie délibérément le chercher.<sup>10</sup>

In marked opposition to this hesitant exclusion of Nathalie Sarraute from the new novel as it is now developing, is the line taken by Stephen Heath in his recent book on the new novel.<sup>11</sup> In his chapter on Nathalie Sarraute, he argues for a new reading of her work which will resolve these critical uncertainties and make her - apparently despite herself - an exponent of an essentially new kind of novel. Concentrating on Entre la vie et la mort and drawing in particular on the work of Jakobson and Benveniste concerning personal pronouns, he detects in her work a concern with 'the radical experience of language',<sup>12</sup> which is the defining characteristic of the nouveau nouveau roman. Thus he outlines a new critical approach to her work, thereby hoping to resolve the problem he starts out from in his opening paragraph:

Her six novels to date, together with an initial collection of short prose pieces, the critical essays and studies and the radio plays, have a tightly integrated coherence of relationship. This body of work has been produced over a considerable body of time (some thirty-five years), but it is difficult as yet to point to any really adequate critical assessment of its achievement.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, II, p. 25. She has said (in conversation with the present writer in 1974) that she was in fact most reluctant to attend and left after the first session.

<sup>11</sup> The Nouveau Roman. A Study in the Practice of Writing, London, 1972.

<sup>12</sup> The phrase is originally Philippe Sollers' and is quoted by Stephen Heath, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.

Though our own subsequent argument is fundamentally opposed to that of Stephen Heath, there is, we would want to agree, some truth in this initial statement.<sup>14</sup> From the time in the late fifties when Nathalie Sarraute first made her name as one of the group of nouveaux romanciers, much has been written on her work. At first of a largely journalistic order, more recently academic. Within the last decade, she has been the subject of a number of theses and several studies of her work have been published. Some of these have concentrated on one particular, if highly important, aspect: there are now three theses devoted to her imagery. The first of these, by John A. Fleming,<sup>15</sup> takes the form of an index with commentary; it gives a thorough and illuminating account of the various categories of images and explores their function in the novels. The most recent, by Bethany S. Oberst,<sup>16</sup> brings the resources of a computer to bear on the same questions by means of a program entitled TROPTRAK. It claims greater precision than Fleming in distinguishing between the varying functions of imagery in the novels but the degree of precision required by the computer seems opposed to the very nature of tropisms.<sup>17</sup> Two further theses compare Nathalie Sarraute's work to that of other writers, Dostoevsky and Virginia Woolf

---

<sup>14</sup> Nathalie Sarraute is of the same opinion: 'Les critiques n'y comprennent rien, même maintenant.' (In conversation with the present writer in 1974.)

<sup>15</sup> John A. Fleming, The Imagery of Tropism in the Novels of Nathalie Sarraute, Ph.D. thesis, Harvard, 1966. A shorter version of this study is to be found in the monograph by the same author contributed to Image and Theme. Studies in Modern French Fiction, edited by W. M. Frohock, Harvard, 1969.

<sup>16</sup> Bethany S. Oberst, Nathalie Sarraute: The Images of Tropism, Ph.D. thesis, Case Western Reserve, 1973.

<sup>17</sup> The third, Susanne E. Johnson, Les Images dans les romans de Nathalie Sarraute, Ph.D. thesis, Western Australia, 1966, we have been unable to consult. Two other theses equally, presented at the universities of Brest and Besançon respectively and as yet unpublished: Jean Le Gall, Nathalie Sarraute, l'espace littéraire des 'Tropismes', 1971, and Anthony S. Newman, Les Articulations du discours romanesque chez Nathalie Sarraute, 1971.

respectively.<sup>18</sup> Another group of (published) studies similar in scope to one another are those by Jean-Luc Jaccard, Christine B. Wunderli-Müller and Elisabeth Eliez-Rüegg.<sup>19</sup> The first two in particular adopt a very similar approach. We are offered a psychological analysis of 'l'être sarrautien' very much in the spirit of Sartre; the former draws largely on the Réflexions sur la question juive and the latter on L'Être et le néant but the parallels drawn and the stages in the argument are very similar. There is no attempt in either case to see the novels as individual artefacts, separate stages in a progressive development. The third adds considerably to this approach by its greater awareness of the extreme complexity and mobility of tropisms and by its attention to image, but again it is not concerned with separate novels.

There are also chronological accounts of Nathalie Sarraute's work. Two of these, by René Micha<sup>20</sup> and Ruth Z. Temple,<sup>21</sup> while they both contain illuminating comments on particular works, are, by virtue of the series in which they appear, necessarily brief and somewhat superficial. The first monograph on Sarraute to be published, that by Mimica Cranaki and Yvon Belaval,<sup>22</sup> offers a much more substantial and coherent account, which has by no means been rendered obsolete by more recent studies. Admirable in its general comments on her work, it has less space for

---

18 Ruth Levinsky, Between Dream and Reality: A Study of Nathalie Sarraute and Fedor Dostoevsky, Ph.D. thesis, Southern California, 1969, and Stephen D. Fox, The Novels of Virginia Woolf and Nathalie Sarraute, Ph.D. thesis, Emory, 1970.

19 Jean-Luc Jaccard, Nathalie Sarraute, Zurich, 1967, Christine B. Wunderli-Müller, Le Thème du masque et les banalités dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute, Zurich, 1970, and Elisabeth Eliez-Rüegg, La Conscience d'autrui et la conscience des objets dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute, Berne, 1972.

20 René Micha, Nathalie Sarraute, Classiques du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, Paris, 1966.

21 Ruth Z. Temple, Nathalie Sarraute, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, New York, 1968.

22 Mimica Cranaki et Yvon Belaval, Nathalie Sarraute, La Bibliothèque idéale, Paris, 1965.

detailed analysis of particular novels and tends to concentrate its discussion on recurrent themes. Of necessity, it does not take into account Nathalie Sarraute's later works. Two further theses, as yet unpublished, by Marie-Laure Vernière-Plank<sup>23</sup> and Françoise Calin<sup>24</sup> offer general studies. The latter is the more substantial of the two and frequently illuminating in its comments on various aspects of Nathalie Sarraute's work. It chooses, not exclusively but more often than not, a thematic approach (and even where the approach is supposedly chronological, the thematic tends to resurface). One of its justifications for so doing, however, 'le souci d'approcher d'une nouvelle façon une œuvre présentée jusqu'ici roman par roman par tous ceux qui s'y sont intéressés',<sup>25</sup> is not really supported by the facts.

One study which does do this, and which resembles the present one most closely in structure and scope, is the most recent study to be published in France: Nathalie Sarraute ou la Recherche de l'authenticité by Micheline Tison Braun.<sup>26</sup> After an initial chapter, which characterizes Nathalie Sarraute's work as a whole, it proceeds to a series of separate analyses of individual works in their chronological order. (As is true of every other study, it predates the publication of Vous les entendez?.) Unfortunately, it is far from providing the 'adequate critical assessment' which Nathalie Sarraute's work lacks; it is more likely to perpetuate the misunderstandings which the novels have met with since their first appearances. Nathalie Sarraute herself expresses considerable reservations about the book:

---

<sup>23</sup> Marie-Laure Vernière-Plank, Nathalie Sarraute. Tradition et 'modernité' d'une œuvre contemporaine, Ph.D. thesis, Fordham, 1967-8.

<sup>24</sup> Françoise D. G. Calin, La Vie retrouvée. Étude de l'œuvre romanesque de Nathalie Sarraute, Ph.D. thesis, Stanford, 1972.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Paris, 1971.

Après un préambule d'une grande pénétration, quand elle s'est attachée à étudier l'un après l'autre chacun de mes livres, elle a été amenée, s'écartant d'une lecture textuelle, à les transposer dans un langage qui n'était pas le leur et où ont réapparu les définitions, les catégories psychologiques, sociales, morales que mes textes s'étaient efforcés de saper.<sup>27</sup>

There are many interesting and illuminating articles on various aspects of Nathalie Sarraute's work and reference will be made to these in the course of this study. Though it is not practical to describe them in detail here, one perhaps deserves special mention: Bernard Pingaud, 'Le Personnage dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute'.<sup>28</sup> Developing and enriching themes embarked on by Yvon Belaval in a review of Tropismes<sup>29</sup> and by Gaëton Picon in relation to Le Planétarium and Les Fruits d'or,<sup>30</sup> Pingaud maintains that 'un roman de Nathalie Sarraute peut se lire indifféremment comme la description attentive d'une certaine réalité ou comme le récit d'une aventure esthétique'.<sup>31</sup> To his analysis much subsequent Sarraute criticism, including the present study, is indebted.

\* \* \*

The present study is primarily concerned with Nathalie Sarraute as a novelist; her other activities, critical and dramatic, are, we would maintain, peripheral compared to the solid backbone of her fictional endeavour. This is not to say that Nathalie Sarraute's achievements outside the novel are insignificant. On the contrary. Her essays display critical insight of a high order (the pages in L'Ere du soupçon on Dostoevsky and on Camus are excellent) and a considerable ability to

---

<sup>27</sup> Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II, p. 39. In private conversation she is still more negative.

<sup>28</sup> Preuves, décembre 1963.

<sup>29</sup> Nouvelle Revue française, février 1958.

<sup>30</sup> Mercure de France, juillet 1959 and juillet 1963.

<sup>31</sup> Pingaud, 'Le personnage dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute', p. 24.

expound abstract ideas lucidly. They are nonetheless primarily an extension of her creative writing in that they reflect upon and support her novels. 'Le romancier qui nous occupe' (p. 92), the modern writer whose problems and endeavours Nathalie Sarraute examines in L'Ere du soupçon, is herself. Equally her plays are essentially a transposition of material from her novels into a different medium. Can the same thing be said, the same experiences described, in a different way? This was the problem the plays posed for her. They are a technical experiment, successful but limited, a momentary diversion from the main line of her endeavour - to which she always returns. They are far from offering the kind of challenge to her earlier works which Mobile or Réseau aérien did to Butor's four novels. They reiterate more than they develop. Her latest play, C'est beau, for example, comes, we are told, 'from the same source as Vous les entendez?'.<sup>32</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute herself, in lectures, interviews, articles and critical studies, has provided her readers with a rich source of information regarding her ideas on the novel genre and her aims and intentions where particular novels are concerned. All her criticism is, as we have said, concerned directly or indirectly with her own creative work.<sup>33</sup> In the course of her paper to the colloque at Cérisy, she takes a self-effacing line in the matter of interpretation:

Je ne prétends nullement que mon propre point de vue sur mes textes soit un point de vue privilégié. Il y a dans tout texte une grande part d'inconscient, d'involontaire, qu'il est loisible à tout lecteur d'y trouver. Toute interprétation d'un texte est valable. Dès qu'il est livré au dehors, il devient un bien commun. Le lecteur, dont la collaboration est indispensable, doit être libre de pousser ses investigations et de laisser vagabonder son imagination dans toutes les directions.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>. Germaine Brée, 'Interviews with Two French Novelists', Contemporary Literature, 14, 1973, p. 146.

<sup>33</sup> For an interesting discussion of the relevance of Nathalie Sarraute's article on Valéry ('étude-clé, sinon de Valéry, à coup sûr de Nathalie Sarraute ...'), see Georges Raillard, 'Nathalie Sarraute et la violence du texte', Littérature, no. 2, 1971.

<sup>34</sup> Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II, p. 39.

Nor are these views simply a product of the company in which she found herself. She has expressed similar ones elsewhere:

Je suis entièrement d'accord avec Roland Barthes quand il nie la possibilité pour un écrivain de communiquer aux lecteurs par des discours ou des écrits autres que son œuvre elle-même les sens différents, le plus souvent ignoré de lui, qu'elle contient, de renforcer par des articles ou des déclarations l'impression que seule l'œuvre elle-même, dans la forme particulière qu'il a choisie, peut donner.<sup>35</sup> X

She has in the past welcomed interpretations of her work which had not occurred to her and which yet seem to her viable ones.<sup>36</sup> Modesty as well as conviction may enter into these statements. Certainly it does not appear that Nathalie Sarraute subscribes consistently to the complete liberty of interpretation and the disregard for the author as conscious creator which are characteristic of Barthes and post-Barthes criticism. Her willingness to expound her own views runs counter in some measure to such beliefs. She is ready on occasion to indicate how a particular reading of one of her texts has gone wrong.<sup>37</sup> Her critical comments on her work appear to us moreover consistently helpful and illuminating where that work is concerned. The present study is based on the conviction that the modern writer in general, and certainly our particular author, however much he or she may be conditioned by the words he uses, by the forms he chooses to write in, is aware of his situation and consciously

---

<sup>35</sup> Geneviève Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute nous parle du Planétarium', Lettres nouvelles, 29 avril 1959, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. for example, her comments in the above interview on Yvon Belaval's interpretation of her work:

Ainsi un peu plus de vingt ans après que j'aie achevé Tropismes, j'ai été surprise en lisant dans un remarquable article qu'Yvon Belaval lui consacrait, que ce que j'avais cherché à décrire était la création à l'état naissant. C'est seulement en y réfléchissant que j'ai compris combien ce qu'il avait dit était perspicace et juste. Cela m'a éclairée de la même façon que cela aurait pu éclairer n'importe quel lecteur.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. for example, her correction, in a letter to the present writer, dated 1972, of a mistaken interpretation of a passage in Tropismes:

Je n'ai pas songé en écrivant le tropisme XXI, que la phrase: 'l'aînée était une fille, eux qui avaient voulu un fils d'abord' avait quoi que ce soit de plus blessant que les autres lieux communs qui a provoqué la crise: celui-ci n'était que la goutte d'eau (n'importe quelle goutte d'eau) qui a fait déborder le vase.



making of it the subject of his art. The author therefore remains the source of his text in a significant sense, not simply as vehicle but as creator.<sup>38</sup> Thus in our reading of the texts we deliberately give considerable space to Nathalie Sarraute's expressed views. L'Ere du soupçon is frequently cited by critics. We endeavour to make full use not only of it but also of the numerous other sources of her views less often referred to by previous students of her work. We have also had the opportunity of corresponding with and meeting Nathalie Sarraute.

We do not adopt a linguistic or semiological approach in this study; our methods have more in common with recent English criticism of the novel. We should wish to satisfy Nathalie Sarraute's 'exigence d'une lecture textuelle',<sup>39</sup> in the sense in which she understands it, one which does not make of her works what she did not intend them to be. It seems to us that the approach we adopt should enable us to do this, that it is potentially well-suited to the kind of novel Nathalie Sarraute writes.

As we saw earlier, Stephen Heath's approach to Nathalie Sarraute is one which aligns her with the nouveau nouveau roman:

The reading of Nathalie Sarraute's texts proposed at the end of this present chapter is based on the recognition, readable in her texts, of the text as work in and on language.<sup>40</sup>

It is a reading which depends on one's disregarding her theoretical writings and utterances, as displaying 'a strange innocence'.<sup>41</sup> It depends equally on one's according a crucial status to Entre la vie et la mort in the light of which the previous novels should be read:

<sup>38</sup> In his study of modern fiction (The World and the Book, London, 1971), Gabriel Josipovici does not mention Nathalie Sarraute but many of the comments he makes in his later chapters on the situation and characteristic outlook of the modern writer apply to her work.

<sup>39</sup> Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Heath, op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

10

This novel, while clearly continuous with those that precede it, manifestly achieves a kind of narrative realism and, simultaneously, in the very evidence of this achievement, suggests the shift of emphasis it entails from the traditional idea of this realism.<sup>42</sup>

In Les Fruits d'or, the reader is 'totally deprived of narrative contours',<sup>43</sup> whereas Entre la vie et la mort, with its theme of the life and death struggle that is the creation of a novel, has 'an immediate narrative coherence'.<sup>44</sup> We cannot agree with such a reading of Nathalie Sarraute's work. The distinction between these two novels seems to us a false one, suggesting a break in development which Nathalie Sarraute is prompt to deny categorically and, we would argue, with justification:

Les écrivains qui se sont réunis à Cérissy ont voulu - paraît-il, démontrer qu'il y avait une rupture, qui datait de 1960, dans ce qu'il écrivaient. (...) En somme, il y aurait eu, avant, une certaine 'représentation' du monde, et après, uniquement une écriture qui ne ramènerait qu'à elle-même.<sup>45</sup>

It also seems to us inappropriate to disregard Nathalie Sarraute's own account of what she considers herself to be doing, particularly since, as we shall see, the attempts to explore the creative process which are at the centre of Entre la vie et la mort come close to reiterating her earlier statements.

It is true that, while there is no 'rupture' in Nathalie Sarraute's work, there is development, in the theoretical pronouncements as well as in the fiction. The essays of the 1940s and 1950s, collected together in L'Ere du soupçon, pursued a fairly straightforward line: the proper mode of the novelist is psychological realism of the kind pioneered by Proust, Virginia Woolf and other modernists; his task is to convey to the reader 'une parcelle de réalité encore inconnue' (p. 154). Even then

---

<sup>42</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard Pivot, 'Nathalie Sarraute a réponse à tous', Figaro littéraire, 4 février 1972, p. 15.

the novelist in her view played a highly active role since he had to invent new techniques through which this unknown reality might be expressed. She has always been aware of the problematic of 'realism' in the twentieth century, such as Raymond Williams describes it in his essay, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel':

The old, naïve realism is in any case dead, for it depended on a theory of natural seeing which is now impossible. When we thought we had only to open our eyes to see a common world, we could suppose that realism was a simple recording process, from which any deviation was voluntary. We know now that we literally create the world we see, and that this human creation - a discovery of how we can live in the material world we inhabit - is necessarily dynamic and active; the old static realism of the passive observer is merely a hardened convention.<sup>46</sup>

She maintains the position of L'Ere du soupçon but in recent years has seemed increasingly aware of the theoretical difficulties involved and the challenges to which it is subjected. She describes the process of writing in more complex terms:

Sensation, recherche de la forme, écriture, les trois démarches sont en vérité absolument inséparable et simultanées: chaque livre se déroule dans une sorte de frottement continu: la sensation appelle la forme. Celle-ci provoque une autre sensation et ainsi de suite.<sup>47</sup>

She is unhappy when described as a realist or mimetic writer:

Je ne crois pas que pour moi le roman soit jamais l'imitation d'une réalité, même inconnue. Comme Robbe-Grillet, je m'efforce de faire surgir ce qui n'existait pas avant d'être mis en forme. Comme lui, je construis quelque chose de neuf à partir d'éléments pris au monde visible (ainsi son hôtel de Marienbad). Il me semble que les tropismes sont précisément ce 'rien' qui, hors de la forme, du langage, ne paraît pas avoir d'existence. Ainsi j'ai appelé une de mes pièces 'ou ce qui s'appelle rien'.<sup>48</sup>

Yet she is always impelled to modify such statements, to express certain reservations:

---

<sup>46</sup> Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution, London, Penguin Books, 1965, p. 314. Our italics.

<sup>47</sup> J.-L. de Rambures, 'Comment travaillent les écrivains', Le Monde, 14 janvier 1972, p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> In a letter to the present writer dated 1972.

Il ne me paraît pas possible de se passer de ce qui est à mes yeux la source vive de toute œuvre: des sensations neuves, encore intactes, qui nous sont données par le monde qui nous entoure.<sup>49</sup>

It was, as we said earlier, the colloque at Cérisy in 1971 which, in clarifying the present position of the nouveau roman, made these reservations clearer. Nathalie Sarraute of course is aware of the problem from the outset and makes it a major theme of her paper:

Des différences très importantes apparaissent, de plus en plus, également dans nos convictions.

Et si je me vois obligée d'évoquer ces divergences, ce c'est pas, croyez-le, pour entamer ici une quelconque polémique, ✓ mais parce qu'il ne m'est pas possible de les passer sous silence sans fausser, sans dénaturer tout ce qui constitue pour moi le fondement et fait pour moi tout l'intérêt de mon travail.<sup>50</sup>

It is true that she places great importance on language in the novel:

Contrairement à ce qui se passe quand on regarde un tableau, la lecture d'un livre se fait par étapes successives, et c'est chacune de ces étapes - celle de chaque paragraphe, de chaque phrase - qui d'abord retient, stimule l'attention, provoque la satisfaction du lecteur, bien avant qu'apparaissent les rapports des différentes parties entre elles et que la construction globale, dont je ne nie pas l'importance, prenne sa forme définitive.<sup>51</sup>

True too that she sees language as playing the role not of simple intermediary but of creator:

Que le langage du roman ne soit pas, ne puisse pas être un simple instrument, une pure transparence qu'on traverse en toute hâte pour voir ce qu'il y a par-dérrière, ce à quoi il ramène - cela m'a toujours paru évident.<sup>52</sup>

When the writer in Entre la vie et la mort seeks to recapture his insight, to come to grips with his original sensation, he finds himself, like the child Marcel in Combray, up against words: 'Quand on la [i.e. la sensation] cherche, on trouve des mots' (p. 112). Yet Nathalie Sarraute stops short of the position of Ricardou and his supporters. She paints ironically

---

<sup>49</sup> Gilbert Gadoffre, 'Avant-garde ou nouveau roman? Conclusions d'un colloque', Quinzaine littéraire, 16 septembre 1970, p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II, pp. 26-7.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.

her own situation when faced with their theories:

Rien n'existait hors des mots. Rien ne leur préexistait. Ceux qui s'aventuraient, comme je l'ai fait moi-même, à affirmer timidement qu'il y avait dans l'esprit de chacun de nous des représentations, des perceptions immédiates et globales, des sensations (mot récusé dont je m'excuse, mais qu'aucun mot nouveau n'est venu remplacer et qui, pris dans le sens qu'il avait autrefois, est aussitôt intelligible à tous), que quelque chose donc existe hors des mots, se faisaient aussitôt rabrouer.

Je me suis ainsi trouvée dans la situation de cet homme qui tombé évanoui et percevant à travers le brouillard qui l'enveloppe que le médecin appelé à l'examiner déclare qu'il est mort, rassemble ses forces, ouvre un œil, balbutie 'Mais je ne suis pas mort' et se voit vertement remis à sa place - de mort - par sa femme qui lui dit: 'Tais-toi donc. Le docteur le sait mieux que toi.'<sup>53</sup>

In her view, the whole edifice of her work rests on the conviction that there are mental sensations which preexist language, sensations of which one can be dimly aware while they are as yet unformulated in words:

C'est pour ça que je suis, comme je le disais tout à l'heure à Jean Ricardou, obligée de croire qu'il y a un pré-langage. C'est une hypothèse de travail, sans laquelle il m'est impossible de travailler. Même si c'est une erreur - ce que je ne crois pas - elle m'est nécessaire. J'en ai un besoin vital. Je ne peux pas y renoncer. Dire: il n'y a pas de pré-langage, tout part des mots ... cela m'est absolument impossible.<sup>54</sup>

Such a protest against being forced into a pattern which does not fit her experience she had already voiced through the writer of Entre la vie et la mort:

Quoi cela, après tout? Tous là-bas le repètent sur tous les tons, le crient, sur les toits: il n'y a pas de 'cela' qui compte. Cela n'est rien. Cela n'existe pas. Les mots seuls ... Tracer d'abord les mots ... (p. 240)

The writer of Entre la vie et la mort remains faithful to 'cela':

<sup>53</sup> ibid., pp. 30-31.

<sup>54</sup> ibid., p. 49. This quotation comes not from the paper but from the discussion following it. To Nathalie Sarraute's annoyance, she was not given the opportunity of correcting the text of the discussion before it was published. We quote here from the corrected version which Nathalie Sarraute has been kind enough to give to us.

La suivre où elle voudra ... Elle qui ne se laisse pas nommer ...  
 ce que je sens ... moi seul ... cette chose intacte, vivante ... Je  
 ne sais pas ce qu'elle est. Tout ce que je sais c'est que rien au  
 monde ne peut me faire douter de sa présence. (p. 252)

It is this same mysterious sense of life that Germaine Lemaire suddenly feels to be lacking in her works, that the reader at the end of Les Fruits d'or finds in the pages of the generally forgotten novel, that the father of Vous les entendez? derives from his contemplation of the stone statue, and that the two narrators of the early novels detect under the surface of the conventional exchanges between the people they observe.<sup>55</sup>

Thus Nathalie Sarraute would seem to be caught between the two extremes of autonomy and mimesis and to find neither of them theoretically satisfying. She is of course by no means alone in this. The following passage in Frank Kermode's important book on the novel suggests, by means of the verb 'assume', a degree of detachment where both positions are concerned:

We probably have to accept, though without making too much of it, an historical transition, related to this protraction of time, from a literature which assumed that it was imitating an order to a literature which assumes that it has to create an order, unique and self-dependent, and possibly attainable only after a critical process that might be called 'decreation'.<sup>56</sup>

The debate is of course a recurrent one where the history of the twentieth-century novel is concerned; a recent enactment of it has involved a series of articles and books written by David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury, both novelists themselves as well as literary critics. We cannot here retrace the argument but wish to quote, as peculiarly relevant to Nathalie Sarraute, a passage where Malcolm Bradbury seeks to formulate once more (despite criticism by Lodge) his belief in the referential quality of

---

<sup>55</sup> For a brief but interesting discussion of the use of demonstrative adjectives and pronouns to refer to tropisms, see Peter Bürger, 'Nathalie Sarraute: Martereau', in Walter Pabst, Der moderne französische Roman, Berlin, 1968, pp. 233-5.

<sup>56</sup> Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending, London, 1968, p. 167.

fiction:

To provide an adequate account of the structure of fiction, then, I propose that we must honour the fundamental recognition of modern criticism, that all things in a fiction are mediated through words, and yet allow ourselves to consider that certain things can be held logically and temporally antecedent to those words, as a matter which the words mediate.<sup>57</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute claims to have very happy memories of her period in Oxford as a student and points out that when England appears in her works, it represents an image of happiness, an ideal world.<sup>58</sup> Where the poetics of fiction are concerned equally, England might well represent for her a 'pays merveilleux'.

If, then, there is a real gulf dividing the 1950s from the 1960s where the nouveau roman is concerned, or, in Professor Kermode's terms, palaeo-modernism from neo-modernism, then Nathalie Sarraute is, we would argue, on the far side of the divide. She has more in common with Virginia Woolf, with Robert Musil, with Gide and Proust and other early modernists than she has with Robbe-Grillet or with Jean Ricardou. This is to reaffirm a thesis which critics have already maintained. Lucien Goldmann, for example, situates Nathalie Sarraute in a different period of the novel's history from Robbe-Grillet and an earlier one:

celle que je caractériserai volontiers par la dissolution du personnage et dans laquelle se situent des œuvres extrêmement importantes, telles celles de Joyce, Kafka, Musil, la Nausée de Sartre, l'Etranger de Camus, et, très probablement, comme une de ses manifestations les plus radicales, l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute.<sup>59</sup>

It is however a thesis which requires reaffirming. We shall return to it later. For the moment it may suffice to emphasise that in our view Nathalie Sarraute's own description of her situation is an accurate one:

Je ne cherche, pour ma part, qu'à avancer si peu que ce soit dans la voie que ces écrivains [Joyce and Proust] ont ouverte et qui ne me semble pas conduire à une impasse. Je crois

---

<sup>57</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, Possibilities, London, 1973, p. 283.

<sup>58</sup> In conversation with the present writer in 1974.

<sup>59</sup> Lucien Goldmann, Pour une sociologie du roman, Coll. Idées, Paris, 1964, p. 298.

fermement à un progrès dans la recherche, et cela dans le domaine de la psychologie, et j'entends par là l'exploration et la création, au moyen d'une forme qui lui est propre, d'un nouvel aspect de l'univers mental.<sup>60</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute is working within a tradition. Such is our point of departure.

In L'Ere du soupçon, Nathalie Sarraute suggests that the purpose of every novel is to recreate an experience for the reader, to give him 'la sensation de revivre une expérience' (p. 98). The two areas of experience, with which Nathalie Sarraute's fiction is chiefly concerned, are psychology and art. The two are of course interconnected in various ways. Here too there are shifts of emphasis but no break in her development: both themes are present in one form or other throughout her work. Both themes start out from a fairly narrow basis - relationships within a family and character in the novel - and move outwards to human relationships in larger and more complex groups and to art in general. Both themes are highly personal ones. None of her works is autobiographical in the usual sense but all of them relate profoundly to her own experience. The family would seem to be the source of her understanding of human relationships. She suggests herself that her insights in this domain go back to childhood and the theme of the child as a victim of the adult world is, as we shall see, a recurrent one in her work. Nathalie Sarraute's comments on other writers often seem to have some bearing on her own concerns; the following in L'Ere du soupçon on Dostoevsky is no exception: 'on a l'impression par moments, de se trouver en présence d'une véritable obsession, d'une idée fixe' (p. 32). Her view of human exchanges has an obsessive quality which might suggest patterns imposed early in life, some 'vieille fêlure jamais bien ressoudée' such as the narrator of

---

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in J. H. Matthews, 'Nathalie Sarraute: la présence des choses', Revue des lettres modernes, nos. 94-99, 1964, p. 197.



Martereau suffers from (p. 172). There is an interesting passage in an interview with Pierre Bourgeade when, on being asked if she has any favourite scenes in Proust, she replies:

Eh bien ... tenez ... au début ... quand le narrateur est assis dans le jardin de ses parents - voilà encore une des images de mon album! - Il est en train de lire. Il ne se passe rien. Il est entouré de toute la sécurité de l'enfance. Le jardin qui l'entoure. La famille qui l'entoure. J'aime cette scène, parce qu'elle fait partie d'une enfance qui, à moi, m'aurait bien convenu.<sup>61</sup>

Her own early childhood involved a series of separations and of changes of scene as she moved from mother to father and from Switzerland to Russia and then to France.

More obvious perhaps are the autobiographical sources of the concern with art. Here her novels follow the stages in her literary career. In her earlier works, she is on the defensive, conscious of the gulf between what she wants to write and what the reader seems to expect, betraying in her portrayal of the narrator figures of Portrait d'un inconnu and Martereau and of Alain Guimiez in Le Planétarium the guilty conscience of the twentieth-century writer. In her early works too, she is primarily concerned with the novel, in particular with the notion of character. With Le Planétarium, one detects a shift towards a concern with the writer's life and his relationship with his environment; at the same time the concern with the novel widens to include other art objects. The world of the next two novels is rather the world of the successful writer. The public enthusiasm for the novel which gives Les Fruits d'or its title may not be permanent but while it lasts it is considerable. In Entre la vie et la mort, the dangers which flow from public recognition and critical acclaim are explored. This novel, though it looks back on days of failure, opens its exploration with an image of the established writer.

---

<sup>61</sup> Pierre Bourgeade, Violoncelle qui résiste, Paris, 1971, p. 45.

In Les Fruits d'or, we saw the writer only from the outside, a victim of the Parisian literary world. Here we move into the consciousness of the writer. Nathalie Sarraute's confidence in her vocation now seems such that she can put her experience of the creative process, those transient 'moments de satisfaction et d'espoir' she evokes in L'Ere du soupçon (p. 90), at the centre of her novel. In her most recent novel, Vous les entendez?, family and art are again central; by means of a family relationship the validity of traditional attitudes towards art is questioned. Nathalie Sarraute, having achieved success as a novelist within a certain tradition, now seems to question the value of that tradition and the worth of her achievement.

We have spoken of two areas of experience which are constant themes in Nathalie Sarraute's work throughout. It is true that the coherence of Nathalie Sarraute's work leads one back in each book to the same basic insights, that Tropismes or Le Planétarium would serve as a title for all her work much as Heart of Darkness might for Conrad's or Dubliners for Joyce's. It is also true, however, that each novel is properly to be understood separately as a stage in a continuing development. Too many critics, in our view, have confined themselves to analysing substance and theme and have neglected the novels as individual structures. Thus, after a preliminary chapter expanding on the central themes of psychology and art, we proceed in chronological fashion, novel by novel. This has the added advantage of enabling us to stress Nathalie Sarraute's increasing mastery over her material, her developing skill as a novelist.

The greater part of our study will be an analysis of her works as individual creations. We have already stressed the personal sources of her inspiration. We shall also seek to show that the creative endeavour represented by Nathalie Sarraute's fiction is characteristic of the century to which it belongs. Her view of the relations between human beings may

have its personal sources in her own experience; it also has much in common with that of other thinkers. Her concern with the novel on the other hand, is clearly that of a modernist writer. That self-conscious awareness of the problems and processes of fiction which from Paludes onwards is a characteristic element in the modern French novel is central to her work. If there is one critical concept she has popularized, it is after all that of the 'ère du soupçon':

Elle [cette évolution actuelle du personnage] témoigne, à la fois chez l'auteur et chez le lecteur, d'un état d'esprit singulièrement sophistiqué. Non seulement ils se méfient du personnage de roman, mais, à travers lui, ils se méfient l'un de l'autre. Il était le terrain d'entente, la base solide d'où ils pouvaient d'un commun effort s'élancer vers des recherches et des découvertes nouvelles. Il est devenu le lieu de leur méfiance réciproque, le terrain dévasté où ils s'affrontent. (...) Nous sommes entrés dans l'ère du soupçon. (p. 59)

Chapter 1    The substance of the novels: psychology and art

Le mot 'psychologie' est un de ceux qu'aucun auteur  
aujourd'hui ne peut entendre prononcer à son sujet  
sans baisser les yeux et rougir.

NATHALIE SARRAUTE

Born Originals, how comes it to pass that we die  
Copies?

EDWARD YOUNG

The present study is primarily aimed at tracing the development of Nathalie Sarraute as a novelist. The contention that there is such a development does not however run counter to the notion that the basic area of her endeavour remains constant from novel to novel. Given that this is the case, it will be both proper and useful to begin our study by outlining the basic preoccupations of Nathalie Sarraute as a writer. These will then be explored in greater detail when we come to deal with individual works.

Nathalie Sarraute has always maintained that the overriding preoccupation in all her work is with human psychology. The need for such a preoccupation is the main argument of 'De Dostoïevski à Kafka'. It is a need which is reiterated in many other articles and interviews. In her discussion of Tolstoy in 1960, for example, she maintains:

Cette matière psychologique est pour moi la seule base du roman. Tout romancier s'attache à dévoiler des aspects inconnus de cette matière psychologique, et je ne connais personne, même parmi les romanciers qui s'en défendent, dont l'œuvre ne consiste pas à en dévoiler des aspects encore inexplorés.<sup>1</sup>

But her statements that the novel must by definition concern itself with psychology tend also to contain certain caveats. In her answer to one of the questions put to her by Tel Quel in 1962, she makes these particularly explicit:

Qu'entendez-vous par psychologie? Si vous entendez par là, l'analyse des sentiments, la recherche des mobiles de nos actes, l'étude des 'caractères', alors je crois qu'aujourd'hui

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Tolstoï', Lettres françaises, 22 septembre 1960, p. 1.

une œuvre romanesque non seulement peut ne pas être psychologique, mais encore qu'elle ne doit pas l'être. Mais si vous entendez par là, la création d'un univers mental, alors je ne connais aucune œuvre littéraire et je n'en conçois aucune qui ne soit psychologique.<sup>2</sup>

What she intends one to understand by psychology is not therefore psychological analysis in the Proustian manner, still less the traditional presentation of rounded characters:

Les loupes et les gilets rayés, les caractères et les intrigues pourraient continuer à varier à l'infini sans révéler aujourd'hui autre chose qu'une réalité dont chacun connaît, pour l'avoir parcourue en tous sens, la moindre parcelle.<sup>3</sup>

For the moderns, the interest of the novel no longer lies 'dans le dénombrement des situations et des caractères ou dans la peinture des mœurs, mais dans la mise au jour d'une psychologie nouvelle'.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of this new psychology she takes to be the distinctive difference of the modern novel. It is made possible by a disintegrating of traditional forms similar to that which has occurred in painting.

Thus she writes:

Aussi, par une évolution analogue à celle de la peinture - bien qu'infiniment plus timide et plus lente, coupée de longs arrêts et de reculs - l'élément psychologique, comme l'élément pictural, se libère insensiblement de l'objet avec lequel il faisait corps. Il tend à se suffire à lui-même et à se passer le plus possible de support. C'est sur lui que tout l'effort de recherche du romancier se concentre, et sur lui que doit porter tout l'effort d'attention du lecteur.<sup>5</sup>

Within such a general conception, many variations are possible. The phrases 'l'élément psychologique' and 'la création d'un univers mental' might well be used in a discussion of the works of both Robbe-Grillet and Butor, for example. Nathalie Sarraute's preoccupations are nonetheless very different from theirs. What then constitutes

---

<sup>2</sup> 'La littérature, aujourd'hui', Tel Quel, no. 9, 1962, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> L'Ere du soupçon, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 71.

the particular 'parcelle de réalité'<sup>6</sup> to the exploration of which she has devoted her work? One characteristic of her world which she herself constantly stresses is that she is trying to portray psychology, not as something static by means of analysis, but in movement. In the course of an interview published in Arts, she points to Proust as an important influence on her: 'Proust m'a vite convaincue qu'il n'était plus possible d'écrire qu'à partir de lui.'<sup>7</sup> She was of course in the position of one of Proust's early readers: 'Some years earlier I had experienced a great shock by reading Proust. In 1924, I believe.'<sup>8</sup> But Proust and other writers she read in the twenties were important to her partly in so far as they left her dissatisfied: 'I wanted something else which they had made me long for.'<sup>9</sup> Her own work grew in part out of this sense of dissatisfaction:

Seulement chez lui la matière psychologique analysée au microscope est étalée comme des souvenirs, elle est statique. C'est l'analyse du formé. J'ai eu l'idée qu'on pouvait continuer d'analyser le mouvement, d'étudier non plus le formé mais les états psychologiques en formation. C'est ce que j'ai tenté de faire avec Tropismes.<sup>10</sup>

It also grew of course out of personal experience. She was conscious of a lack of coincidence between people's spoken words, their surface acts and gestures and the mental activity which she half-perceived existing beneath the surface:

J'ai eu l'idée de noter ces Tropismes en remarquant autour de moi des êtres lisses comme des cailloux, des créatures sans faille apparente, pourtant remués imperceptiblement jusque dans leurs régions les plus profondes par des sentiments auxquels ils refusent de donner droit de cité.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Demeron, 'Nathalie Sarraute ou Littérature sans cabotinage', Arts, 3 juin 1959, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Schneider, 'Nathalie Sarraute talks about her art', New York Times Book Review, 9 February 1964, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Demeron, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Denise Bourdet, Visages d'aujourd'hui, Paris, 1960, p. 60.

It was an awareness which seemed to her to go back to her childhood.

In the preface to the 1964 Idées edition of L'Ere du soupçon, she writes:

J'ai commencé d'écrire Tropismes en 1932. Les textes, qui composaient ce premier ouvrage étaient l'expression spontanée d'impressions très vives, et leur forme était aussi spontanée et naturelle que les impressions auxquelles elle donnait vie. Je me suis aperçue en travaillant que ces impressions étaient produites par certains mouvements, certaines actions intérieures sur lesquelles mon attention s'était fixée depuis longtemps. En fait, me semble-t-il, depuis mon enfance. (p. 8)

Her characters, then, are presented to us not as objects for analysis but as minds in action and what she observes in these minds in action are the movements to which she gives the name tropisms. Not only did it give her first book its title, but she has subsequently adopted the term to describe the basic subject matter of all her work.<sup>12</sup> When in 1964 she talks of her ventures into drama it is still the appropriate word. She says of the mental activity they explore: 'Ces mouvements, je les appelle "tropismes".'<sup>13</sup> In 1968 she uses it again to identify the raison d'être of Entre la vie et la mort: 'J'avais pensé que l'effort créateur d'un écrivain serait un terrain propice au jeu des tropismes.'<sup>14</sup>

What does she understand by tropisms? Originally, the term belongs to the natural sciences. It was first of all used in botany in the early nineteenth century to describe the habitual response of an organism to a given stimulus. Later, it was extended to include the patterns of response of animals; later still of human beings. A comment, in a literary context, on these later uses of the term occurs in Gide's

---

<sup>12</sup> It is however noteworthy that in L'Ere du soupçon the term does not appear and that 'mouvements', and 'drames' are the alternatives. It is later when Tropismes has become more widely known that she adopts the term for use in discussion of her work.

<sup>13</sup> Yvette Romi, 'Sous la surface', Nouvel observateur, 23 novembre 1966, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> 'Portrait d'un écrivain vu par lui-même', Le Monde, 11 mai 1968, Supplément, p. iv.



Les Caves du Vatican:

En attendant de s'attaquer à l'homme, Anthime Armand-Dubois prétendait simplement réduire en 'tropismes' toute l'activité des animaux qu'il observait. Tropismes! Le mot n'était pas plus tôt inventé que déjà l'on ne comprenait plus rien d'autre; toute une catégorie de psychologues ne consentit plus qu'aux tropismes. Tropismes! Quelle lumière soudaine émanait de ces syllabes! Evidemment l'organisme cédaux mêmes incitations que l'héliotrope lorsque la plante involontaire tourne sa fleur face au soleil (ce qui est aisément réductible à quelques simples lois de physique et de thermo-chimie). Le cosmos enfin se douait d'une b nignit  rassurante. Dans les plus surprenants mouvements de l' tre on pouvait uniquement reconnaître une parfaite ob issance   l'agent.<sup>15</sup>

Gide, of course, is being heavily ironic at the expense of his scientific determinist and the whole sotie is designed to show the inadequacy of such a conception of human nature. Nathalie Sarraute is by no means implicated in his irony. Her use of the term is to be understood metaphorically. The context of application is not physiological but psychological, and though in her description of the latter field she resorts to analogies drawn from the former, she does not thereby imply any kind of necessary and determining connection between the two.

The term is for her a 'd signation globale tr s vague et tr s grossi re';<sup>16</sup> indeed she warns us explicitly against being misled by the scientific source of the term and taking the analogy in too literal a fashion:

It was an analogy which was meant to be quite general. Human beings are not plants. Their reactions to each other are so complex. It is a childish simplification to take that analogy literally.<sup>17</sup>

There was however, she felt, sufficient analogy to make the term - as metaphor - an appropriate one:

I thought they might be called 'tropisms', after the biological term, because they are purely instinctive and are caused in us by other people or by the outside world and resemble the

---

<sup>15</sup> Romans, r cits et soties, Biblioth que de la Pl iade, Paris, 1966, p. 683.

<sup>16</sup> Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Lennon, 'Interview with Nathalie Sarraute', The Guardian, 8 March 1962, p. 6.

movements called tropisms by which living organisms expand or contract under certain influences, such as light, heat and so on.<sup>18</sup>

Over the years Nathalie Sarraute has on numerous occasions herself explained what she understands by these 'mouvements', 'drames', or by the term tropisms as applied to her own work. A few examples will suffice. One of the earliest comes in the context of a discussion of Dostoevsky's characters but, as is often the case, applies equally well to her own:

ces mouvements subtils, à peine perceptibles, fugitifs, contradictoires, évanescents, de faibles tremblements, des ébauches d'appels timides et de reculs, des ombres légères qui glissent, et dont le jeu incessant constitue la trame invisible de tous les rapports humains et la substance même de notre vie.<sup>19</sup>

Some years later:

I remember reading a few years ago in one of Flaubert's letters that Flaubert wondered what we really mean when we say: I feel what we call de la sympathie for someone. I think tropisms are the numerous movements we perform, the action that takes place in us, before clear recognition mounts to the surface of our consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

Or again, a more detailed attempt at definition from the preface to

L'Ere du soupçon:

Ce sont des mouvements indéfinissables, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience; ils sont à l'origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons éprouver et qu'il est possible de définir. Ils me paraissaient et me paraissent encore constituer la source secrète de notre existence. (p. 8)

Nathalie Sarraute's tropisms, then, are movements of the human psyche in the process of formation and development. Certain basic characteristics

---

18 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', The Listener, 9 March 1961, p. 428.

19 L'Ere du soupçon, p. 29.

20 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 428.

emerge. These movements of the mind are extremely difficult to isolate or grasp. It is not that they are unconscious; otherwise Nathalie Sarraute herself would not have become aware of them.<sup>21</sup> They take place, however, at the extreme limits of the conscious mind. They are as yet unformulated and may go unnoticed by the person entertaining them. They certainly betray themselves in a person's conduct, in his gestures or expressions, but do so by signs which are almost imperceptible. They are material which is normally - for reasons we shall see - censored:

D'ordinaire, ces mouvements n'ont pas droit de cité. Ils se produisent comme à notre insu dans des régions de nous-mêmes où la prudence nous empêche de nous aventurer. On n'en parle pas.<sup>22</sup>

This does not mean that they are inventions of the author or of her neurotic observers. Not only have other authors dealt in different ways with similar material. But Nathalie Sarraute's readers, as she herself rightly maintains, experience a sense of recognition when confronted with this material: 'Le lecteur les reconnaît comme les ayant éprouvés lui-même quand on les lui montre au ralenti.'<sup>23</sup> Another very important characteristic of tropisms is their fluidity: they succeed one another very rapidly, each having only a brief span of existence:

un foisonnement innombrables de sensations, d'images, de sentiments d'impulsions, de petits actes larvés qu'aucun langage intérieur n'exprime, qui se bousculent aux portes de la conscience, s'assemblent en groupes compacts et surgissent tout à coup, se défont aussitôt, se combinent autrement et réapparaissent sous une nouvelle forme.<sup>24</sup>

While the observer tries to follow up one particular movement, it is replaced by many others. Nor is he helped by a correspondence between

---

21 'Ce n'est pas inconscient parce que je les ai sentis.' (In conversation with the present writer in 1974)

22 'Entretien avec Nathalie Sarraute à propos du Mensonge et du Silence', Le Monde, 18 janvier 1967, p. 18.

23 Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute nous parle du Planétarium', p. 30.

24 L'Ere du soupçon, pp. 96-7.

these movements and what appear to be the particular qualities or defects of a person. These movements belong to particular individuals in the sense that at any given moment they are entertained by one mind but they have no individual quality apart from this. Identical movements may be experienced by anyone who is subject to them: they do not reveal or correspond to anything in a person's character, by which we normally identify him. At this level people are interchangeable:

Je crois à l'identité de tous les êtres et cette croyance est née, en moi, de observation, de l'expérience. Au niveau où je me place, la volonté, la détermination n'intervient pas et l'individu ne peut pas contrôler ses mouvements. Le contrôle n'intervient qu'après, et c'est alors seulement que les forts et les faibles se distinguent.<sup>25</sup>

Thus Alain Guimiez in Le Planétarium:

Voyez comme je suis fait, je suis stupide, je réagis d'une façon ridicule, mais je ne parviens pas à croire à une différence fondamentale entre les gens ... Je crois toujours - c'est peut-être idiot - que quelque part, plus loin, tout le monde est pareil, tout le monde se ressemble ... Alors je n'ose pas juger ... Je me sens aussitôt comme eux, dès que j'ôte ma carapace, le petit vernis ... Pas vous? Vous ne trouvez pas? ... (p. 34)<sup>26</sup>

Imperceptibility, fluidity, anonymity: these then are the characteristics of tropisms. But when one becomes sensitive to their existence certain patterns can be observed. The word tropism in its original biological sense covered movements of organisms towards or away from the source of influence. The movements of the mind which Nathalie Sarraute isolates and calls by this name are of the same order; they are movements of attraction or repulsion with regard to some external

<sup>25</sup> André Bourin, 'Techniciens du roman: Nathalie Sarraute', Nouvelles littéraires, 25 juin 1959, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> The same theme is important in Nathalie Sarraute's first play, Le Silence, in which one character attempts to persuade a group of other people that their reactions are similar to his: 'Car ils sont comme moi, eux tous, vous savez. Seulement ils n'osent rien montrer, ils n'ont pas l'habitude ...' (p. 55) Once he has achieved his aim, he turns on them, denying his own vision, and thus achieving (temporarily at least) the upper hand.

object or person. It is not correct to suggest that objects never provoke tropisms but, when they do, they frequently represent something other than themselves. Objects have no autonomous existence in Nathalie Sarraute's work.<sup>27</sup> More often than not it is people who are the agents of tropisms: 'Ils sont toujours, enfin presque toujours, provoqués par d'autres gens.'<sup>28</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute's human beings are not isolated figures like those of Beckett, continuing minimally to exist in an almost deserted world and desperately trying to fill the void with their own words. They bear a closer resemblance to Camus's Clamence, who self-consciously pirouettes before his captive audience, an audience essential to him, without whom his raison d'être vanishes. Indeed they are more sensitive even than he is to audience reaction. They suffer, one might say, from an excess rather than a lack of communication with others. A passage in L'Ere du soupçon states the necessity of the presence of another very clearly:

Ces drames intérieurs faits d'attaques, de triomphes, de reculs, de défaites, de caresses, de morsures, de viols, de meurtres, d'abandons généreux ou d'humbles soumissions, ont tous ceci de commun, qu'ils ne peuvent se passer de partenaire. (...) C'est lui le catalyseur par excellence, l'excitant grâce auquel ces mouvements se déclenchent, l'obstacle qui leur donne de la cohésion, qui les empêche de s'amollir dans la facilité et la gratuité ou de tourner en rond dans la pauvreté monotone de la manie. Il est la menace, le danger réel et aussi la proie qui développe leur vivacité et leur souplesse; l'élément mystérieux dont les réactions imprévisibles, en les faisant repartir à tout instant et se développer vers une fin inconnue, accentuent leur caractère dramatique. (pp. 99-100)

---

<sup>27</sup> On the place of objects in Nathalie Sarraute, see J. H. Matthews, 'Nathalie Sarraute: la présence des choses', Revue des lettres modernes, nos. 94-99, 1964, and more recently, Eliez-Rüegg, op. cit. Also a brief but acute comparison of Sartre and Sarraute in this respect in Neal Oxenhandler, 'Towards the new aesthetic', Contemporary Literature, 11, 1970, p. 181.

<sup>28</sup> Nathalie Sarraute in conversation with François Bondy, Cranaki and Belaval, op. cit., p. 214.

Thus the basic situation in Nathalie Sarraute's fiction is that of two or more people engaged in conversation. Hence her use of the term sous-conversation as an alternative for tropisms. Under the verbal exchanges between people lie a multiplicity of non-verbal exchanges which threaten every now and then to make themselves heard through the spoken word. Thus in the novels some brief phrase of spoken dialogue will be shown to be the product of intense subterranean drama. One of the sources of Nathalie Sarraute's inspiration might be said to be an extraordinary sensitivity to the rhythms of the spoken word. What she says of the staging of Le Silence and Le Mensonge is true of all her work: 'I don't visualize any characters. (...) I don't see any exterior action. I just hear voices and rhythms.'<sup>29</sup>

Tropisms, then, are movements towards or away from another human being. The situation in the realm of psychology, as Nathalie Sarraute sees it, is complicated by the fact that movements of both kinds can coexist, or at least succeed one another rapidly, with regard to the same object. The terms of the relationship are thus obscure, ambivalent: 'Comme le serpent devant la musique? comme les oiseaux devant le boa? il ne savait plus.'<sup>30</sup> The narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu comments on the idea of ambivalence in one's mental attitudes as a major psychological discovery:

L'ambivalence: c'est très fort d'avoir découvert cela - ~~cette~~ ce mélange de répulsion mêlée d'attrait, cette coexistence chez le même individu, à l'égard du même objet, de haine et d'amour.  
(p. 80)

Ambivalence is an essential aspect of the world of tropisms. Thus no relationship is stable. The uncertainty is reflected in many of Nathalie

---

<sup>29</sup> Brée, p. 146.

<sup>30</sup> Tropismes, IX.

Sarraute's extended images: suddenly the hunter becomes the hunted, the aggressor the attacked. It is reflected too in shifting attitudes to some of Nathalie Sarraute's recurrent themes: the hard and the soft, normally used to evoke the surface world and the world of tropisms, the fake and the genuine, may at the same time become an opposition between the pure and the viscous, reminiscent of Sartre in its emotional connotations.<sup>31</sup>

There is a basic impulse in the human mind with regard to the outside world and particularly other people and this is the desire for intimacy, 'this terrible desire to establish contact', as Nathalie Sarraute calls it, quoting Katherine Mansfield.<sup>32</sup> This is what she understands to be the fundamental subject matter of Dostoevsky's work and she elaborates on it in a passage of L'Ere du soupçon which is worth quoting in full as it could well be taken as a description of her own work:

C'est ce besoin continuel et presque maniaque de contact, d'une impossible et apaisante étreinte, qui tire tous ces personnages comme un vertige, les incite à tout moment à essayer par n'importe quel moyen de se frayer un chemin jusqu'à autrui, de pénétrer en lui le plus loin possible, de lui faire perdre son inquiétante, son insupportable opacité, et les pousse à s'ouvrir à lui à leur tour, à lui révéler leurs plus secrets replis. Leurs dissimulations passagères, leurs bonds furtifs, leurs cachotteries, leurs contradictions, et ces inconséquences dans leur conduite, que parfois ils semblent multiplier à plaisir et faire miroiter aux yeux d'autrui, ne sont chez eux que des coquetteries, des agaceries pour piquer sa curiosité et l'obliger à se rapprocher. Leur humilité n'est qu'un appel timide, détourné, une manière de se montrer tout proche, accessible, désarmé, ouvert, offert, tout livré, tout abandonné à la compréhension, à la générosité d'autrui: toutes les barrières que dressent la dignité, la vanité, sont abattues, <sup>X</sup> chacun peut s'approcher, entrer sans crainte, l'accès est libre. Et leurs brusques sursauts d'orgueil ne sont que des tentatives douloureuses, devant l'intolérable refus, la fin de non-recevoir opposée à leur appel, quand leur élan a été brisé, quand la voie qu'avait cherché à emprunter leur humilité se trouve barrée,

---

<sup>31</sup> For an extended discussion of such shifts, see Eliez-Rüegg, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> L'Ere du soupçon, p. 33.

pour faire rapidement machine arrière et parvenir, en empruntant une autre voie d'accès, par la haine, par le mépris, par la souffrance infligée, ou par quelque action d'éclat, quelque geste plein d'audace et de générosité, qui surprend et confond, à rétablir le contact, à reprendre possession d'autrui. (pp. 33-4)

So her characters when a prey to the world of tropisms may offer themselves all defences down, to the other, or may attack with extreme aggression; in each case the aim is to establish a relationship of intimacy, to make some kind of impact upon the other. Nathalie Sarraute reiterates this point with reference to her first two plays, Le Silence, and Le Mensonge:

Je crois que s'il y a un absolu que mes personnages recherchent c'est toujours le besoin de fusion et de contact avec autrui. Le silence de quelqu'un rompt le contact. Et de même le mensonge: c'est une rupture. Il s'agit chaque fois d'une rupture qu'on essaye de réparer. Il y a un des personnages qui ne la supporte pas.<sup>33</sup>

The other is of course himself subject to the same impulses and may seize the opportunity offered by moments of defencelessness to attack himself in the most hurtful way possible. Reactions at this level will appear primitive, violent to the fully conscious mind; Nathalie Sarraute therefore recreates them for the reader by analogies with animal and insect life and with situations of conflict in the human world.

The violent reactions of Nathalie Sarraute's characters may sometimes be the product of the desire for a close relationship. They may also be a reaction against it, a desire to escape contact which is registered as a hateful promiscuity, 'une promiscuité dégradante'.<sup>34</sup> For her characters' attitude to the world of tropisms is itself ambivalent. One of the alarming aspects of the world of tropisms is certainly its atmosphere of potential violence. When contact between people is established at this level, the individual is conscious of himself as a 'petite bête

---

<sup>33</sup> Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Nathalie Sarraute', Kentucky Romance Quarterly, 14, 1967, pp. 293-4.

<sup>34</sup> Martereau, p. 228.



41

apeurée';<sup>35</sup> he shrinks from the other person or the situation because he expects to be attacked: he may alternatively seek to stick as closely to the other person as possible in the hope of preventing an attack. But there is more to the reactions which Nathalie Sarraute presents than simply a fear of violence.<sup>36</sup> The anguish provoked by these characters' vision of 'un univers informe, étrange et menaçant',<sup>37</sup> is of a metaphysical variety, not at all dissimilar to the Sartrean 'nausée'. Awareness of the world of tropisms tends to bring with it a strong conviction that this is something to be reckoned with, that this is authenticity. At the same time authenticity then appears as fluid, uncertain, ambiguous, something that is 'informe' and 'étrange'. One is lost with no familiar land-marks by which to reorient oneself. One has the sense of having lost control of one's own and other people's reactions, of being caught up in a world without form, in a world which can be said to exist but cannot be said to be. The terminology is used by Sartre in his preface to Portrait d'un inconnu, which he concludes with the following words: 'Elle a mis au point une technique qui permet d'atteindre, par delà le psychologique, la réalité humaine, dans son existence même.' And Nathalie Sarraute approves the use of the word existence in the course of the Tel Quel interview:

Des mouvements à l'état naissant, qui ne peuvent pas encore être nommés, qui n'ont pas encore accédé à la conscience où ils se figeront en lieux communs, forment la substance de tous mes livres. Ils sont en constante transformation, en perpétuel devenir. C'est donc à juste titre, me semble-t-il, que Sartre a pu, à leur propos, parler d'existence.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> When Lucie is forced in Le Mensonge to explore what goes on her mind as she supports Edgar's role-playing, she formulates it as follows:  
J'étais tout près, plus près qu'avant. Je me collais à lui pour l'aider à comprimer ça ... la vérité ... pour la cacher, qu'elle disparaisse ... J'avais si peur qu'il croie que je la vois ... Je ne peux pas le supporter ... ça me ferait honte. (p. 88)

<sup>37</sup> Portrait d'un inconnu, p. 157.

<sup>38</sup> 'La littérature, aujourd'hui', p. 52.

Nathalie Sarraute's characters, in particular in the earlier works, are all presented to us in terms of their participation or non-participation in such perception. Most of them are also engaged to a greater or lesser extent in the attempt to escape or deny it. Each seems to be caught up in his particular vision of formlessness and to be trying to escape into an outside world where there are generally accepted definitions and values, where recognisable labels are current:

Il n'y a rien autour d'eux à quoi se raccrocher, rien autour d'eux qu'une immense étendue grise le long de laquelle ils se sentent glisser doucement comme sur une paroi lisse - et ils cherchent, ils palpent un peu au hasard pour trouver quelque chose, une aspérité, une prise, quelque chose de dur, de sûr, à quoi se retenir.<sup>39</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute is not simply concerned with demonstrating the existence of tropisms but also with exploring their relationship to the surface world of ordinary human converse. In his preface to Portrait d'un inconnu, Sartre stressed the importance of this aspect of her work, and it is an emphasis which Nathalie Sarraute has concurred in:

Les 'tropismes' ne parviennent aux limites de la conscience où ils peuvent être enregistrés à son insu par le personnage - et ils le sont certainement puisque le lecteur les reconnaît comme les ayant éprouvés lui-même quand on les lui montre au ralenti -, ils ne se font jour bien souvent qu'à travers des lieux communs qui sont, comme Sartre l'a très bien vu, des lieux de rencontre avec autrui, et aussi avec soi-même. Les lieux communs à la fois révèlent les 'tropismes' et les dérobent sous un aspect anodin et banal.<sup>40</sup>

Sartre summed up her view of man in the following terms: 'Un homme pour elle, ce n'est pas un caractère, ni d'abord une histoire ni même un réseau d'habitudes: c'est le va-et-vient incessant et mou entre le particulier et le général.'<sup>41</sup> The general is the realm of others,

<sup>39</sup> Portrait d'un inconnu, p. 156.

<sup>40</sup> Serreau, Nathalie Sarraute nous parle du Planétarium', p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> Preface to Portrait d'un inconnu, p. 14.

of the group, of ordinary conversation, of all social intercourse. It is a world of the commonplace, the cliché, a world of masks and images, of conventional social roles. The particular is the world of the individual, of tropisms, 'la source secrète de notre existence'.<sup>42</sup> The one is drab and moribund; it resembles 'une salle d'attente dans une gare de banlieue déserte, une salle nue, grise et tiède, avec un poêle noir au milieu et des banquettes en bois le long des murs';<sup>43</sup> yet it is also safe and familiar. The other is formless and unpredictable, violent and frightening; yet it exerts a repeated fascination. The figures in the early works are all seen in terms of their relationship to these two worlds: some endeavour to remain wholly in the first and deny the existence of the second, some are totally a prey to the second, others hover uneasily between the two. There are some who appear magically preserved from all experience of, or contact with, tropisms but such people - 'les autres', 'les gens privilégiés' - are always viewed from outside and from a distance; when closer scrutiny is possible, such impressions prove false.

The subjective experience of human nature, according to Nathalie Sarraute, is of a nature which is fluid and malleable. The individual perceives this fact with anguish and disgust; he feels vulnerable and longs for definition. In the attempt to escape, he adopts an image which will be recognised and accepted by other people. Such an image becomes his protection against them. Yet he remains vulnerable since he is dependent on others to confirm him in his role. Moreover he retains an obscure sense of the artificiality of such roles and will

---

<sup>42</sup> Preface to L'Ere du soupçon, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Tropismes, p. 22.

be tempted to destroy them in himself and others. Having done so, he will be overcome once more by a sense of fear and defencelessness; the urge to withdraw behind a mask will again be dominant and the same process will be re embarked on, endlessly repeating itself, inescapable. This is what might seem to emerge from Nathalie Sarraute's early works: an ironic and pessimistic view of the relations of the human being with himself and with others. Such a view is of course close to the Sartrean one, so much so that it is very easy to understand Sartre's early enthusiasm for Nathalie Sarraute's work. Sartrean terms might well be used in the context of Sarrautean psychology: viscosity, the role of the other, the notion of 'mauvaise foi', nostalgia for the state of the 'en-soi'.<sup>44</sup> Nathalie Sarraute appears to ascribe to sincerity and self-coincidence the same value as Sartre and, in her early work at least, she suggests little hope of achieving them. Despite the similarities, however, Sarraute's account is one which is conveyed at the outset in purely intuitive fashion by exclusively literary means; it is the product of lived experience. To describe Nathalie Sarraute as the 'fille de Sartre'<sup>45</sup> is misleading. There can be no question of the influence of Sartre. Tropismes was written, if not published, before La Nausée (1938) or Le Mur (1939) and it was as a result of Tropismes that they met. Nathalie Sarraute's editor suggested that she should send Sartre a copy. Simone de Beauvoir makes what seems the appropriate comment:

Sa vision des choses s'accordait spontanément avec les idées de Sartre: elle était hostile à tout essentialisme, elle ne croyait pas aux caractères tranchés, ni aux sentiments définis, ni à aucune notion toute faite.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> They are used extensively in the works already referred to by Jean-Luc Jaccard and Christine B. Wunderli-Müller.

<sup>45</sup> Jacqueline Piatier, 'Le nouveau roman', Tendances, no. 48, 1967, p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> La Force des choses, Paris, 1963, p. 30. Our italics.

The same sort of comment might well be made on the subject of the similarities between Nathalie Sarraute's analysis of human psychology and those of some contemporary psychologists or sociologists. These similarities have been noted by critics. Micheline Tison Braun writes in a footnote to her chapter on Les Fruits d'or:

Les observations de Nathalie Sarraute rappellent curieusement les analyses - un peu antérieures aux Fruits d'or - de Eric (sic) Fromm (Escape from Freedom) et de David Riesman (The Lonely Crowd).<sup>47</sup>

In her article comparing Eric Berne's Games People Play and Nathalie Sarraute's Tropismes, Anne C. Murch maintains:

A student of psychology could fruitfully carry out a structural analysis of the work [i.e. Tropismes] along the lines of Berne's, and bring to light a whole series of games.<sup>48</sup>

Where sociology and social psychology are concerned, it is perhaps in particular that area of investigation and interpretation known as 'role theory' which bears the greatest resemblance to Nathalie Sarraute's portrayal of human beings in their interrelations with one another.

Peter Berger gives us the following definition of the role as understood by some social psychologists:

A role, then, may be defined as a typified response to a typified expectation. Society has predefined the fundamental typology. To use the language of the theatre, from which the concept of role is derived, we can say that society provides the script for all the dramatis personae. The individual actors, therefore, need but slip into the roles already assigned to them before the curtain goes up. As long as they play their roles as provided for in this script, the social play can proceed as planned.<sup>49</sup>

This analogy with drama is at the centre of Erving Goffmann's The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.<sup>50</sup> In the course of an analysis

<sup>47</sup> Tison Braun, op. cit., p. 172.

<sup>48</sup> Anne C. Murch, 'Eric Berne's Games and Nathalie Sarraute's Tropismes', Australian Journal of French Studies, 8, 1971, pp. 63-4.

<sup>49</sup> Peter L. Berger, Invitation to Sociology, London, 1966, p. 112.

<sup>50</sup> First published in 1959; references here are to London, Penguin Books, 1971.

of people's attitudes to their own performances, which is reminiscent of distinctions made by Nathalie Sarraute ('an individual may be taken in by his own act or be cynical about it'<sup>51</sup>), he quotes a passage from Robert Ezra Park:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role ... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.<sup>52</sup>

All this sounds very much like a description of Sarrautean psychology. The self in Nathalie Sarraute's fiction once it attempts to enter into social contact with other people, once it seeks contact at a verbal level, must of necessity adopt the common coin of language, must adapt to the existing patterns in which people think and therefore can communicate; he must choose or accept a 'role'. In the nature of things he cannot but be 'other-directed', to use David Riesman's terminology, otherwise communication is impossible, at least in everyday life.

The sociologist of course is frequently concerned with the study of the phenomenon as it manifests itself in particular communities, professions or institutions. Nathalie Sarraute's fiction seeks rather to make a universal statement about man's social relationships. She is more concerned with psychology than with sociology. The sociologist moreover may or may not be particularly disturbed by the implications for human freedom which role theory, given the immense and insidious influence it attributes to society, brings with it. Nathalie Sarraute's view of the social, like that of Sartre, appears altogether negative.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>52</sup> *loc. cit.* The reference is to Robert Ezra Park, Race and Culture, Glencoe, Illinois, 1950, p. 249.

<sup>53</sup> Whatever other formative influences may be at work here, it is a view which in France in particular has a long and respectable history. It is ironic in the circumstances that Sartre should detect in her work the insidious influence of the social.

We have seen how it conjures up for her empty station waiting-rooms, drab and cheerless activities, how it implies a rejection of the individual, above all of the creative spirit.

The reverse side of Nathalie Sarraute's critique of the social is her treatment of the theme of neurosis.<sup>54</sup> In according a peculiar status to the mind labelled neurotic by the average citizen; Nathalie Sarraute reflects a modernist trend. Dennis Porter, who discusses this topic in relation to two writers closely associated (in some respects) with Nathalie Sarraute, namely Sartre and Robbe-Grillet, states his general theme as follows:

The testimony of their works [i.e. those of modernist writers] and of their lives has appeared to be that a disturbed relationship with the world is the norm among those who see furthest and is in any case a necessary condition of important artistic creativity. (...) The notion that mental health, a condition of adjustment, is frequently the equivalent of spiritual sloth is, in fact, central to modernist thought.<sup>55</sup>

Writers have long been suspicious of the notion of normality; psychiatrists have continued to treat their patients in its name. Prominent among the practising psychiatrists who have sought to modify the professional view of mental illness and see it rather as the writers have done, as an appropriate reaction to an irrational situation, is R. D. Laing, in whose work Nathalie Sarraute expresses considerable interest.<sup>56</sup> Laing describes the process whereby, under normal circumstances:

the physical birth of a new living organism into the world inaugurates rapidly ongoing processes whereby within an amazingly short time the infant feels real and alive and has a sense of being an entity, with continuity in time and a location in space.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> The theme is particularly important in Portrait d'un inconnu and we shall renew our discussion of it then.

<sup>55</sup> Dennis Porter, 'Sartre, Robbe-Grillet and the Psychotic Hero', Modern Fiction Studies, 16, 1970, p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> In conversation with the present writer in 1974.

<sup>57</sup> R. D. Laing, The Divided Self, London, 1960, pp. 42-43.

The individual thus achieves what Laing calls 'a firm core of ontological security'.<sup>58</sup> Where this does not happen, the individual suffers from 'ontological insecurity', a lack of a firm sense of self, and this, according to Laing, is the source of schizophrenic disorders. The characters of Beckett, Laing says, suffer from ontological insecurity.<sup>59</sup> The term seems equally appropriate to those of Nathalie Sarraute. What Laing describes in the following passage from The Divided Self is exceedingly reminiscent of the mental processes Nathalie Sarraute presents (in amplified form) in her fiction, and the similarity is underlined by Laing's use of the term 'tropism':

If the individual does not feel himself to be autonomous this means that he can experience neither his separateness from, nor his relatedness to, the other in the usual way. A lack of sense of autonomy implies that one feels one's being to be bound up in the other, or that the other is bound up in oneself, in a sense that transgresses the actual possibilities within the structure of human relatedness. It means that a feeling that one is in a position of ontological dependency on the other (i.e. dependent on the other for one's very being), is substituted for a sense of relatedness and attachment to him based on genuine mutuality. Utter detachment and isolation are regarded as the only alternative to a clam- or vampire-like attachment in which the other person's life-blood is necessary for one's own survival, and yet is a threat to one's survival. Therefore, the polarity is between complete isolation or complete merging of identity rather than between separateness and relatedness. The individual oscillates perpetually, between the two extremes, each equally unfeasible. He comes to live rather like those mechanical toys which have a positive tropism that impels them towards a stimulus until they reach a specific point, whereupon a built-in negative tropism directs them away until the positive tropism takes over again, this oscillation being repeated ad infinitum.<sup>60</sup>

Both Laing and Sarraute can be seen as following in the footsteps of Heidegger<sup>61</sup> with his devaluation of the social as das Man, an

---

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 41-2.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 55-6.

<sup>61</sup> The similarities to Heidegger are noted in Cranaki and Belaval, *op. cit.*, pp. 43 ff.



anonymous generality with great power but without definition. His notions of the authentic and the inauthentic, linked to the concept of das Man, seem equally relevant to Nathalie Sarraute. For Heidegger, to live authentically is to be constantly aware of one's unique individuality, while to live inauthentically is to lose one's individuality in the anonymous crowd of das Man. Nathalie Sarraute herself has admitted to the possibility of a relationship between her work and Heidegger such as existed between Proust and Bergson. She adds however: 'Mais je connais trop mal l'existentialisme pour vous en dire davantage. Je l'ignorais même tout à fait lorsque j'ai composé mon premier et mon second livre.'<sup>62</sup>

Such similarities as we have briefly evoked here are no more curious than the many other examples of the kind which occur in the history of literature or ideas. Ionesco recalls being told that his work was influenced by that of Vitrac: 'On m'avait dit que j'étais influencé par Vitrac. Alors j'ai lu Vitrac et j'ai dit: "en effet, je suis influencé par Vitrac".'<sup>63</sup> The kind of two-way traffic which Lionel Trilling analyses in his essay 'Freud and Literature' is clearly at work here but it is a question of generalised awareness of a specific cultural moment rather than of particular influences. Of Freud, Trilling writes:

When we think of the men who so clearly anticipated many of Freud's own ideas - Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, for example - and then learn that he did not read their works until after he had formulated his own theories, we must see that particular influences cannot be in question here but that what we must deal with is nothing less than a whole Zeitgeist, a direction of thought.<sup>64</sup>

Freud, himself, is of course accorded his due importance by

<sup>62</sup> Bourin, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco, Paris, 1966, p. 57.

<sup>64</sup> Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, London, Mercury Books, 1961, pp. 34-5 (first published 1951).

Nathalie Sarraute. Talking in L'Ere du soupçon, of the situation of the contemporary reader, she writes

Ce qu'il a appris, chacun le sait trop bien, pour qu'il soit utile d'insister. Il a connu Joyce, Proust et Freud; le ruissellement, que rien au dehors ne permet de déceler, du monologue intérieur, le foisonnement infini de la vie psychologique et les vastes régions encore à peine défrichées de l'inconscient. (p. 64)

But it is for his unveiling of the complexities of the human psyche, rather than for his analyses of what he found there, that she appreciates him. He is a landmark, but not a significant influence; his theories, like those of other psychoanalysts, are too rigid to be of use to her:

Je suis loin de la psychanalyse. Comment du reste appliquer des catégories déjà élaborées à ce qui, pour moi, est quelque chose de purement ressenti?<sup>65</sup>

Where Nathalie Sarraute is concerned, if we are to see personal experience as supplemented or encouraged by external sources at any point, it is literary influences which are by far the most important, the most direct and the most conscious. It is significant that the names of Joyce and Proust precede that of Freud in her list of masters of the modern mind. To the question of Nathalie Sarraute's literary ancestry we shall return in a later chapter.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>65</sup> Guy Le Clec'h, 'Drames microscopiques', Nouvelles littéraires, 28 février 1972, p. 4.

It is true, then, that Nathalie Sarraute in her novels is concerned with exploring human relationships and moreover that her views may be found to coincide with recent work in the field of psychology, and in particular with the existentialist tradition. One must not, however, make of her what she is not. Sometimes her own earlier utterances, arising out of a need to defend her own work against criticism, and arguing the rightness of her own psychological insights, may themselves mislead. She is not a psychologist; on that point she herself is adamant:

Je ne pense pas faire des découvertes dans le domaine scientifique de la psychologie comme l'ont fait les psychologues. Il ne s'agit pas de rivaliser avec les savants, mais de traduire des impressions qui sont plutôt d'ordre poétique.<sup>66</sup>

On the contrary, she claims: 'Mes connaissances en matière de psychanalyse sont assez simples.'<sup>67</sup> In her paper to the décade at Cérisy, she refers to Jacques Monod's work in her arguments against recent linguistic theory, but it is clear that Monod is for her simply a means of defending her own private convictions. If Monod is to be discarded, she falls back on these: 'De toute façon, je demeure solide sur mes positions, même sans Jacques Monod.'<sup>68</sup> Her beliefs concerning the existence of unformulated mental activity do not pretend to the status of a scientific theory; they are at best a conviction arising out of lived experience, at worst 'une hypothèse de travail, sans laquelle il m'est impossible de travailler'.<sup>69</sup>

Nor is she a moralist: 'Il n'y a aucun jugement moral, à mes yeux, dans mes livres';<sup>70</sup> 'Je dois affirmer qu'à aucun moment je n'ai cherché à délivrer des messages, à donner le moindre enseignement moral.'<sup>71</sup> Her

<sup>66</sup> Knapp, p. 288.

<sup>67</sup> Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II, p. 58. Corrected version.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 46. Corrected version.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49. Corrected version.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48. No change.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, p. 34.

psychology is not concerned with problems of behaviour or with the actions which may result from an individual's mental activity. The anonymity of her characters should not of course affect one's ordinary judgments of people:

On ne fait jamais suffisamment la différence entre la vie courante et la littérature. Dans la vie courante il y a des distinctions pratiques nécessaires. Nous sommes obligés de dire qu'une telle personne est avare. C'est une simplification mais nous savons alors que ce n'est pas elle que nous irons voir quand nous aurons besoin d'emprunter de l'argent.<sup>72</sup>

She laughingly objects to the idea that in her view there is nothing to choose between Hitler and Joan of Arc.<sup>73</sup> She is concerned not with judging but with knowing, and her endeavours moreover are to be viewed in the context not of ordinary life but of literature.

In an article entitled 'Nathalie Sarraute: Moraliste', which endeavours to justify the label of the title, Charles Whiting makes the following statement: 'As a moralist, her ideal is nothing other than the authentic intellectual life.'<sup>74</sup> The statement might be valid if the word 'writer' were substituted for the word 'moralist'. Nathalie Sarraute is above all a novelist. She certainly writes out of lived experience but does so because she wants to write, not because she is fighting some kind of moral battle for authentic behaviour against inauthentic behaviour. She has too often been made a moralist despite herself. One of the defects of Micheline Tison Braun's study is her tendency to see Nathalie Sarraute as primarily engaged in such a struggle. In her comments, for example, on the similarity between the work of Fromm and Riesman and that of Nathalie Sarraute she continues as follows:

---

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 47. No change.

<sup>73</sup> In a discussion held at the University of Glasgow in 1965.

<sup>74</sup> The French Review, Vol. XLIII, Special Issue, No. 1, Winter 1970, p. 168.

E. Fromm et D. Riesman approuvent un type indépendant de personnalité, qu'ils nomment respectivement: creative personality et auto-directed personality. C'est aussi le souhait de Nathalie Sarraute, qui se préoccupe dans toute son œuvre de chercher les conditions de l'authenticité.<sup>75</sup>

It is true of course that the writer in Entre la vie et la mort must resist in his life the pressures of the inauthentic but this is simply a necessary concomitant of the ability to continue to write authentically, i.e. creatively. The same tendency to see Nathalie Sarraute as a writer with a moral message, though a rather different one, is to be found in Ruth Levinsky's comparative study of Sarraute and Dostoevsky. One finds, for example, the following passage:

Sarraute's entire novelistic achievement studies her perception of a paralysed embryonic state of the human personality. Despite her attacks on banality and hypocrisy, Sarraute concludes that one must accept these evils in order to adjust to life.<sup>76</sup>

This is to put Nathalie Sarraute in the position of the psychiatrist in Portrait d'un inconnu, whose advice she is at such pains to mock. Sartre's preface to that novel can hardly be accused of misinterpretation of this order, but his emphasis equally is perhaps too exclusively moral and insufficiently aesthetic.

Writing represents for her the effort to formulate in words what is as yet unformulated. It is here that the notion of authenticity comes into play. She has made it clear that this was for her an aesthetic rather than a moral issue: 'Je ne me suis pas posé un problème moral, mais esthétique, je me suis placée au point de vue du travail littéraire.'<sup>77</sup> Immediately the writer attempts to find words to convey what he has

---

<sup>75</sup> Tison Braun, op. cit., p. 75.

<sup>76</sup> Levinsky, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> In conversation with François Bondy, Cranaki and Belaval, op. cit., p. 217.

sensed, he comes up against a basic linguistic problem. He is forced to use 'les mots de la tribu', words which are by their very nature familiar counters endowed with meanings. They pull him back all too easily into a familiar world and make him lose contact with the unfamiliar one he is attempting to explore. Such is the experience of the character in the first text Nathalie Sarraute ever wrote:

Il n'y avait rien à faire. Rien à faire. Se soustraire était impossible. Partout, sous des formes innombrables, 'traîtres' ('c'est traître le soleil d'aujourd'hui, disait la concierge, c'est traître et on risque d'attraper du mal. Ainsi, mon pauvre mari, pourtant il aimait se soigner ...'), partout, sous les apparences de la vie elle-même, cela vous happait au passage, quand vous passiez en courant devant la loge du concierge, quand vous répondiez au téléphone, déjeuniez en famille, invitiez des amis, adressiez la parole à qui ce fût.<sup>78</sup>

Such equally is the experience - here explored more explicitly and at length - of the writer in Entre la vie et la mort. The writer, as Nathalie Sarraute sees it, is thus condemned to walk a tight-rope between an obscurity which fails to communicate and a conventional language which loses touch with his original insights:

Entre ce non-nommé et le langage qui n'est qu'un système de conventions, extrêmement simplifié, un code grossièrement établi pour la commodité de la communication, il faudra qu'une fusion se fasse pour que, patinant l'un contre l'autre, ils produisent un texte.<sup>79</sup>

The writer's insights are engaged in a constant struggle for survival against the pressures built into the language he must use:

Là où ce langage étend son pouvoir, se dressent les notions apprises, les dénominations, les définitions, les catégories de la psychologie, de la sociologie, de la morale. Il assèche, durcit, sépare ce qui n'est que fluidité, mouvance, ce qui s'épand à l'infini et sur quoi il ne cesse de gagner.

A peine cette chose informe, toute tremblante et flageolante, cherche-t-elle à se montrer au jour qu'aussitôt ce langage si puissant et si bien armé, qui se tient toujours prêt à intervenir pour rétablir l'ordre - son ordre - saute sur elle et l'écrase.

Cette lutte, j'ai essayé de la montrer dans mes romans.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Tropismes, II. Nathalie Sarraute has confirmed, in a letter to the present writer dated 1971, that this sketch, composed in the winter of 1932-3, was the first she wrote.

<sup>79</sup> Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II, pp. 32-3.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

Thus the struggle which is at the heart of all her novels is a linguistic struggle as well as a psychological one. The vision one has of her characters slipping back into roles or assuming masks for their own protection is the product as much of a linguistic situation as of a moral one.

Nathalie Sarraute, then, is concerned with human psychology in her works but she is also concerned with the processes of writing and with the pressures which are exerted on the writer and which he must resist, whether these pertain to the genre in which he has chosen to write or whether they arise out of the nature of language itself. She is also concerned with the nature of the aesthetic experience, with the relationship of work of art and consumer. Thus, throughout her work, the theme of art, in one form or another, is present. The language issue is a permanent one; one finds it reformulated in each successive work. In other respects the particular emphasis shifts from work to work, as we saw in our introduction. In the early novels, she is concerned with the novel tradition and particularly with the concept of character. This development culminates in Le Planétarium, where one finds equally signs of a change of direction. Not only the character but the novel itself (and with it other art objects) now comes under suspicion. Seen in relation to its public (and its secondary creator) in Les Fruits d'or, the novel is then seen in relation to its original creator in Entre la vie et la mort; Nathalie Sarraute addresses herself directly to the process of creation. In Vous les entendez?, her scope widens still further: the validity of art as we have understood it since the Renaissance is questioned.

It is evident that there is more development where the art theme is concerned, than there is in the psychological content of her novels, perhaps because the latter represents the original basic insights which

impelled her to write, her instinctive side, whereas the former reflects her highly conscious awareness of herself as a writer, which naturally develops over the years as she practises her trade. It will be thus more appropriate to expand on this aspect of her work in relation to individual works. Equally the relation between psychology and art in her work will be best examined in our subsequent chapters.



Chapter 2    Tropismes

Mon premier livre contenait en germe tout ce qui,  
dans mes ouvrages suivants, je n'ai cessé de  
développer.

NATHALIE SARRAUTE

œuvre?

Tronismes occupies a special position in Nathalie Sarraute's opus. X

It is, of course, her first work and one which is tentative, in the sense that it is the work of a writer who was at that point uncertain of the interest of what she had to say. In its original form,<sup>1</sup> it was composed over a period of nearly five years and took two further years to find a publisher. Nathalie Sarraute's own feelings about the work were ambiguous. When asked, in 1959, what her impression had been on completing Tronismes, she replied: 'Celle d'avoir produit une espèce de monstre. J'ai été extrêmement surpris.'<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it is by no means an example of juvenilia bearing little relation to works produced in the writer's prime. Nathalie Sarraute was thirty when she began to write and the links between Tronismes and all her subsequent works can be shown to be very close. She herself says as much in her preface to the 1964 edition of L'Ere du soupçon: 'Mon premier livre contenait en germe tout ce qui, dans mes ouvrages suivants, je n'ai cessé de développer' (p. 9). It is an ambiguous work where the sources of its inspiration are concerned. On the one hand, it might be deemed to be a very literary work, consciously inspired by the reading of previous fiction. Again this is something which Nathalie Sarraute herself admits: 'I have been able to feel certain things and to try

---

<sup>1</sup> Tronismes was first published in 1939 by Denoël; this first edition contained nineteen sketches. The second edition, by the Editions de Minuit in 1957, omitted one sketch from the first edition, and included six further sketches composed between the years 1939 and 1941. References here are to the second edition. Given the nature of this particular work, we have thought it appropriate to refer the reader to sketch rather than to page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Bourin, p. 7.

and separate them from a mass of other things, because my sensibility had been trained and my curiosity aroused by certain books.'<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it is also a highly personal, intuitive work which has its source in lived experience. This Nathalie Sarraute has equally been at pains to stress, as we saw in our last chapter.

The form of Tropismes - a series of brief texts closer perhaps to prose poems than to fiction - is not one to which she has since returned, but it was a form which was by no means ill-suited to her preoccupations at that time. It had the great merit of being undefined, of leaving her free to explore and to express what she observed as she thought fit. Thus, before encountering the technical problems of a full-length novel, she was able to go a considerable way towards establishing a style which was distinctive and appropriate to her material. Without Tropismes, she might have been less successful in resisting the novel's formal traditions. The sketches of Tropismes enabled her to create intuitively a basis for her future work.

It is subject-matter and style rather than structure which confer unity on the work. Tropismes is what it appears to be: a series of brief sketches unrelated to one another in terms of character or action. There is neither development nor necessary sequence; Nathalie Sarraute is adamant on this point: 'Il n'y avait aucun principe régissant l'ordre des Tropismes.'<sup>4</sup> The sketches are rather to be seen as variations on a theme, successive illustrations of a single phenomenon, or of related phenomena. This theme, these phenomena, the essential

---

<sup>3</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 428.

<sup>4</sup> In a letter to the present writer dated 1971. This need not exclude the possibility of occasional juxtapositions with a view to effect: under the impact of V, for example, the reader registers all the more acutely the shock of the feverish activity of the woman in VI. It does however cast some doubt on the special status some critics have wished to give to the first and last sketches.

subject-matter of the book, is defined by the title, Tropismes. Nathalie Sarraute is concerned with these tiny, innumerable, fleeting psychological reactions which lie beneath the surface of our formulated words, emotions and thoughts. The sketches reveal them in many different contexts and convey them in different ways. They are sometimes provoked by objects, mostly by contact with other people. Sometimes an exchange between people - what Nathalie Sarraute will later call a 'sous-conversation' - is taking place at this level. Sometimes the tropism is registered by writer or reader rather than by the figure in the text. Always, however, the affirmation of the existence of this inner life is at the centre of each sketch.

Already in Tropismes, however, Nathalie Sarraute is not simply concerned with demonstrating the existence of tropisms but also with exploring their relationship to the surface world of ordinary human converse. The figures in the sketches of Tropismes are all seen in terms of their relationship to these two worlds: some endeavour to remain wholly in the first and deny the existence of the second, some are totally a prey to the second, others hover uneasily between the two. In most cases, what we are dealing with is a temporary state - a moment in the continual shuttling back and forth between one world and the next. *fin.*

At one extreme, then, there are those figures who have adapted themselves more or less successfully to the external world. Nathalie Sarraute is skilled at rendering the conversational tone of those who live and have their being in the realm of the general and commonplace, in 'le monde rassurant et désolé de l'inauthentique'.<sup>5</sup> In the second sketch, for example, there is the conversation of the cook, the housewife.

---

<sup>5</sup> J.-P. Sartre, Preface to Portrait d'un inconnu, p. 14.

and the concierge. Or in the tenth, that of the kind of woman who spends her afternoons shopping and gossiping in teashops:

Il y a entre eux des scènes lamentables, des disputes à propos de rien. Je dois dire que c'est lui que je plains dans tout cela quand même. Combien? Mais au moins deux millions. Et rien que l'héritage de la tante Joséphine ... Non ... comment voulez-vous? Il ne l'épousera pas. C'est une femme d'intérieur qu'il lui faut, il ne s'en rend pas compte lui-même.

Women such as these have reduced existence to a pale shadow of itself.<sup>6</sup>

They are described as:

roulant sans cesse entre leurs doigts cette matière ingrate et pauvre qu'elles avaient extraite de leur vie (ce qu'elles appelaient 'la vie', leur domaine), la pétrissant, l'étirant, la roulant jusqu'à ce qu'elle ne forme plus entre leur doigts qu'un petit tas, une petite boulette grise.

What lies at the end of such reductions is a series of categories into which the self and others can be safely fitted, hypersimplifications which ensure against any descent beneath the surface of life, a series of olichés which act as alibis, reassuring explanations. Again, there is a manner of being old which is a protective self-parody. In the sixteenth sketch, an elderly couple is presented sitting at a café table and possessing the traditional attributes of age, its serenity, comfort, resignation. But the cadre is hostile to the image; it almost crumbles: 'La salle avait un éclat souillé et froid, les garçons circulaient trop vite, d'un air un peu brutal, indifférent ...' The old people are aware of the threat, but with the experience of long complicity in their role, they know how to deal with it: 'Il fallait juste choisir attentivement (...), serait-ce une grenadine ou un café? crème ou nature?' It is always a question of giving the shapeless form,

---

<sup>6</sup> In general, as Françoise Calin points out (op. cit., pp. 20-1), the women characters in Nathalie Sarraute's works fit the traditional bourgeois pattern; economically dependent, they appear to offer support for the narrator's contention in Iris Murdoch's The Black Prince: 'of course men play roles, but women play roles too, blander ones. They have, in the play of life, fewer good lines' (London, Penguin Books, p. 34).

of reducing the unknown to the familiar: in XX, a man relies on his female relatives to reduce his fears to known quantities. If his indefinable anguish can be identified with professional jealousy or a sense of growing old, he is temporarily reassured.

The extreme example of the image substituted for life is XVIII. The key phrase of the sketch is the following: 'toute sûre d'elle et des autres, solidement installée dans son petit univers'. Like the woman in II who spends hours with her cook, mistress and maid here bolster each other up in their roles, the external sign of which is the bell which each of them knows will be rung for tea at a set hour. Even here, however, there are signs that the image presented to the world is an artificial construction. The 'petit univers' hints at a restricted version of life reminiscent of that led by the women in X. There is the vacuity of the cook's expression, her apparent absence of personality, and, amid the general prettiness and precision of the picture created by the muslin curtains, the wistaria and the cat, the slightly jarring, hesitant note of the 'joues roses un peu violacées' (heralding the famous mauve braces in La Nausée?). In every sketch where people are presented in terms of a role or an image, there are similar suggestions of brittleness, and artificiality, or of the tension involved in sustaining the role. There is the comment on the gossiping women in X: 'Leurs visages étaient comme raidis par une sorte de tension intérieure', or the description of the eager shoppers in XIII:

Avec leur sac sous le bras, leurs gantelets, leur petit bibi réglementaire juste comme il faut incliné sur leur tête, leurs cils longs et rigides piqués dans leurs paupières bombées, leurs yeux durs, elles trottaient le long des boutiques.

In each case a sense of unease is engendered in the reader.

The view whereby assimilation into a social world represents a

deadening influence, a denial of individual reactions, is particularly emphasised through the child figures in Tropismes. Childhood is an important theme in Tropismes: in over half the sketches there is a child, or a reference to children or to someone's childhood. The opposition of child and adult parallels that of inner life and social converse. The social group is seen as a game where the children join hands in a circle supervised by an adult. The effect is to predispose the reader towards the inner life side of the equation. In Tropismes, however (though perhaps not in Portrait d'un inconnu where the same theme recurs and where the treatment of it is in any case more complex), the parallel is probably less a conscious device than a natural product of the book's sources in Nathalie Sarraute's own childhood.

The general theme is that of appropriation of the child by the adult; the relationship is that of victim and oppressor. The grandfather in VIII can be taken as representative:

Quand il était avec des êtres frais et jeunes, des êtres innocents, il éprouvait le besoin douloureux, irrésistible, de les manipuler de ses doigts inquiets, de les palper, de les rapprocher de soi le plus près possible, de se les approprier.

The children in Tropismes are expected by their adults to be, and are, obedient, quiet and untroublesome; they hold the adult's hand in a gesture of submissiveness. They are frequently described as well-behaved, 'sage': 'il trottinait très doucement et sagement' (VIII), 'Elle sentait comme sagement, bien sagement, comme une bonne petite fille docile, elle leur donnait la main et tournait avec eux' (XXIII), 'c'était une petite fille extrêmement "facile", une enfant très docile et très sage' (XXI). Here as elsewhere, the repetition creates the impression of cliché and casts doubt on the adequacy of the comments.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the children

---

<sup>7</sup> Such comments are strikingly similar in substance and tone to those made by the families of the schizophrenics studied by R.D. Laing and A. Esterson in Sanity, Madness and the Family, London, 1964. In at least two of the sketches of Tropismes (V and XXII), the figures would seem to have emerged no more successfully than Laing's schizophrenics into adulthood; the experience of each, though it takes very different forms, suggests failure to relate to others to an extent which would normally require clinical treatment.

in Tropismes are simply there in the background, submitting passively to the adult world like the 'petits enfants tranquilles' of the first sketch, or the two children of the 'professeur de lycée' in III. In other sketches the central figure is a child. In XVII, for example, there is the child who is so dominated by the atmosphere imposed by his parents that he sets up his little camp-stool where and when they decide to stop and plays quietly at their feet. The unnaturalness of the behaviour expected of the children is stressed in various ways. The children of the lycée teacher have (like their father) 'de longues têtes aux yeux pâles, luisantes et lisses comme de grands œufs d'ivoire'; they disappear silently into their dark flat. The boy in XVII is at least taken out-of-doors and out of the city, if only on 'les jours de fêtes'. Negative comment in this sketch is made indirectly through the evocation of a nature dominated by human beings; the new leaves on the trees seem oppressed by their surroundings:

Elles ne parvenaient pas à jeter autour d'elles un peu de leur éclat et ressemblaient à ces enfants au sourire aigrelet qui plissent la figure sous le soleil dans les salles d'hôpital.

This child, like others, is being made to adopt the attitudes of the adult world: 'Il absorbait ce qu'ils disaient.' In VIII, we see the process at work and the content of what the adult says is elaborated upon; a series of conventional reactions inspired principally by caution and fear, a whole negative attitude of mind, is being inculcated in the child by his grandfather:

Et le petit sentait que quelque chose pesait sur lui, l'engourdissait. Une masse molle et étouffante, qu'on lui faisait absorber inexorablement, en exerçant sur lui une douce et ferme contrainte, en lui pinçant le nez pour le faire avaler, sans qu'il pût résister - le pénétrait, pendant qu'il trotтинait doucement et très sagement, en donnant docilement sa petite main.

In other sketches the same theme is present but is explored from the opposite angle: the role an adult has adopted is shown to have its



origins in childhood, to have been gradually built up over a long period of time. There is the woman in XXI whose desperate need for the approval of others goes back to the childhood days when, before buying a book or a paper, she would ask the opinion of the shopkeeper as to its suitability. Or again, there are the women in XIII whose untiring search for just the right costume is shown to be the product of an attitude of mind developed in them in youth:

Elles souraient tout de même, aimablement, bien élevées, bien dressées depuis de longues années, quand elles avaient couru encore avec leur mère, pour combiner, pour 'se vêtir de rien', 'car une jeune fille, déjà, a besoin de tant de choses, et il faut savoir s'arranger'.

Since childhood the doll-like figure of XIX has cooperated with his oppressors: 'Il avait pris goût depuis l'enfance à cette dévoration.' In the main the children of Tropismes are unresisting victims; they do not know what is happening to them. We see them as already doomed before they have a chance to assert themselves. Not for the children here Marcel's 'même et inflexible jaillissement de toutes les forces de ma vie'<sup>8</sup> which characterises the Combray stage of his odyssey; they seem already infected by adult attitudes, already 'accablé par la morne journée et la perspective d'un triste lendemain'.<sup>9</sup> The adults in Tropismes do not preserve their childhood through the intervention of memory. What is evoked as lost in the process of socialization is evoked only negatively, as something gone for good:

Ils ne voyaient jamais se lever dans leur souvenir un pan de mur inondé de vie, ou les pavés d'une cour, intenses et caressants, ou les marches douces d'un perron sur lequel ils s'étaient assis dans leur enfance. (III)<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> A la recherche du temps perdu, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, 1954, Volume I, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> The theme of private memories as evidence of individuality preserved is so obviously reminiscent of Proust that it seems appropriate that one of the examples given should recall the 'pan de mur' in Vermeer's View of Delft which so impresses Bergotte and another the uneven 'pavés' of the courtyard at the Hôtel de Guermantes which recapture Venice for Marcel.

It seems doubtful indeed whether the children in Tropismes are ever given the opportunity to amass such memories.

If the world of the commonplace is deadening, trivialising in its effects on people's mode of being, it is also reassuring. The conventional characters in XXIII derive a sense of security from the knowledge that they are based on familiar, long-established models: 'Ils étaient à l'abri.' It is frightening when suddenly the mask slips to reveal the chaotic world within.<sup>11</sup> Too great an awareness of tropisms is terrifying, paralysing, and makes for the complete avoidance of any social contact whatever. To the woman in V, the most trivial action is fraught with danger:

La moindre action, comme d'aller dans la salle de bain se laver les mains, faire couler l'eau du robinet, paraissait une provocation, un saut brusque dans le vide, un acte plein d'audace. Ce bruit soudain de l'eau dans ce silence, suspendu, ce serait comme un signal, comme un appel vers eux, ce serait comme un contact horrible, comme de toucher avec la pointe d'une baguette une méduse et puis d'attendre avec dégoût qu'elle tressaille tout à coup, se soulève et se replie.

It is within the family circle that such pressures are felt at their strongest. The enforced intimacy of the family makes the protection afforded by the image all the more precious. Yet familiarity also means increased awareness of underlying reactions, of the strength of impulses beneath apparently anodyne gestures and statements. The outsider can speak and act freely, unhampered by such awareness. Such is the fortunate situation of 'les autres' in VI, who can happily maintain that they do not object to drinking their coffee cold. The 'initiés', on the other hand, are only too conscious of the reactions produced by such a

---

<sup>11</sup> Micheline Tison Braun underlines the protective nature of the cliché: Le cliché, ce n'est pas ce que tout le monde pense ou sent. C'est ce qu'on se force à penser ou à sentir pour échapper au vertige de la réalité. Le cliché, c'est la pensée du ON, la pensée inauthentique, celle qui permet de vivre, bien sage, et de ne rien remarquer. (op. cit., p. 47)

statement in the woman who runs the household: 'Quand on vivait près d'elle, on était prisonnier des choses, esclave rampant chargé d'elles, lourd et triste, continuellement guetté, traqué par elles.'

Artists are figures who reveal unknown aspects of reality, who challenge the accepted notions of things, and as such they represent a menace to be kept in check at all costs. In VII, a woman seeks to protect someone with whom she stands in intimate relationship against every evidence of inner chaos. What if the conversation should turn to artists, men whose whole lives are given up to expressing the reality of which he is afraid, a reality over which he does not have the upper hand? The conversation does so turn, despite her. But the menace is averted by a demonstration of the incompetence of such artists to behave like ordinary men and lead normal, sensible, integrated lives. The man in question is thus spared an access of rage, terror and confusion. One of the surest ways of insulating oneself against this shocking world perceived by the artist, of justifying the acceptance of roles and idées reçues, is to postulate a sanity in relation to which it can be dismissed as 'tout cela'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in the twelfth sketch one hears of a psychiatrist who, before an attentive audience at the Collège de France, 's'amusait de tout cela'. The miracles and mysteries of Proust and Rimbaud as treated by him become 'leur cas'. He confirms himself and his audience in their imperviousness to such ideas. And his method is a universal one:

Et partout alentour, dans les Facultés avoisinantes, aux cours de littérature, de droit, d'histoire ou de philosophie, à l'Institut et au Palais, dans les autobus, les métros, dans toutes les administrations, l'homme sensé, l'homme normal, l'homme actif, l'homme digne et sain, l'homme fort triomphait.

---

<sup>12</sup> Reference has already been made to Nathalie Sarraute's use of the demonstrative to convey tropisms. Here the same word is used but, by means of its context, made to appear pejorative.

troubled and Rimbaud are dismissed, left to wander about the streets,  
disconsolate and solitary, eternally outsiders.

Artists can be the source of roles or images as well as a challenge to them. Sketch XXIII embarks briefly upon this theme:

Ils étaient laids, ils étaient plats, communs, sans personnalité, ils dataient vraiment trop, des clichés, pensait-elle, qu'elle avait vus déjà tant de fois décrits partout, dans Balzac, Maupassant, dans Madame Bovary, des clichés, des copies, la copie d'une copie, pensait-elle.

The realist novel and the tendency to see people as characters in realist novels are, of course, Nathalie Sarraute's particular target in this instance. Art can be put to good use in another way; Nathalie Sarraute treats with particular virulence the eager intellectual of XI:

Ils étaient ainsi un grand nombre comme elle, parasites assoiffés et sans merci, sangsues fixées sur les articles qui paraissent, limaces collées partout et répandant leur suc sur des coins de Rimbaud, suçant du Mallarmé, se passant les uns aux autres et engluant de leur ignoble compréhension Ulysse ou les Cahiers de Malte Laurids Brigge.

This sketch, in Nathalie Sarraute's earliest work, already provides material with which to counter criticisms made of her by Lionel Trilling. There is much in Lionel Trilling's admirable book, Sincerity and Authenticity,<sup>13</sup> that is relevant to a study of Nathalie Sarraute, but the pages devoted explicitly to her (primarily to a discussion of her essay on Flaubert) do not altogether do her justice. We should want to quarrel with the following passage:

According to Mme. Sarraute, the inauthenticity of Emma Bovary consists in her using as the stuff of her dreams the 'cheap images drawn from the most debased, discredited forms of romanticism'. Would Madame Bovary, we wonder, have lived a more authentic life, would her sentiment of being have more nearly approached singleness and particularity, if at the behest of a more exigent taste she had chosen as the stuff of her dreams the well-made, expensive images of a more creditable form of romanticism? Will not any art - the most certifiedly authentic, the most shaming - provide sustenance for the inauthenticity of those who consciously shape their experience by it? It was the peculiar inauthenticity which comes from basing a life on the very best cultural objects that Nietzsche had in mind when he coined the terrible phrase, 'culture-Philistine'. What he means by this is the inversion of the bourgeois resistance to art which we usually call Philistinism; he means the use of the art and thought of high culture, of the highest culture, for purposes of moral accreditation.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> London, 1972.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 104.

Nathalie Sarraute is perfectly well aware that any art - whether great or not - can provide sustenance for an inauthentic life (or novelist).

This particular sketch seems precisely to offer us a portrait of Nietzsche's 'culture-Philistine'.

The average human being cannot permanently escape either world. The people in III, who have opted for anonymity, for the loss of individuality within a social pattern, are only 'presque chez eux'. The man in II, who registers the conversation of others as 'une bave poisseuse', knows the commonplace to be all pervasive: 'Partout cela vous happait au passage.' The nature of language is such that immediately one uses words one submits to the commonplace. Some of the sketches in Tropismes describe states of being, in one or other world. More characteristic perhaps are those sketches in which momentarily the two worlds clash, in which a tropism surfaces and destroys or threatens to destroy a carefully maintained, generally accepted image. In XV, a man rebels against the category of 'vieux Messieurs' into which he is forced by a young girl, and refuses to play the game expected of him. (Here the child appears as aggressor as well as victim, a first sign of the ambivalence which will be further pursued in Portrait d'un inconnu.) In XXI, a woman is tempted momentarily to throw off the shackles of those conventional responses to which she is normally so faithful:

Se taire, les regarder; et juste au beau milieu de la maladie de la grand-mère se dresser et, faisant un trou énorme, s'échapper en heurtant les parois déchirées et courir en criant (...), courir la bouche tordue, hurlant des mots sans suite.

In XIV, a modest, ultra-feminine woman provokes by the insistent quality of her self-effacement unsuitable reactions in her audience:

Ils se sentaient glisser, tomber de tout leur poids écrasant tout sous eux: cela sortait d'eux, des plaisanteries stupides, des ricanements, d'atroces histoires d'anthropophages, cela sortait et éclatait sans qu'ils pussent le retenir.

In the main such outbursts take place despite the characters in

Tropismes. Most of them submit more or less easily to the surface world; those who are intensely aware of deeper currents of activity are generally involved in a desperate panic-stricken attempt to conceal them, to prevent them impinging on the surface:

Il fallait leur répondre et les encourager avec douceur (...) sans quoi un déchirement, un arrachement, quelque chose d'inattendu, de violent allait se produire, quelque chose qui jamais ne s'était produit et qui serait effrayant. (II)

Aussi lui fallait-il contenir cela le plus longtemps possible, empêcher que cela ne sorte, que cela ne jaillisse d'elle, le comprimer en elle, à tout prix, n'importe comment. (IX)

\* \* \*

To convey such material Nathalie Sarraute obviously had to face considerable stylistic and formal problems. At the stage of Tropismes, these were resolved by her in an intuitive rather than a reasoned fashion. It was only after she had completed Tropismes, and in the face of the public's lack of response to the work, that she began to reflect on what she had done and attempt a theoretical justification of her innovations in subject matter and in form. These reflections were contained in the essays of L'Ere du soupçon and subsequently in other articles and interviews, and also found their way into her first novel, Portrait d'un inconnu. One of her problems was to direct her reader's attention firmly towards the material she was interested in and to make sure that pre-conceived ideas about the nature of fiction did not lead him astray. Hence the value of the form of Tropismes, where traditional notions of character and plot are clearly irrelevant. Hence too the anonymity of her characters. Significantly enough, the one figure in Tropismes awarded a proper name is the cook, Ada, in the eighteenth sketch. In

general, Nathalie Sarraute's characters are referred to only by pronouns, the use of proper names being inappropriate except at a surface level of awareness:

Ils n'apparaissent jamais dans mes livres qu'au moment où ces actions dramatiques, ces tropismes qui se développent dans les régions encore intactes où se situe pour moi, aujourd'hui, l'authenticité, affleurent au dehors et se figent en lieux-communs et en trompe-l'œil.<sup>15</sup>

Hence too the lack of physical descriptions; only those figures who seem far removed from life and closely identified with their images are accorded an outward appearance: the woman in the English cottage, for example, 'une demoiselle aux cheveux blancs, aux joues roses un peu violacées' (XVIII), or the psychiatrist at the Collège de France, 'avec son petit œil perçant et malicieux, sa cravate toute faite et sa barbe carrée' (XII).

Her major problems however arose from the nature of the material itself. It could not be described directly, only through metaphor; she had to find physical equivalents for mental reactions. In any case, she did not want to produce a clinical description of the material but rather to induce in the reader a sensitive awareness of it, similar to her own. The reader has to experience the tropisms along with the figures in the sketches, and be made to participate in the feelings which accompany them. The metaphors are often, in consequence, emotionally highly charged. She also uses what she refers to herself as a kind of slow-motion technique: her sketches take place in a 'hugely amplified present'.<sup>16</sup> Thus the momentary sensation is blown up into a dramatic climax and made more clearly perceptible to the reader.

---

<sup>15</sup> 'La littérature, aujourd'hui', p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> Preface to the English translation of Tropismes, London, 1963, p. 8.

12

The subject-matter of Tropismes is wholly psychological. Yet the world of Tropismes is externally a well-defined world, not rich in physical detail perhaps but eminently familiar, easily recognisable: residential Paris for the most part, a place of quiet streets and deserted squares. There is one excursion to the suburbs which hardly represents an escape and one quite unreal glimpse of England. It is a world of teashops, boutiques, social gatherings, the family, the Collège de France. Its inhabitants are Parisian, bourgeois, often though not exclusively female; in the background is the supporting cast of the bourgeois world, the local tradesmen, the cooks, Madame la concierge.<sup>17</sup> Sartre, in his later criticism of Nathalie Sarraute, argues that the world she portrays in her fiction is too limited:

J'ai toujours trouvé remarquable (...) ce que fait Nathalie Sarraute. Mais elle croit atteindre par les échanges protoplasmiques qu'elle décrit, des relations interindividuelles et élémentaires, alors qu'elle ne fait que montrer les effets abstraits et infinitésimaux d'un milieu social très défini: aisé, bourgeois, un peu mondain, où le travail et l'oisiveté ne se différencient jamais.<sup>18</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute's answer to such criticism has always been that this is the world she knows best, that it is therefore the world to whose undercurrents she is most sensitive, and that as a creative artist it is proper that she remain within it. She argues however that, given the necessary familiarity, it would be possible to discover the same mental phenomena in any national or social sphere.<sup>19</sup> A further point about the external world of Tropismes - and which Sartre did not misunderstand-

---

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed description of the bourgeois world of all Nathalie Sarraute's fiction, see Françoise Calin, op. cit., pp. 12-26.

<sup>18</sup> Chapsal, op. cit., pp. 213-4.

<sup>19</sup> Nathalie Sarraute cites a comment made to her by a kibbutz-dweller and fellow-writer on the occasion of her visit to Israel in 1969: "Vous savez, il ne faut pas se faire d'illusions, ici aussi, il y a beaucoup de tropismes" (Erwin Spatz, 'Nathalie Sarraute au kibboutz', Quinzaine littéraire, 16 octobre 1969, p. 13).



is of course its complete subordination to the main substance of the work. (It is interesting that one of the reasons Nathalie Sarraute gives for dropping the text omitted from the second edition is its period quality.<sup>20</sup>) For example, the recurrent figure of the concierge is not just a piece of local colour, a realistic detail appropriate to a picture of the bourgeoisie, but a figure who typifies the cliché world, who is the classic figure of the gossip, the epitome of the idée reçue. In II, she is one of the points from which the commonplace sends out its tentacles: 'quand vous passiez en courant devant la loge de la concierge'. The figures in III are on good terms with 'Mme la concierge' - a sign of the extent to which they have adapted themselves to a social pattern. When the woman in XXI imagines sudden and violent revolt, the concierges are the representative figures whose feet she would have to step over and whose gaze would follow her as she ran down the street. The characteristic Sarrautean décor which recurs several times in the sketches of Tropismes is a physical means of creating a mental atmosphere. (In this respect, the sketches belong to a well-established poetical tradition. Parallels might be found, for example, in Baudelaire's Petits Poèmes en prose.) The 'façades mortes des maisons' which appear in the initial sketch, the 'appartements donnant sur des cours sombres' (III), the 'masses plates, fermées et mornes des maisons' (VIII), the 'maisons qui guettaient accroupies tout au long des rues grises' are all a way of conveying the pressures on the individual of a conventional social and psychological world. The third sketch is not so much a realistic picture of people who have moved to Paris from the provinces,

---

<sup>20</sup> In a letter to the present writer dated 1971. The other reason was dissatisfaction with its form: 'De plus, il me paraît que la forme en est moins bonne.'

who have come to live 'dans des petites rues tranquilles, derrière le Panthéon', as an attempt to evoke the psychological state of people who have renounced individuality and opted for conformity.

If the general physical setting of the sketches can be interpreted in psychological terms, so equally are individual psychological movements conveyed by physical equivalents. The aggression of the old man in XV and the reactions of the girl are expressed as follows:

Il l'avait agrippée et la tenait toute entière dans son poing. Il la regardait qui gigotait un peu, qui se débattait maladroitement en agitant en l'air ses petits pieds, d'une manière puérile.

Similarly, in IV, the obedience of the women to the psychological pressures of their male companion is seen in terms of their participation in a dance whose steps are dictated by the baton of the ballet-master. The psychological rebellion of the woman in XXI is conveyed through the picture of an actual flight. Physical details build up a psychological picture: 'elle était accroupie sur un coin de fauteuil' (IX), 'elles mangeaient des gâteaux qu'elles choisissaient délicatement, d'un petit air gourmand' (X), or 'il passait vite et n'entravait jamais la circulation sur la chaussée' (XXII). The use of image, metaphor and simile, is thus central to Tropismes.

The sources of the imagery found here are varied; already present, however, are signs of the preferences which will become more strongly emphasised in the early novels. The general analogy contained in the choice of the term tropism naturally suggests a series of particular analogies with animal, insect, and plant life: 'comme de toucher avec la pointe d'une baguette une méduse' (V); 'limaces collées partout et répandant leur suc sur des coins de Rimbaud' (XI); 'comme le serpent devant la musique?' (IX); 'semblable à une fragile et douce plante sous-marine toute tapissée de ventouses mouvantes' (XIV). It also suggests images based on obscure and unpleasant physical sensations: 'comme on

arrache par morceaux sa peau quand on pèle' (II); 'comme une sorte de bave poisseuse leur pensée s'infiltrait en lui' (II); 'une masse molle et étouffante (...) le pénétrait' (VIII).

The endeavour of Nathalie Sarraute in Tropismes can be seen as essentially poetic. Max Jacob, in a letter he wrote to Nathalie Sarraute on the publication of Tropismes,<sup>21</sup> saw it as such: 'Vous êtes un profond poète et je mets votre gros livre (...) dans le coin des poètes que je relis.' And she herself has taken up the idea that the sketches of Tropismes may best be described as prose poems. As such their quality will emerge most clearly when they are read and studied as separate entities. Moreover, though our examination of Tropismes so far has tended to stress its nature as a single, total statement, it must not be forgotten that it is also a series of individual, independent statements and that it is on the success of each individually that the success of the whole depends. All the sketches repay close textual analysis; we shall limit ourselves to one particular example - XXI - in the hope that from it some of the characteristic aspects of the Sarrautean prose poem will emerge: the dramatic quality, the variations in pace in the narrative, the economic use of detail, the careful structuring of the whole.

The sketch begins with the image of the 'petite fille extrêmement "facile"' and the conformist nature of the image, underlined by the inverted commas round 'facile', is not simply stated but recreated in the mind of the reader by concrete details - the 'tablier noir' and the 'croix' and an example of behaviour. The psychological motivation of the

---

<sup>21</sup> The letter is reproduced in Cranaki and Belaval, op. cit., pp. 96-7. Nathalie Sarraute received two other letters on the publication of Tropismes, one from Sartre and the other from Charles Mauron.

78

child's behaviour is suggested, again in concrete fashion, in the next paragraph. It is her acute awareness of the shop-keeper's gaze as she leaves the shop which conditions her attitude; the approval of other people is all-important to her. The strength of feeling is emphasised by the repetitions: 'oh, non, pour rien au monde elle n'aurait pu', 'tout le long de son dos', 'le regard de la papetière'. The effect of these repetitions is also one of immediacy; from our initial position of detachment, viewing the child as 'une petite fille extrêmement "facile"' as the social group does, we are encouraged to enter her consciousness, to begin to sense her private tensions and participate in her imminent panic at the first sign of disapprobation. The structure of the sentence with, as its conclusion, the climactic phrase 'le regard de la papetière' suggests the child's attempt to defend herself against the woman's gaze and conveys to the reader the menacing quality it holds for her.

The phrase 'déjà à cet âge-là' prepares us for the next paragraph. The child has become an adult for whom conformity, acceptance by others, remains all-important. It is the evocation of the state of mind of this adult woman which is the substance of the sketch. Thus far, what we have had is preparation, setting of the scene, an indication of the sources in the past of the present situation; the rest of the sketch constitutes the dramatic action. A torrent of commonplaces, 'le temps passe vite', 'les hommes, s'ils pouvaient mettre au monde des enfants', etc., conveys the adult existence of this woman. It is not clear whether she, or the people she is with, or both, enunciate them. It does not matter. They are the common currency of life at this level and belong to no particular individual. Again physical details contribute to the image: 'son ensemble noir qui allait avec tout', 'son sac assorti'. She dresses according to commonly accepted notions of what is proper, suitable, attractive. Her gestures are meek, designed to please; she sits

11

attentive with her hands folded; she nods and smiles. But despite all her efforts, there is nonetheless a suggestion of separation from the people she is with, of being judged by them: 'elle se tenait devant eux ...' She is in fact engaged in a desperate struggle to maintain a sense of precarious identity with them, the others. Her desperation is in part conveyed syntactically: the uninterrupted length of the sentence suggests continuous effort. (The repeated device of the points de suspension serves to link its parts rather than separate them.)

At the end of the sentence comes a climax, a moment of dramatic tension when a tropism threatens to emerge on the surface and destroy the carefully maintained impression of unity. A subject is raised which touches her closely,<sup>22</sup> which is potentially - perhaps deliberately - wounding: 'l'ainée était une fille, eux qui avaient voulu avoir un fils d'abord!'. Her reaction is registered, protestations begin (the more vehement because the poisoned dart has been successful?), and she submits: 'c'est si gentil, un frère aîné'. Her own protestations are perhaps a means of self-defence; nothing has gone wrong, she is still at one with them. Yet the seed of revolt has been sown. A momentary and uncontrollable psychological rebellion finds expression in the next sentence. Its violence, its dramatic quality is again conveyed by the syntax; first, a new sentence indicating a dramatic break, then pauses more definite than any in the previous sentence: 'Se taire; les regarder;' etc., and subsequently a speeding up of the pace until the final climax of 'leur regard'. The revolt is registered as violent and frightening: 'un trou énorme', 'les parois déchirés', 'la bouche tordue'; as totally

---

37

22 We have already quoted Nathalie Sarraute's comments on this reading of the sketch: cf. note ~~24~~ to our introduction. We accept the comments but have allowed the reading to stand in order to give the point made in the introduction its proper force.

instinctive and unreasoning: 'hurlant des mots sans suite'; also perhaps as ludicrous: 'juste au beau milieu de la maladie de la grand-mère'. Nothing comes of the momentary revolt; the pressures represented by the 'maisons qui guettaient accroupies' and the concierges with their knitting, are too strong. The reassertion of the surface world of accepted, approved responses is indicated by the final detail of the 'regard' taking us back to the sketch's point of departure.<sup>23</sup>

Density of matter, economy of expression, dramatic quality of the narrative are all striking features of this as of other sketches. What is perhaps most outstanding here as elsewhere is Nathalie Sarraute's success in developing a metaphoric mode through which her initially recalcitrant material can be perceived and understood by the reader. A brief psychological exchange, almost imperceptible on the surface, a wound inflicted and the reaction to it is the subject of the sketch; Nathalie Sarraute makes us aware of it, experience its acuity, perceive its sources and its implications.

It is of course true that Tropismes, as a collection of sketches, is slight by comparison with the works which follow. Nathalie Sarraute had still to prove herself capable of treating the same material in a full-length novel and those themes which were adumbrated in Tropismes were to receive more complex treatment in later works. Tropismes is nonetheless a remarkably polished and satisfactory work. The 'parcelle du monde invisible' which it reveals is densely, unmistakably rendered. It is rare for an author to give so clear an indication of his potential in a first work. The one review which Tropismes was accorded at the time of publication was prophetic: 'Il [ce petit livre] peut être considéré

---

<sup>23</sup> The basic structural pattern here - point of departure, development, turning-point and back to the point of departure now viewed in a different light - is that of a number of other sketches, cf. for example, VIII, X.

comme l'échantillon avant-coureur d'une œuvre dont l'acuité et la  
profondeur nous surprendront peut-être un jour.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Victor Moremans, Gazette de Liège, 24 mars 1939. Cf. Cranaki and Belaval, op. cit., p. 228.

Chapter 3 Portrait d'un inconnu

A properly constituted, healthy, decent man never writes, acts or composes.

MANN

Des femmes passent dans la rue, différentes de celles d'autrefois, puisque ce sont des Renoirs, ces Renoirs où nous refusions jadis à voir des femmes.

PROUST



Between Tropismes and Nathalie Sarraute's first full-length novel, Portrait d'un inconnu, lies a period of roughly ten years. Tropismes, begun in 1932, was published in 1939; Portrait d'un inconnu, published in 1948, was begun in 1941. Nathalie Sarraute's rate of composition has always been slow; she herself cites as an example of this the twelve weeks it took her to complete the essay L'Ere du soupçon.<sup>1</sup> She does not write with pleasure or ease. In answer to the question 'Pensez-vous avoir un don d'écrivain?', posed her by the review Tel Quel in 1960, she wrote:

Je croyais avoir un don d'écrivain, quand j'écrivais en classe mes devoirs de français. Je le reconnaissais à l'aisance et à la joie avec lesquels je les écrivais. Hélas, depuis, j'ai perdu, et je crois, pour toujours, l'une et l'autre.<sup>2</sup>

During this particular period, however, there were other contributory factors: the disturbances of the war years and the discouragement resulting from the lack of recognition accorded to Tropismes. Moreover, for a brief period after the publication of Tropismes, she continued to write brief texts of the same type.<sup>3</sup> The first edition of Tropismes in fact announces the forthcoming publication of a volume of these to be entitled Le Planétarium. But such a volume was never published. She submitted sketches to various reviews but without success and in 1941 she began work on her novel.

From the evidence of the two works concerned, these ten years seem to have been a period of maturation rather than interruption. The primary material of Portrait d'un inconnu is that of Tropismes. From this point

<sup>1</sup> Demeron, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Tel Quel, no. 1, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> These were subsequently included in the second edition of Tropismes, published by the Editions de Minuit in 1957.

of view, Portrait is certainly not a new departure. What was said about the basic preoccupations of the author of Tropismes remains true of the author of Portrait. Here again she is making it her business to investigate those obscure and devious movements of the human mind which she calls tropisms, those secret responses called forth either by objects or other human beings. The landscape of this investigation is mapped out very much as it was in Tropismes; we find again the contrast between the authentic subterranean world of the tropisms and the inauthentic surface world of normal social converse; Nathalie Sarraute explores again the ambivalent attitudes of human beings towards these two worlds. The two works are related even more closely than this: the figures, scenes and themes through which she expresses her central ideas are often strikingly similar. In both books similar figures appear: an elderly, domineering man, a younger, extremely sensitive person, a psychiatrist, a woman who considers herself badly treated. Sometimes they appear in very similar scenes: the elderly man, for example, is shown taking a child for a walk and exercising some sort of psychological pressure upon him, or he is shown firing a rapid series of questions which have a demoralising effect on his interlocutor. In both works similar themes appear: the child's relation to the adult world, the dangerous hours of the afternoon and the resource of shopping, illness and its use as an instrument of moral blackmail, the attitudes of psychiatrists towards the artist.

One might well feel that the title Tropismes would be as appropriate to this work as it was to the earlier one. The reader is left with a strong impression that Nathalie Sarraute felt she had not exhausted the significance of these scenes and themes either for herself or for the reader. This was of course the case. The reception given to Tropismes indicated that Nathalie Sarraute had not succeeded in interesting the

public in what she had to say. At the same time, however, it began to seem to her that, in choosing the form of Tropismes, she had imposed limitations on herself which she now registered as irksome. She remained firmly committed to her initial choice of material but the form no longer seemed satisfactory:

The tropism as such was the centre and the driving-power of my books. But, while I worked, I became aware that the tropism could be more complex, could be richer, if it were prepared by many other tropisms. It was difficult in writing these small one- or two-page stories, each of them containing one tropism, to start each time all over again as if I had to write an entirely new story. I wanted to follow the tropisms while they developed slowly in different scenes and then expanded in all their richness and complexity in one final scene.<sup>4</sup>

This is what Nathalie Sarraute attempts within the larger scope of Portrait. The tropisms which belonged to numerous anonymous and separate beings now relate to a limited number of identifiable people, and the themes which existed side by side, but in isolation, here contribute to a total pattern.

The word 'roman' figures on the title page of Portrait d'un inconnu, but it is of course a novel which scarcely fits traditional notions of the genre. Such a work as E. M. Forster's Aspects of the Novel would find it difficult to accommodate Portrait under its chapter headings: The Story, People, The Plot ... There are identifiable people in Portrait but the word 'characters' cannot really be applied to them. They have no names, no precise profession, no clearly recognizable qualities or defects and only the vaguest of social identities. Nor do they take part in any significant action. A middle-aged man<sup>5</sup> displays

<sup>4</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

<sup>5</sup> Critics sometimes refer to the 'young' narrator but the brief description we have of him, though quite probably prejudiced, hardly bears this out: 'ce bonhomme "sur le retour", à la mine négligée, court sur pattes, un peu chauve, légèrement bedonnant' (p. 211). Equally the reference to his 'vieux parents' (p. 77).

a neurotic interest in the doings of an old man and his daughter, is treated by a psychiatrist, but subsequently returns to his old pre-occupations with greater vigour. The old man and his daughter have a close but quarrelsome relationship. The principal bone of contention is apparently money. The daughter likes to travel and is interested in certain sports; both are expensive pursuits and any mention of them tends to arouse the father's anger and sarcasm. At the end of the novel, however, the daughter is about to escape her financial dependence on the father through marriage. Such is the plot. External events are deliberately presented in a trivial light, factual details of time and place treated as insignificant. The narrator takes a trip but his destination is never explicitly mentioned. He has been to lunch at the home of the old man and his daughter but this took place sometime in the past; it is not clear when or why: 'C'était chez eux, à un déjeuner auquel j'avais été invité, je ne sais plus à quelle occasion, il y a déjà assez longtemps de cela' (p. 142). Thus material which normally seems interesting or at least worthy of mention is devalued, indeed almost eliminated. The events which provoke most excitement in the novel concern a stain on a bathroom wall, a bar of soap, and a doctor's bill. Some at least of these scenes are in any case imaginary ones. The reader's attention is thus firmly directed towards the subject matter which interests the author, the tropisms: 'They were the only thing I was interested in, I wanted the readers of my books to be interested only in them. Nothing else should have diverted their attention from them.'<sup>6</sup> More consciously than in Tropismes, we find Nathalie Sarraute guarding against that fatal tendency on the part of the reader of which

---

<sup>6</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

she speaks in L'Ere du soupçon; he is firmly discouraged from any inclination he might have to read her novel in a traditional manner and to become interested in character and plot:

Il faut donc empêcher le lecteur de courir deux lièvres à la fois, et puisque ce que les personnages gagnent en vitalité facile et en vraisemblance, les états psychologiques auxquels ils servent de support le perdent en vérité profonde, il faut éviter qu'il disperse son attention et la laisse accaparer par les personnages, et, pour cela, le priver le plus possible de tous les indices dont, malgré lui, par un penchant naturel, il s'empare pour fabriquer des trompe-l'œil.  
(p. 71)

It is altogether a more self-conscious work than Tropismes. This is hardly surprising, Tropismes being a series of brief sketches, belonging to no particular genre, in which Nathalie Sarraute could express what she had observed and experienced without consideration of traditional forms. The subject-matter might be original and certain techniques, such as the absence of identifying descriptions or names, unfamiliar, but no explicit rejection of previous forms was necessary. With Portrait, however, she adopted a form which had a long tradition of both creative and critical writing, a tradition which did not seem to allow for her particular subject-matter. Thus she found it necessary to give her observations a theoretical basis, to place them within the perspective of the novel genre, and to incorporate this material into her novel itself. In this respect Portrait is unique among her novels. All of them contain a high degree of critical consciousness, but only Portrait d'un inconnu is so directly concerned with exposing the particular nature of her own work to the uninitiated reader. In the novels which follow, this is no longer necessary; basic explanations have been provided by Portrait and by the two essays published in the Temps modernes in 1947 and 1950.

To speak of the theoretical content of Portrait in this way may give a false impression. It is not that Portrait has a number of theoretical considerations worked into the text, which supply a running commentary on the action of the novel but remain extraneous to it and

which therefore might have been better reserved for the critical essays. Their role is more central than this. Nathalie Sarraute has aimed at making her own experience vis-à-vis the novel genre an integral part of her first novel. Portrait d'un inconnu can be seen as a novel about novel-writing, about what it is like, as a serious creative artist, to write a novel in the mid-twentieth century. The narrator is a would-be novelist playing a similar part to that of Nathalie Sarraute as she approaches the novel form. As far as Nathalie Sarraute is concerned, the raw material of the novel remains human psychology. What she is out to show is that our present understanding of psychology is very different from that current when the nineteenth-century novelists were writing, and that to express these new modes of perception new forms are necessary. One might say that she is not really writing a 'new' novel at all, but merely summing up what the novel has achieved in the previous forty years or more. One might instance Gide or Virginia Woolf, refer to their utterances on the subject of the realist novel, and remember their experiments with the possibilities of the novel form. But all this Nathalie Sarraute would be perfectly willing to admit. When her attitude to such an author as Virginia Woolf has been misinterpreted, she has hastened to make this clear. In a letter to the Times Literary Supplement,<sup>7</sup> she corrects a failure to understand a reference in L'Ere du soupçon:

Il s'agit donc pour moi non d'attaquer les auteurs que j'ai cités, mais de suivre leur voie et de m'efforcer de faire après eux ne serait-ce qu'un pas de plus dans la recherche.

And she concludes:

J'espère pouvoir ainsi réparer un malentendu qui m'a peiné d'autant plus qu'est grande et très sincère mon admiration pour des œuvres aussi neuves, audacieuses et exemplaires que celles de Joyce, de Proust ou de Virginia Woolf.

---

<sup>7</sup> 13 March 1959, p. 145.

Her point is, however, that this achievement in the field of the novel has not yet been properly recognized. It is still necessary, she maintains, to define one's position in terms of a rejection of the nineteenth-century novel because the critical attitude which points to the nineteenth-century realists as the great models of novel-writing is still very common:

Il est curieux de voir que la critique traditionnelle a considéré avec sévérité toute influence venue de ces auteurs (Proust, Joyce, Kafka) et tout emploi de formes dérivées de celles qu'ils ont créées. Elles étaient aussitôt appelées 'procédés'. Alors que les formes du roman du XIXe et même du XVIIIe siècle étaient acceptées sans discussion, comme si la réalité qu'elles dévoilaient s'était si bien intégrée à la réalité connue qu'elle était devenue une seconde nature, ou plutôt la seule vraie nature, la seule réalité possible, et comme si les formes par lesquelles elle s'exprimait étaient l'expression toute naturelle et la seule valable, de la réalité.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to find a contemporary English critic (and novelist), Malcolm Bradbury, making a similar point concerning the failure of criticism to keep abreast of modernism in the novel. He points out how slow critics were to pay proper attention to the great novelists of the early twentieth century:

This happened surprisingly late, in fact; it is worth recalling that many of these modern reputations in fiction, from Joyce to Lawrence to Faulkner to Conrad, did not really become established until the 1940s and 1950s, and that, similarly, though C. H. Rickword had been emphasizing the need for a new critical poetics of fiction in the 1920s, it was not until the late 1940s that important pieces like Mark Schorer's essay 'Technique as Discovery' appeared to change the climate of critical discussion. Up to this point the modernist novel had been regarded as something of an aberrancy, and the new 'art of the novel', celebrated in many famous journals, notebooks, and prefaces as well as in the inward speculation of many modern novels, from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man to Les Faux-monnayeurs, a special case. The prime conventions of professional novel criticism had remained those of much nineteenth-century critical assumption: the novel was eminently a copying form, a dramatic presentation in a distinct and personal 'style' that discursively explored certain sentiments, experiences, persons, and social milieux, and which could be tested as a body of awareness against men's own lives, their experience of people, and their moral stresses.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> 'Les deux réalités', Esprit, juillet 1964, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Bradbury, op. cit., p. 7.

In his preface, Sartre puts Portrait in a category of works to which he gives the label 'anti-romans'. These he characterizes as follows:

Les anti-romans conservent l'apparence et les contours du roman; ce sont des ouvrages d'imagination qui nous présentent des personnages fictifs et nous racontent leur histoire. Mais c'est pour mieux décevoir: il s'agit de contester le roman par lui-même, de le détruire sous nos yeux dans le temps qu'on semble l'édifier, d'écrire le roman d'un roman qui ne se fait pas, qui ne peut pas se faire, de créer une fiction qui soit aux grandes œuvres composées de Dostoïevsky et de Meredith ce qu'était aux tableaux de Rembrandt et de Rubens cette toile de Miro, intitulée Assassinat de la peinture. (p. 7)

Nathalie Sarraute disapproves of the label, considering it to be based on a false conception of what the novel is.<sup>10</sup> The first part of his description is perhaps misleading where Nathalie Sarraute is concerned. She is not anxious to deceive; indeed she is at pains to avoid misapprehension on the part of the reader. But the second part conveys very well the nature of her intentions in Portrait. Her method of proceeding is to place side by side literary works and the raw material of reality on which they draw, as her narrator perceives it, and to make comment, explicit and implicit, on the relationship between the two. The total number of literary references and reminiscences is high: a further reflection of the degree of critical consciousness at work in this novel. Literary references - often to the same works - were also to be found in Tropismes but tended rather to appear as appropriate material for particular figures: the professor at the Collège de France or the young blue-stockings. In one sketch however - XXIII - the attitudes of Portrait are clearly prefigured. A girl expresses a negative judgment on those people whose lives are modelled on the patterns they have derived from Balzac or other writers; she

---

<sup>10</sup> In conversation with François Bondy, Cranaki et Belaval, op. cit., p. 215.



sees them as embodying a kind of third-hand version of life, they are 'des copies, la copie d'une copie'. In Portrait the literary references appear in various guises - though they all bear some relation to this general theme. Sometimes they may serve as a useful shorthand, helping to convey something which is elusive, otherwise difficult to define. Thus the narrator will refer to 'des personnages à la Pirandello' (p. 46) or to 'des désirs secrets et corrosifs un peu dans le genre de ceux de la Bovary' (p. 42). Such reference to authors for whom the narrator (and Nathalie Sarraute) is likely to have some sympathy may well be helpful. However even they may also be dangerous. They impose momentarily an image on his experience which is extraneous to it and which may not render it justly or in its entirety. This danger becomes all the more apparent when a literary work is used not merely as a hint but as the source of a full-scale, exhaustive interpretation of his experience, making the latter into 'la copie d'une copie'. This is what happens when a character sums up the relationship between the old man and his daughter, which fascinates the narrator, as a Julien Green, or Mauriac situation:

Oui, je me souviens. J'étais allé les voir. Il y a déjà assez longtemps de cela. Il me semble qu'ils habitaient un vieil appartement avec des meubles 1900, des rideaux jaunes, brise-bise, très petit-bourgeois, donnant sur une cour sombre probablement. On devinait de vagues grouillements dans les coins, des choses menaçantes, vous savez ... qui guettaient. Elle faisait penser, avec sa tête un peu trop grosse, à un champignon poussé dans l'ombre. L'ensemble faisait assez dans le genre de Julien Green ou de Mauriac. (pp. 21-2)

The novel goes on to show that the narrator's experience cannot be accommodated in this kind of strait-jacket. It bursts the confines which he or others try to impose on it. Nathalie Sarraute is perhaps making a point about literature in general but her target is also more precise. In particular she wishes to place side by side the twentieth-century experience of the narrator and the nineteenth-century novel and she aims at making the inappropriateness of the second to deal

with the first abundantly clear.

Sartre speaks of the 'grandes œuvres composées de Dostoïevsky et de Meredith' as targets for attack. The former in particular is an odd choice as far as Nathalie Sarraute is concerned, but it is true that there are two 'grandes œuvres composées' which are challenged in the course of Portrait, one explicitly and one implicitly: War and Peace and Eugénie Grandet. One of the most significant passages in the novel is that in which the narrator comments on his reactions to War and Peace or rather to one particular area of this novel, the characters of Prince Bolkonski and his daughter Marie and the father-daughter relationship, which is presented through them. The passage is strategically placed, introducing theory only after the reader has seen the narrator in action and witnessed his contact with a variety of people. It has been made clear that he is interested in human personality and in the personality of two individuals in particular, and that he is unusually sensitive to the manifestations of the inner life of these individuals' minds. It has also been made clear that in attempting to explore this inner life he is engaging in an activity which is generally frowned upon, or misunderstood as an interest in gossip; references to doctors and psychiatrists situate his activity as unhealthy and abnormal and his own attitude towards it already appears ambivalent. The third section makes explicit what has been emerging from the previous ones. The narrator speaks openly of how he differentiates between the public and private selves of his characters and how he looks on the former as a mask. The old man never appears in the presence of his daughter without a mask. This notion of masks leads him on to Prince Bolkonski and Marie. He speculates on and around the relationship presented by Tolstoy and proceeds to some comments on Tolstoy as a novelist. Nathalie Sarraute has made her reasons for choosing Tolstoy as her example quite clear.

91

It is because War and Peace possesses an exemplary status in many people's minds. In her article on Tolstoy she writes:

Je l'ai si bien senti qu'en 1943 quand j'écrivais Portrait d'un inconnu, j'ai choisi comme modèles parfaits de personnages de roman, de personnages 'vivants' admirablement réussis, deux personnages de Guerre et Paix, le vieux prince Bolkonski et sa fille. Je les ai choisis pour les opposer dans leur perfection à ce qu'étaient devenus les personnages, après toutes les dislocations et désintégrations qu'ils n'avaient cessé de subir à travers le roman contemporain. Je voulais montrer que chercher à imiter ces modèles, c'était aller à contre-courant de l'évolution de la littérature de notre temps.<sup>11</sup>

The narrator in Portrait d'un inconnu has made a father and daughter and the relationship between them the particular object of his scrutiny and the whole novel establishes the difference between the way he sees his father and daughter and the way Tolstoy presents Bolkonski and Marie. In this section of the novel, the contrast is stated very strongly in a series of Nathalie Sarraute's most characteristic images. The narrator first of all explores the reasons for Bolkonski's brusqueness towards his daughter such as he believes Tolstoy to have understood them: the strength of his love for her led him to conceal it until the moment of his death. Then he suggests that perhaps the princess had more responsibility for the situation than might appear on the surface; that it was she who was making it impossible for her father to express his love:

Mille fils excessivement ténus, difficiles à déceler - encore ces tremblants et collants fils de la Vierge - devaient à chaque moment partir de la princesse Marie et se coller à lui, l'envelopper. (p. 69) .

Such speculations however are ultimately idle; Bolkonski and his daughter resist such treatment on the part of the narrator. They are characters in a novel. We tend to speak of them as more real than the

---

<sup>11</sup> 'Tolstoï', p. 1.

people we meet in everyday life, they are exhausted by the author, complete, defined, they allow of no doubts or questions in the reader: 'Ils nous apparaissent, chacun d'eux, comme un tout fini, parfait, bien clos de toutes parts, un bloc solide et dur, sans fissure, une boule lisse qui n'offre aucune prise' (p. 70). The narrator cannot see people in this way or create characters like these. In his younger days, he was a devotee of the analytic approach. As a school-boy, he and a chosen friend would spend their free time analysing the characters of the people they knew:

Nous nous amusions, isolés loin des autres dans un coin de la cour du lycée, à dépecer délicatement, par petits morceaux, nos camarades, nos maîtres, nos parents, et jusqu'aux boutiquiers de notre quartier, à qui nous avions recours quand le stock commençait à s'épuiser. (p. 45)

But the days are gone when, having exhausted his friends and teachers, he had to move on to the shop-keepers of the neighbourhood. He has two objects of interest and he cannot exhaust either of them. His perception operates at a level at which 'character' and the limitation and definition it involves appears like a mask covering up the reality beneath:

Ils ne sont pas pour moi, les ornements somptueux, les chaudes couleurs, les certitudes apaisantes, la fraîche douceur de la 'vie'. Pas pour moi. Moi je ne sais, quand ils daignent parfois s'approcher de moi aussi, ces gens 'vivants', ces personnages, que tourner autour d'eux, cherchant avec un acharnement maniaque la fente, la petite fissure, ce point fragile comme la fontenelle des petits enfants, où il me semble que quelque chose, comme une pulsation à peine perceptible, affleure et bat doucement. Là je m'accroche, j'appuie. Et je sens alors sourdre d'eux et s'écouler en un jet sans fin une matière étrange, anonyme comme la lymphe, comme le sang, une matière fade et fluide qui coule entre les mains, qui se répand ... Et il ne reste plus, de leur chair si ferme, colorée, veloutée, de gens vivants, qu'une enveloppe exsangue, informe et grise. (pp. 71-2)

The use to which Nathalie Sarraute puts Tolstoy here is extremely similar to that to which Sartre puts Balzac (along with other writers) in La Nausée. As Roquentin sits having lunch, he reads a passage of

conversation from Eugénie Grandet; he also listens to the 'real' conversation taking place at the next table. The one is clear, consequential, significant; the other meanders, is broken by silences, remains largely incomprehensible.<sup>12</sup> Eugénie Grandet itself might have served Nathalie Sarraute's purposes as well as War and Peace. The parallel between the situation in Portrait and that in Eugénie Grandet is equally striking: in both novels our attention is concentrated on a miserly father and a down-trodden daughter. No explicit comparison is made within Portrait, but Nathalie Sarraute has elsewhere indicated that although her point of departure was not Eugénie Grandet, the parallel did occur to her as she was working on her novel:

Le Portrait d'un inconnu est issu de sensations tout à fait personnelles. Après, en le travaillant, je me suis dit que si Balzac aujourd'hui avait voulu montrer l'avarice, il l'aurait traitée différemment. Mais mon point de départ n'était pas Eugénie Grandet.<sup>13</sup>

Then I had the idea of the theme of the Portrait of a Man Unknown. The situation was like the one chosen by Balzac in Eugénie Grandet. Of course, I did not try to compete with Balzac's masterpiece. But I thought that what we know about reality has changed since Balzac's time. In Portrait of a Man Unknown characters appeared from the outside as they appear in the traditional novel: the father was a miser, an egoist, the daughter a cranky spinster. This was what people said about them. But what did it really mean? What kind of movements composed what appeared on the surface as something that could be labelled: an egoist, a miser? What kind of tropisms take place in a man whom others, when they speak about him, call a miser? This was what the narrator, who spoke in the first person, wanted to know.<sup>14</sup>

In the essay 'L'Ere du soupçon' (first published in 1950), there is some discussion of Eugénie Grandet; Nathalie Sarraute's thesis is that, whereas the way in which Balzac made his contemporary readers look at people was new and exciting for them then, it no longer is so for us today.

---

<sup>12</sup> La Nausée, Paris, 1938, pp. 67-70.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret P. Bouille, La Remise en question du personnage, 'les Faux-monnayeurs' et le nouveau roman, Paris, Thèse universitaire, p. 352.

<sup>14</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature; Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

In Eugénie Grandet, every material detail of appearance and surrounding had its part to play in conveying Balzac's vision of Grandet and the way in which his miserliness totally dominated his being:

L'avarice était le père Grandet, elle en constituait toute la substance, elle l'emplissait jusqu'aux bords et elle recevait de lui, à son tour, sa forme et sa vigueur. (p. 62)

In Portrait d'un inconnu, a certain amount of factual information is available about the two central characters: the father objects to the cost of holidays or medical fees, the daughter dresses in unattractive, old-fashioned clothes and carries a satchel instead of a handbag; the daughter is dependent on her father and her father does not treat her with much sympathy. On the basis of this information, people other than the narrator formulate judgments which define these characters:

'C'est un vieil égoïste', disent-elles, 'je l'ai toujours dit, un égoïste et un grippe-sou, des gens comme ça ne devraient pas avoir le droit de mettre au monde des enfants. Et elle, c'est une maniaque. Elle n'est pas responsable. Moi je dis qu'elle est plutôt à plaindre, la pauvre fille.' (p. 17)

Such people also oversimplify the nature of the relationship between these two individuals. In restating the fact of their blood-relationship, they consider that something significant has been said: 'Après tout, il aura beau faire, vous serez toujours sa fille, il sera toujours votre père. On ne va pas contre ça, allez' (p. 62).

The narrator, however, finds that when he comes into contact with these two people such statements seem totally inadequate; their reality appears far more complex than these judgments suggest. He is aware of signs of an inner life in the father, for example, which are not adequately dealt with by the definition of miser and seem in fact to have very little to do with such definitions. He tries to find some sign-post or pattern to help him explore this territory; he tries to provoke or imagine scenes in which this mental activity will be expressed. But it is of such a secret, fluid nature that this proves very difficult

if not impossible. Success remains just outside his grasp. He attempts various versions of the people he has before him: the daughter is 'l'Hypersensible-nourrie-de-clichés' (p. 47), the father is 'le rentier à l'abri' (p. 119). The pattern never seems quite adequate; it is always disturbed either by some new incident or by some memory he already had at his disposal but had forgotten to take into account, or once he has created his scene, he feels that his protagonist will refuse to recognise it. The life he had been attempting to capture suddenly escapes him. Again and again he has to face this outcome: 'Je m'étais démené inutilement, une fois de plus' (p. 148). His father and daughter remain for him essentially mysterious: 'toujours à double face, à triple, à multiple face, fuyants, pleins de replis secrets' (p. 170).

War and Peace provides an example of the kind of art with which the narrator feels he has nothing in common. Some of the other literary references may on the contrary express a degree of sympathetic recognition: those to Rilke or to Pirandello, for example. Other passages would seem to acknowledge a close bond without explicit reference: the occasional Proustian simile like that beginning 'Comme l'amoureux qui ...' (p. 81), and the role played by 'des pans de mur inondés de soleil' (p. 89, p. 101). (We shall return to the question of such literary reference later.)

Nathalie Sarraute is also able to make her favourite comparison between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky to the advantage of the latter by showing how much closer to the narrator's experience he comes than does his compatriot.

But the central example of the kind of work admired by the narrator, the pendant to War and Peace, is of course the painting of an unknown man by an unknown artist which hangs in the gallery of the Dutch town he visits. The significance of this painting is underlined by the fact that it gives the novel its title. It marks an important turning-point

in the novel's development. Seeing it again restores the narrator's confidence in himself and leads him back to his old preoccupations. He refers to it when attempting to explain to the daughter during their visit to the Monet exhibition what kind of art he particularly admires. It is no doubt significant that this example should be drawn from the realm of painting rather than from literature. Nathalie Sarraute has at various times pointed out how the validity of experiment has been accepted far more completely in the visual arts than in the novel:

On nous dit quelquefois: 'Montrez-vous donc capable d'abord d'écrire à la manière des romanciers classiques, ensuite, nous verrons.' Mais songerait-on à dire la même chose à un peintre? Aurait-on l'idée de conseiller aujourd'hui à l'un d'eux de peindre comme Delacroix ou comme Poussin? C'est inconcevable.<sup>15</sup>

She herself finds painting in general far more stimulating from the creative point of view than literature: 'Elle me touche et me donne, mieux que ne le font la plupart des livres, envie d'écrire.'<sup>16</sup> The painting in the novel has a similar effect on the narrator; it reinspires him with confidence in his own perception and acts as a kind of ally against the disapproval of other people:

L'Inconnu prenait sa part de mon tourment. Je n'étais plus seul. Un sentiment réconfortant de confiance, de dignité, de fierté même me soutenait tandis que je prenais le chemin du retour. (p. 101)

Critics of Portrait d'un inconnu have generally agreed that this episode is an important one, but they have differed as to its precise significance. The narrator's immediate reactions in particular cause puzzlement:

La scène d'Amsterdam pose pourtant autant de questions qu'elle en résout. (...) Une exigence de vérité, en rapport avec la rigueur existentialiste, marque toute l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute. Le monde n'est pas fait de margelles de puits luisant au soleil dans des cours de mosquées. La littérature d'évasion, d'harmonie, n'est pas une littérature authentique.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Bourin, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Tison Braun, op. cit., p. 79.



Françoise Calin is of the opinion that, though the portrait acts as a liberating force freeing the narrator from the constraints represented by the psychiatrist, he embarks initially on a false course:

Le portrait lui a permis de triompher de la tentation du silence. Mais il s'engage sur une fausse route. Les pages suivantes nous le montrent cédant à une autre tentation, celle du 'décanté', c'est-à-dire s'enivrant de beautés déjà célébrées. (...) Le Narrateur croyant avoir retrouvé son inspiration, ses Muses, ne produit qu'un pastiche. Dans cette ville baudelairienne, il se meut dans un univers de pans de murs proustiens, rêve d'oasis gidiennes.<sup>18</sup>

Bernard Pingaud takes a similar line: 'Mais ce monde vrai, rayonnant, ouvert, n'est pas le monde réel. C'est déjà un monde raconté.'<sup>19</sup> If this is so, it seems surprising that the narrator should be so convinced of the contrary:

Je n'avais plus besoin, tendu docilement vers eux, d'attendre d'eux ma pâture, de recevoir d'eux la becquée: ces nourritures toutes mâchées, ces joies toutes préparées qu'ils me donnaient. Je retrouvais mes nourritures à moi, mes joies à moi, faites pour moi seul, connues de moi seul. (p. 88)

Nathalie Sarraute herself is categorical about the fact that she intended the passage to be read as the narrator himself understands it. Her words echo his: 'Il retrouve ces trésors à lui, donc il a la force de repartir de nouveau.'<sup>20</sup> These then are memories of past aesthetic pleasures as acute as the present one offered by the portrait. That some of these should be literary, and reminiscent of Proust and Gide in particular, need not surprise us. It does not make of them common property: we know to what extent Nathalie Sarraute considers the genuine encounter with the work of art to be a solitary experience: Proust of course is a literary influence on Nathalie Sarraute in a way that Gide is not. But on her own admission Les Nourritures terrestres represents a particular aspect of Gide and one which does have some importance for her:

---

<sup>18</sup> Calin, op. cit., p. 241.

<sup>19</sup> Pingaud, 'Le personnage dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute', p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> In conversation with the present writer in 1974.

Cela, c'est un côté de Gide que j'aimais beaucoup; toute ma génération s'est nourrie des Nourritures terrestres. Elles ont joué un rôle moral très grand pour ma génération. C'était une libération.<sup>21</sup>

We do not wish to suggest that deliberate references to particular writers are to be found in these pages of Portrait, simply that it is not inappropriate that some of the narrator's 'trésors' should arouse literary echoes in the reader's mind.

Why is it that the portrait has such an impact on the narrator? It is not just, as Gerda Zeltner suggests, that the portrait makes him experience 'le triomphe de l'imagination sur la fascination directe et pénible qu'à tout moment le monde exerce sur lui'.<sup>22</sup> It is because it presents him with a particular kind of work. Its attraction for him lies in the tentative nature of its portrayal and the evident consciousness on the part of the artist of the enormity of his task. These are the main characteristics he refers to when trying to explain to the daughter what he admires in art:

'Je préfère, je crois, aux œuvres les plus achevées, celles où n'a pu être maîtrisé ... où on sent affleurer encore le tâtonnement anxieux ... le doute ... le tourment ...', je bafouille de plus en plus ... 'devant la matière immense ... insaisissable ... qui échappe quand on croit la tenir ... le but jamais atteint ... la faiblesse des moyens ...' (p. 214)

On the one hand, he finds in this particular painter a temperament and a perception which coincide with his own and therefore strengthen his position; on the other hand, the tentativeness of such an artist does not exclude but encourages, gives meaning to further exploration on the part of others. This is exactly what a work like War and Peace does not do. The narrator may feel vaguely dissatisfied with the characters of Prince Bolkonski and his daughter; he may even feel at moments that

---

<sup>21</sup> Boulle, op. cit., p. 348.

<sup>22</sup> Gerda Zeltner, 'Nathalie Sarraute et l'impossible réalisme', Mercur de France, août 1962, p. 602.

there are signs of greater complexities than Tolstoy has acknowledged, but in the end he can do nothing but accept them. They are too perfect, too complete in themselves to leave him any scope for his own talents:

'De bien plus forts que moi se casseraient les ongles, les dents, à essayer ainsi, insolemment de s'attaquer au prince Bolkonski ou à la princesse Marie' (p. 69). These are again ideas which Nathalie Sarraute has since made explicit. In her article on Tolstoy, speaking of her belief that the serious novelist is always intent on exploring some new area of human psychology and on discovering a form in which to convey the fruits of his exploration, she continues:

Le travail de tout romancier consistant dans cette découverte, puis dans ce corps à corps, il me semble que ce qui compte pour un romancier, ce ne sont pas les œuvres les plus achevées, les plus parfaites, mais celles, même moins parfaites, qui stimulent en lui ce goût de la recherche, ouvrent devant lui de nouvelles voies, et le portent à ne pas imiter des formes qui ne peuvent servir qu'à ceux qui les ont créées.<sup>23</sup>

This hostility towards certain authors of the past is not at all intended as a value judgment by a detached reader; it is rather the hostility of the creative writer, who derives no stimulus from these works but only a sense of the past weighing heavily and unprofitably upon him. At the end of an article in the Times Literary Supplement, she writes:

It seems clear to me, therefore, that the real danger for all writers - and I don't believe that I am being paradoxical - is not that of being crushed by mediocrity but rather of being dazzled by genius.<sup>24</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute is not alone in having registered Tolstoy as a threat to her individuality as a creative writer; Henry James regarded him in a similar way (though the threat he represented for James took a very different form): 'His own case is prodigious, but his example for others dire: disciples not elephantine he can only mislead and betray.'<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> 'Tolstoi', p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> 'Rebels in a World of Platitudes', Times Literary Supplement, 10 June 1960, p. 371.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in W. P. Harvey, Character and the Novel, London 1965, p. 191.

It is not only because the narrator admires the painting or sympathizes with the painter's attitudes that the novel has this title. It also serves to draw attention to the similarity between the achievement of the painter and the efforts of the novelist in embryo which the narrator represents. The description of the painting might well be applied to the narrator's own attempts at human representation:

Les lignes de son visage, de son jabot de dentelles, de son pourpoint, de ses mains, semblaient être les contours fragmentaires et incertains que découvrent à tâtons, que palpent les doigts hésitants d'un aveugle. On aurait dit qu'ici l'effort, le doute, le tourment avaient été surpris par une catastrophe soudaine et qu'ils étaient demeurés là, fixés en plein mouvement, comme ces cadavres qui restent pétrifiés dans l'attitude où la mort les a frappés. Ses yeux seuls semblaient avoir échappé au cataclysme et avoir atteint le but, l'achèvement: ils paraissent avoir tiré à eux et concentré en eux toute l'intensité, la vie qui manquaient à ses traits encore informes et disloqués. (pp. 85-6)

The title also reflects the contrast established between the narrator and other earlier novelists such as Tolstoy or Balzac. One of the external signs of difference between Tolstoy's characters and the narrator's subjects of study is the fact that the former have proper names. The narrator cannot bring himself to label his characters in this way; they do not possess this kind of reality. In the title which Nathalie Sarraute has chosen, one may perhaps detect a deliberate contrast in the titles of such 'grandes œuvres composées' as Eugénie Grandet, Anna Karenina, or Adam Bede, where the characters most clearly do possess this kind of reality. The title of the novel thus underlines what has been added in Portrait to the material of Tropismes: the tension between notions of traditional and modern novel, between the nineteenth-century novelist's conception of character and the narrator's perception of the people he studies.

One aspect of the situation of the narrator or embryo novelist in Portrait is constantly stressed: the mental attitude which accompanies

it. This is predominantly one of anguish and doubt. The narrator is sensitive to signs of such feelings in the author of the painting and registers them as a bond linking him with this unknown artist. To explain these feelings, it is not sufficient to say that the narrator is a neurotic, though this is perhaps an approximately accurate description. Nathalie Sarraute deliberately chooses characters whom she herself describes as 'un peu névrosés',<sup>26</sup> because the movements she wishes to observe and convey are more easily visible in such people. This however in no way invalidates their general significance. They are merely brought more strikingly to the reader's notice.

One of the underlying causes of these feelings of anguish on the part of the narrator is simply the enormity of his task, a fact that constantly oppresses him. His material is immensely complex, by definition difficult to grasp. It has not been previously explored: he has the sensation of wandering through uncharted territory. He has to provide his own map and no sooner has he sketched in a corner of it than the actual picture changes. His material, the words he has at his disposal, seem woefully inadequate; they transform his living material into a series of lifeless clichés. He is thus constantly dogged by a sense of failure and inadequacy. His brief moments of apparent triumph always end in disillusionment.

C'est ainsi qu'elles sont toujours, mes découvertes ... C'est à cela qu'aboutissent le plus souvent mes états de triomphe, d'euphorie: à prendre pour des trouvailles de vieilles choses oubliées ... A ressasser sans fin ... (p. 47)

There are, however, other factors which contribute to his state of mind. In Portrait, as in Tropismes, there is a world which does not recognise or refuses to admit the validity of such perception as the narrator's. He is, as Valerie Minogue says in her perceptive account of

---

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Pingaud, 'Dix romanciers face au roman', Pensée française, 15 décembre 1956, p. 56.

102

the imagery of childhood in the novel, 'a doubting child in a group of adults'.<sup>27</sup> From the first we are made aware of forces militating against him, of pressures hostile to him. His initial conversation is with people who disapprove of the direction in which he tries to lead the conversation and his preoccupations are thus indicated to be unacceptable in normal social intercourse. Two words recur several times: 'normal' and 'décent'; the effort to restrain the narrator is an effort made in the name of normality and decency. The interests of the narrator are unhealthy: 'Méfiez-vous, c'est très malsain' (p. 216), the daughter tells him. His status in this social world is that of a neurotic. Various references to doctors and psychiatric cases indicate this early in the novel and subsequently he attends a psychiatrist for treatment. His preoccupations isolate him; only his one close friend has any real understanding of them, others, who apparently sympathise, speedily reduce them to the level of gossip. The parallels drawn throughout the novel between the situation of the narrator and that of a child are double-edged. The narrator may be viewed as the victim of an unsympathetic adult world; he may equally be seen as immature, pre-occupied with childish things.

As in Tropismes, of course, there are many nuances within this general resistance to the narrator and his ideas. There are those people who categorise the old man and his daughter with complete confidence in the adequacy of such statements; there are others who, influenced perhaps by the presence of the narrator, lack this confidence and prefer some vague and harmless euphemism: 'Oui, elle semble tenir beaucoup à l'affection des gens' (p. 16). Some people, like the maid, are patently governed by the tropisms which fascinate the narrator, while never recognising them

---

<sup>27</sup> Valerie Minogue, 'The Imagery of Childhood in Nathalie Sarraute's Portrait d'un inconnu', French Studies, 27, 1973, p. 179.

105

as such; others, like the old man and his daughter, who are equally a prey to such movements, appear to hesitate between denial and recognition of them. The most sophisticated approach to the question is that of the psychiatrist.<sup>28</sup> He is a specialist in the narrator's field: 'Lui, il devait sûrement comprendre: c'était sa branche, après tout, ces pulsations, ces frémissements, ces tentacules qui se tendent, ces larves' (p. 74). But the 'air de fausse solidarité' (p. 26), adopted by doctors, is misleading. Their real attitude to their patients is primarily one of careless superiority, such as is expressed by the figure in Tropismes, when he describes his patients as 'ces curieux et amusants loufoques qui viennent me raconter leurs interminables histoires pour que je m'occupe d'eux, les apprécie et les rassure' (XII). The latter is only marginally less offensive than Dr. Rogé in La Nausée who treats M. Achille with good-humoured contempt and whose pretensions are demolished without mercy by Sartre (pp. 91-2). The specialist too is on the side of normality; his job is to deal with such sensations and send people back into the world once more fit for normal, decent converse with their fellows. His knowledge of the terrain makes him much more powerful; like all his colleagues, he has the confidence of long familiarity in grasping the narrator's material, categorising it and reducing its significance:

Ils ont vite fait de ranger tout cela, de le classer à leur manière. Elle est étiquetée, jetée en vrac avec les autres, dans la même catégorie, la petite idée, la petite vision qu'on a couvée, plein de honte et d'orgueil, dans la solitude. (pp. 73-4)

He is more subtle, more sophisticated than his colleague in Tropismes.

'Ne vous formalisez pas', he says to the narrator, 'bien des types

---

<sup>28</sup> Françoise Calin, along with others, identifies this figure with the professional critic (op. cit., p. 239). Critic he is indeed, but he is also and equally a psychiatrist; the term 'specialist' is deliberately chosen to allow both interpretations rather than suggest one at the expense of the other.

littéraires devenus immortels sont, de notre point de vue, aussi des névrosés (p. 76), implying that he has the latter judgment well in proportion and is according full value to the former. Nevertheless it is he who (as critic) formulates the general rejection of the narrator's activity in terms of what is to be expected of the true artist. This kind of speculation does not produce literature. If the narrator wants to achieve anything, he must change his approach and prove himself in the traditional manner:

Montrez-nous donc quelqu'un de bien vivant et collez-lui, si cela vous plaît, tous les masques que vous voudrez. Mais faites-le vivre d'abord, rendez-le concret, tangible. Sortez de ces ruminations stériles, de ces idées qui restent à l'état d'idées, inconsistantes et nues, ni chair, ni poisson, ni science, ni matière d'art. (p. 77)

The supreme representative of the forces hostile to the narrator is, however, Louis Dumontet, the deus ex machina figure, who appears at the end of the novel to rescue the old man and his daughter from the narrator's clutches. At the opposite pole from the psychiatrist, he derives his strength from his sublime unconsciousness of anything resembling the narrator's preoccupations. He belongs entirely to the 'normal' world, to the world of 'real' people and surface definitions. It is significant that he is the only character in the novel to be given a proper name, a sign that he escapes the narrator completely. We have already cited Nathalie Sarraute's commentary on such departures from her standard practice of anonymity:

Ils n'apparaissent jamais dans mes livres qu'au moment où ces actions dramatiques, ces tropismes qui se développent dans les régions encore intactes, où se situe pour moi, aujourd'hui, l'authenticité, affleurent au dehors et se figent en lieux-communs et en trompe-l'oeil.<sup>29</sup>

We are given a description of Louis Dumontet's appearance which

---

<sup>29</sup> 'La littérature, aujourd'hui', p. 48.



emphasises the fact that it exudes an air of solidity, not restricted to the physical realm, and the terms of this description recall the impression made by Tolstoy's characters on the narrator:

Bien calé sur sa chaise, renversé un peu en arrière, balançant son pied, il s'étalait devant moi avec une sorte d'outrecuidance. Extrêmement sûr de lui. Impassible. Imposant. Un roc. Un rocher qui a résisté à tous les assauts de l'océan. Inattaquable. Un bloc compact. Tout lisse et dur. (p. 222)

Louis Dumontet in other words is not a living person at all but a character in a realist novel. He has a profession, projects, hobbies; he participates without any sign of unease in conventional attitudes and relationships; he expresses conventional notions with complete self-confidence. His strength is sufficiently great to carry others along with him. It is significant that at the beginning of the scene the narrator can hardly see the old man and his daughter against their background:

Rien d'étonnant que je ne les aie pas remarqués, tant ils avaient changé, tant, par un mimétisme étrange, ils se fondaient, s'encastrent exactement dans cette salle banale et clinquante de restaurant, parmi ces glaces, ces cuivres, ces plantes vertes, ce velours rutilant des banquettes; des images plates, hautes en couleurs, toutes semblables à celles qui les entouraient, à tous ces gens en train de déjeuner, assis autour d'eux aux autres tables. (pp. 220-1)

Under Dumontet's influence, they step into clearly defined roles with relative ease: the fiancée full of plans for the future, the elderly father glad to see his daughter finally settled. The narrator finds himself discussing fishing and his uncle's apple trees. Dumontet is too strong for him; he has to admit defeat. He will pose no threat to 'normal' people in the future; the concierges, sitting outside their doors, will sum up the character of the old man, and the situation of father and daughter, without hesitation in his presence and he will meekly concur: 'Je mêlerai pieusement ma voix aux leurs' (p. 258).

What also contributes to the narrator's feelings of anguish is the ambivalence of his own attitude. He does not share the perception

of human beings on which the denizens of the normal world of social intercourse base their judgments, but he sympathises with their unease when these judgments are questioned, and with their fear and distaste at the glimpses of his own world. He speaks repeatedly of the 'mélange d'attrait et de peur' (p. 32), the 'mélange d'appréhension et d'espoir' (p. 103), that he feels with regard to his preoccupations. The fascination they have for him is obvious. He is continually seeking out signs of activity at this level in the old man and his daughter and his attempts to escape are short-lived. The first lines of the novel introduce the reader immediately into this atmosphere of fascination: 'Une fois de plus je n'ai pas pu me retenir, ça été plus fort que moi ...' But the contrary impulses he also entertains are equally stressed. He speaks with nostalgia of Tolstoy's characters, regretting that he cannot see people in this way, and making his own creations sound thoroughly unattractive by comparison:

Comme je voudrais leur voir aussi ces formes lisses et arrondies, ces contours purs et fermes, à ces lambeaux informes, ces goules, ces larves qui me narguent et après lesquels je cours ... (p. 71)

One is reminded again of La Nausée here and of Roquentin's nostalgic longing for the kind of necessity which the world of art represents and in which his life is lacking:

Et moi aussi j'ai voulu être. Je n'ai même voulu que cela; voilà le fin mot de ma vie: au fond de toutes ces tentatives qui semblaient sans liens, je retrouve le même désir: chasser l'existence hors de moi, vider les instants de leur graisse, les tordre, les assécher, me purifier, me durcir, pour rendre enfin le son net et précis d'une note de saxophone. (p. 218)

The narrator wishes someone would rescue him from his vision of the old man and his daughter by presenting him with just those resounding definitions which he himself is incapable of producing. He is aware of the disturbing influence his own perception has on other people and wishes he could eliminate it. He dwells with readiness on the parallels between his own occupations and psychiatric case treatment and

delivers himself up voluntarily to the care of a psychiatrist. He speaks of his preoccupations as 'divagations' (p. 44) and realises how ridiculous he must appear to other people. He implies an adverse judgment on himself when he wonders at his friend's continued faith in him: 'comme si rien n'avait changé, comme si il n'avait jamais remarqué ce que je suis devenu depuis' (pp. 45-6). He speaks of his hatred for the objects of his study, a hatred which arises out of their similarity to himself:

C'est pour cela aussi qu'il m'est arrivé souvent de la haïr, pour cette complicité, cette promiscuité humiliante qui s'établit entre nous malgré moi, cette fascination qu'elle exerce toujours sur moi et qui me force à la suivre à la trace, tête basse, flairant à sa suite d'immondes odeurs. (p. 142)

And such phrases as 'promiscuité humiliante' and 'd'immondes odeurs' are typical of the vocabulary he uses to describe his own preoccupations.

In the narrator, then, we have an embryo novelist who is no longer capable of seeing human beings as the novelists of the past have seen them. His situation is a difficult one. His material cannot be encompassed in traditional forms and he has to feel his way towards new ones. He meets with no sympathy from the public at large and his faith in his own vision and its significance is not great enough to sustain him in the face of this general resistance. But the option of creating characters in the traditional mould which the public considers still open to him is not really a valid one.

In the course of his interview with the psychiatrist, he comes closer to the latter's way of looking at people. He begins to see the father and daughter take shape as 'characters'. At the same time, however, they no longer seem alive:

Je prends déjà petit à petit - symptôme de guérison, paraît-il - 'contact avec le réel'. Je le sens à la façon dont 'ils' changent d'aspect, se rapprochent, deviennent durs, eux aussi, finis, avec des couleurs nettes, des contours précis, mais un peu à la manière de ces poupées en carton peint qui servent de cibles dans les foires. Un petit déclic encore et ils vont basculer. (p. 76)

When he joins his parents after his visit to the psychiatrist, they try to talk to him about old friends of his or acquaintances of the family in an effort to increase his 'sens du réel'. He submits. But none of it means anything to him: 'Je faisais pivoter devant eux, comme ils le voulaient, leurs poupées, j'avancais avec eux lentement à travers leur musée, je passais avec eux la revue de leurs soldats de plomb ...' (p. 79). People seen in this way seem no more alive to him than dolls or waxworks in a museum and he cannot invent any; if he is not allowed to portray those areas of the mind where he does perceive life, he cannot write at all. Submission means 'le vide'; death to his particular talent. Hence the terms in which the effect of Louis Dumontet is described. He has a 'regard de Méduse' (p. 228), and when he leaves the old man and the narrator, he seems to have emptied them of life: 'Nous devons ressembler, assis côte à côte sur la banquette, à deux grosses poupées qu'on vient de remonter ...' (p. 234).

We have said that the situation of the narrator in Portrait closely parallels that of Nathalie Sarraute herself. She has indicated, in speaking of her characters, that we are not to identify them with their author: 'Les personnages que je mets en scène, les histoires que je raconte n'ont rien à voir avec ma propre vie.'<sup>30</sup> But she goes on to admit: 'Mais si je choisis ces personnages et ces histoires, c'est probablement qu'ils sont liés à moi d'une certaine façon.' The narrator of Portrait is made to share her interests as a writer, and finds himself in a roughly similar situation vis-à-vis the novel and public opinion. Nathalie Sarraute too felt the weight of the past heavily upon her and doubted the value of her material:

---

<sup>30</sup> Pingaud, 'Dix romanciers face au roman', p. 56.

When I wrote Tropismes, and long after I had finished this first book, I sometimes wondered if those hidden and un-expressed feelings had any general bearing or significance. I even wondered if they existed in other people, as no-one ever spoke about them or tried to express them or indeed seemed to know that they existed.<sup>31</sup>

It is her own situation that she describes in L'Ere du soupçon in the essay, 'Conversation et sous-conversation', when she evokes the novelist who, in pursuing his exploration into the 'ténèbres secrètes' (p. 86) of the human mind, feels guilty and tries to address himself to larger issues in his work, only to find that they and the men who are involved in them seem to him unreal:

Force lui est donc, sans encouragements, sans confiance, avec un sentiment souvent pénible de culpabilité et d'ennui, de retourner à lui-même. Mais là, tandis qu'après cette évasion le plus souvent imaginaire - il est d'ordinaire bien trop méfiant et découragé d'avance pour s'aventurer au dehors - il s'est replongé dans son bocal, on ferait de sa situation une description trop poussée au sombre si l'on ne disait qu'il lui arrive de connaître, à son propre étonnement et assez rarement il est vrai, des moments de satisfaction et d'espoir. (pp. 89-90)

Nathalie Sarraute of course writes and publishes - even if with difficulty and without much recognition - the novel which the narrator lives. As author of Portrait, she has in a sense passed beyond the situation in which her narrator finds himself. She conveys to us the flavour of self-doubt, the weight of public hostility involved in the effort to break new ground, but, in doing so, she is writing the novel the narrator failed to write. As subsequent novels will show, she gains confidence rather than losing it as a result of the experience of Portrait. What David Lodge says in connection with Julian Mitchell's The Undiscovered Country is equally apt where Portrait d'un inconnu is concerned:

Problematic novels are not normally valedictory, signalling the author's abandonment of his literary vocation. More often than not they are purgative or exorcistic: problems in the writer's life and/or work have accumulated to the point

---

<sup>31</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 428.

where they threaten a creative 'block', and only by grappling with them directly can the writer free himself from them - after which he often proceeds with restored confidence.<sup>32</sup>

It is arguable, as we shall see, that the narrator too has his short-lived 'moments de satisfaction et d'espoir', that he creates in his fashion his 'portrait'.

It remains true, however, that the presentation of the narrator and the negative ending convey something of her feelings at the time, feelings which were to lead her to write the self-justificatory essays of L'Ere du soupçon. On the evidence of Portrait, these feelings of self-doubt are to some extent at least literary as well as personal in origin. The influence of Proust and Dostoevsky is fundamental and both writers contribute to the creation of the narrator of Portrait. Important also in this particular novel is the impact of two other writers, indeed of two works in particular: the Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge and Tonio Kröger. Nathalie Sarraute remembers reading both of them in the 1920s and having been greatly impressed,<sup>33</sup> Rilke and Malte Laurids Brigge are explicitly referred to in Portrait (p. 30 and p. 55); the setting in Paris and the gloomy, slightly sinister, aspect of the physical surroundings are similar in each work.<sup>34</sup> Both here and in Tonio Kröger, however, it is the mental attitudes of the central figures which are most important. The task of Brigge is different and greater than that of the narrator in Portrait, but Brigge's sense of its enormity and of his own failure is very similar, so that Rilke's comment on his work could be understood in the narrator's terms: 'The book of

---

<sup>32</sup> David Lodge, The Novelist at the Crossroads, London 1971, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> In conversation with François Bondy, Cranaki and Belaval, op. cit., pp. 221-2.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed analysis of these similarities, see F. C. St. Aubyn, 'Rilke, Sartre, and Sarraute: The Role of the Third', Revue de littérature comparée, 41, 2, 1967.

Malte, when at last it shall be written, will be nothing but the book of this insight exemplified in one for whom it was too great.<sup>35</sup> Where Mann's story is concerned, it is the central theme of the bourgeois manqué, the artist with a bad conscience, which is reflected in Portrait. Literature is experienced by Tonio, as it is by the narrator, as a curse, setting him off from other men, from normal, decent people:

Literature is not a calling, it is a curse, believe me! When does one begin to feel the curse? Early, horribly early. At a time when one ought by rights still to be living in peace and harmony with God and the world. It begins by your feeling yourself set apart, in a curious sort of opposition to the nice regular people; there is a gulf of ironic sensibility, of knowledge, scepticism, disagreement between you and the others; it grows deeper and deeper, you realize that you are alone; and from then on any rapprochement is simply hopeless!<sup>36</sup>

Both the Notebooks and Tonio Kröger are, in different ways, autobiographical; equally Portrait, while not dealing in specific characters or incidents, is undoubtedly a transposition of its author's personal and literary experience. That this first novel should be so evidently marked by Nathalie Sarraute's reading might itself be construed as a sign of lack of confidence on her part. In later works literary references are certainly much rarer. It is however by no means inappropriate that a novel which concerns itself so consciously with the novel form should be a highly literary work.

\* \* \*

We have until now been primarily concerned with identifying the substance of the novel. What of its actual texture? What of its structure and style? How precisely does Nathalie Sarraute convey her material to

---

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in H. F. Peters, Rainer Maria Rilke: Masks and the Man, Seattle, 1960, pp. 89-90.

<sup>36</sup> Stories of a Lifetime, London, 1961, Volume I, p. 178.

us? Given the close interdependence of the two, in discussing structure, we shall find ourselves expanding further upon content.

One of the primary factors at work in determining the novel's structure is Nathalie Sarraute's anxiety to avoid traditional plot-content, and to let the tropisms emerge as the central substance of the novel. She intended that the 'dramatic developments of these movements should replace the plot'.<sup>37</sup> How was this to be done? In Portrait d'un inconnu, in the first place, by the device of the narrator. Here we have an 'appareil de prise de vues',<sup>38</sup> actually incorporated into the novel, a man who is abnormally sensitive to manifestations of this kind of mental activity in himself and in other people, who constantly directs the reader's gaze, magnifies these movements for his benefit, and creates the emotional context in which they take place. Nathalie Sarraute describes the effect she was aiming at in her discussion of first-person narration in L'Ere du soupçon:

Alors le lecteur est d'un coup à l'intérieur, à la place même où l'auteur se trouve, à une profondeur où rien ne subsiste de ces points de repère commodes à l'aide desquels il construit les personnages. Il est plongé et maintenu jusqu'au bout dans une matière anonyme comme le sang, dans un magma sans nom, sans contours. S'il parvient à se diriger, c'est grâce aux jalons que l'auteur a posés pour s'y reconnaître. Nulle réminiscence de son monde familier, nul souci conventionnel de cohésion ou de vraisemblance, ne détourne son attention ni ne freine son effort. (p. 74)

The device has the added advantage of giving the narrative the appearance of authenticity: 'Il possède au moins une apparence d'expérience vécue, d'authenticité, qui tient le lecteur en respect et apaise sa méfiance' (p. 69).

The narrator however is not simply an 'appareil de prises de vues';

---

37 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

38 Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute nous parle du Planétarium', p. 29.



he is an actor as well as an observer. He cannot observe the old man and his daughter without entering on a relationship with them and therefore potentially himself provoking certain reactions in them. The narrator himself is in part responsible for the constantly shifting pattern he observes. Sometimes he feels himself wholly responsible for it, hence his impression on occasion that 'c'est moi qui les fait surgir, qui les provoque' (p. 30). His characters then seem to him an invention, an extension of himself:

Si j'essaie, par un très grand effort, de l'évoquer de nouveau, cette image tourmentée, il me semble que, pareille à mon ombre portée elle me rejoint, et comme mon ombre quand le soleil monte dans le ciel, elle diminue rapidement, se ramasse à mes pieds en une petite tâche informe, se résorbe en moi-même. (p. 139)

Is he then an unreliable narrator of the type described by Wayne Booth?<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the sometimes confusing mixture of past and present event, imaginary and real scene, is a sign of his unreliability. Perhaps we should view with suspicion everything he tells us. This is what he feels in his moments of self-doubt; it is not the verdict of the novel upon his efforts. Is he one of those modern narrators whom Nathalie Sarraute describes in L'Ere du soupçon who so dominate the narrative that the secondary figures are deprived of independent existence:

Les personnages qui l'entourent, privés d'existence propre, ne sont plus que des visions, rêves, cauchemars, illusions, reflets, modalités ou dépendances de ce 'je' tout-puissant. (p. 58)

This is closer to the truth. What one has to remember is that the narrator is a would-be novelist. As such, like any other novelist, he is half-observer, half-creator, where the old man and his daughter are concerned. The special relationship which he has with the old man and his daughter, 'ce lien secret, connu de nous seuls' (p. 150), and to

---

<sup>39</sup> Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, Chicago, 1961, pp. 339-374.

which he refers on a number of occasions, is that of novelist and creation:

Il y a sous tous ses actes, même insignifiants en apparence et anodins, comme un envers, une autre face cachée, connue de nous seuls, et qui est tournée vers moi. (p. 92)

The phrase, 'c'est moi qui les fait surgir', can be understood positively as well as negatively. The narrator therefore is not simply a 'corps conducteur' (p. 144), not simply a provoker of tropisms, he has an important role as organising agent. This emerges from Nathalie Sarraute's own description of the novel:

He [i.e. the narrator] grasped snatches of these movements; they became more and more complex through different scenes until he felt strong enough to grasp one long, complex scene in which all the tropisms he had seen or guessed at through the book culminated in a climax.<sup>40</sup>

The narrator appears therefore in the role of creator and the structure of the novel conveys, as we shall see, the constant tension between the raw material he is preoccupied with and the attempt to impose - or rather to detect - a pattern.

Two considerations are at work here: on the one hand, the attempt to convey by structure the nature of the narrator's preoccupations and the stages in his exploration; on the other, a need to explain to the reader the significance of this exploration. This presents problems; the two aims are not easily combined. The needs of the first require a plunge in medias res from the beginning, those of the second explanation and theory. Nathalie Sarraute manages to combine them by slowing down the exposition and spreading it out over five sections, and by saving the theory, as we saw, until the reader has some degree of familiarity with the practice. With the return of the narrator from his trip, the balance

shifts and exposition gives way to a greater preponderance of action. The narrator, freed from the deadening influence of the psychiatrist, released from his submission to the values of others, reaffirms his belief in aesthetic values and his conviction that his own particular preoccupations partake of such value. Thereafter his efforts are rather more ambitious and, for a time at least, more confident than before.

In terms of action, the most important section of these initial five is the second; it provides a first version of the dramatic climax of the novel, a preview of events to come. It has the same kind of structure, made up of parallels and contrasts. It presents two meetings with the daughter and two attempts to accompany her home to her father both in act and in imagination. The two are contrasted in various ways, chiefly by the different roles played by the protagonists: in the first, the narrator is the aggressor taking the daughter by surprise; in the second, the roles are reversed. The section introduces the various leitmotifs of the narrator's obsession which he later enumerates to the psychiatrist:

surtout la 'scène' entre eux, ce moment où ils s'affrontent, qui me tire et où je tombe comme dans un trou noir; la façon, aussi, dont ils surgissent, et cette fascination pénible qu'ils exercent toujours sur moi. (p. 75)

It is the 'scene' in particular which marks the progress made by the narrator in the course of the novel. The enormously detailed recreation of this quarrel scene between father and daughter is the climax of the book; in the second section he already tries to imagine the same scene:

Elle se tient dans la porte ... Et cela commence presque tout de suite entre eux ... Leurs déroulements de serpents ... Mais je sens que je n'y suis plus très bien, ils ont pris le dessus, ils me sèment en chemin, je lâche prise ... Elle doit demander quelque chose, il refuse, elle insiste. Cela porte presque sûrement sur des questions d'argent ... (p. 36)

The outline of the scene is already there but at this stage the narrator can do no more than grope in the direction of its substance.

Between this early version and the climax itself, we see the novelist at work. The narrator gathers together material about the old man and his daughter, judgments passed on them by others, anecdotes told of them, memories from past contacts, impressions from present ones. He tries to relate his factual information to that inner mental life of which he is intermittently aware. We see him building up pictures of these people, trying out two versions of a situation one after the other (cf. p. 119), being suddenly suspicious of too neat an effort (cf. pp. 160-8), and apparently meeting with failure after failure. Sometimes he draws on his knowledge of his own psychology or intervenes directly in the situation and he is on occasion afraid that his effort will prove to be an invention of his mind bearing no relation to reality. At last he is ready for his big effort at recreation, the scene into which he puts everything he has gleaned about the human reality he has been studying. However the pattern has not changed; again another encounter destroys his 'vision'. At the Monet exhibition, it becomes clear from the narrator's various misinterpretations of what the daughter is about to do or say that he has not achieved the power of reading beneath the surface of her mind. Nor does he receive any kind of recognition or sympathy from her despite his attempts to secure it. Their lack of communication where the painting in the Dutch museum is concerned, prepares us for the end of the novel. Then comes Louis Dumontet to set the seal on the narrator's defeat.

As we saw in a previous chapter, one essential characteristic of the world of tropisms is its constant mobility; it is a world of flux, of constant change, a world where descriptions, if they are to ring true, must of necessity be imprecise. Hence the narrator's repeated dissatisfaction with the patterns he detects. The narrative must aim at following these movements and registering them before the reader's eyes as though on a graph. Nathalie Sarraute frequently uses images drawn from the

117

cinema to convey what she is trying to do. She speaks of taking a film, 'un film que je développe ensuite devant le lecteur et qui lui présente, en ralenti et très grossi, ce qui se passe aux limites de la conscience'.<sup>41</sup> She draws an analogy with the device known as travelling:

Such actions are extremely quick and precise. They have to be shown while they are going on by a process which resembles what, in the cinema, is called travelling, when the camera is moving at the same time as the object the operator wants to photograph.<sup>42</sup>

The novel consists for the greater part in a series of scenes. Some of these involve external action and event but all of them we view through the mind of a character and the emphasis is always on the mental activity generated by the given set of circumstances, actual or imaginary, past or present. Passages of description are infrequent and where they do occur, they are always to be understood metaphorically, that is they contribute to the recreation of a character's state of mind at that particular moment. At the beginning of the novel and at the beginning of all the subsequent sections, the reader is plunged into mental activity and is forced to follow its movements if he is to understand what is going on. Hence too the absence of proper names. It is only as the subjects of the narrator's study are referred to by other people that we gather they are a father and daughter or that they present the outward characteristics of miserliness or eccentricity. We are first of all introduced to them by means of the pronouns 'il' and 'elle' and this is how they are most frequently designated throughout the novel. The daughter's effect on the narrator is evoked in the first pages of the novel as follows:

---

<sup>41</sup> Bourin, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

quelque chose qui sortait d'elle, quelque chose de mou, de gluant, qui adhérerait et aspirait sans qu'on sache comment et qu'il fallait soulever et arracher de sa peau comme une compresse humide à l'odeur fade, douceâtre ... (p. 15)

An elusive psychological reaction is, as in Tropismes, expressed in physiological terms and in ones which recall the earlier work.

The rhythm of Nathalie Sarraute's prose conveys to the reader this sense of movement and the complex and elusive character of the tropisms. In his preface, Sartre praises the impression of authenticity Nathalie Sarraute achieves through her style and traces this back to its hesitant, tentative quality: 'son style trébuchant, tâtonnant, si honnête, si plein de repentir' (p. 14). The narrator supplies us with an appropriate description of it when speaking about the difficulty of coming to grips with the personality of the old man: 'Avec lui, il faut toujours être sur le qui-vive, n'avancer qu'avec la plus extrême prudence, en se retournant à chaque pas' (p. 120). This is how Nathalie Sarraute proceeds. She combines an intense desire for accuracy with a painful sense of the inadequacy of her instruments; a constant distrust of words which appear to her either too vague or inaccurately precise in their meaning. Nathalie Sarraute has attributed the sense of anguish the process of writing gives her to this constant feeling of failure: 'J'ai toujours l'impression d'atterrir à côté de l'endroit que je m'étais fixé' (p. 24). Hence her alternatives, her repeated efforts to pin down a particular sensation and her constant qualifications which indicate dissatisfaction with the word she has chosen to use: 'un malaise vague' (p. 123); 'une drôle de satisfaction' (p. 105). The broken sentence which is so characteristic a feature of her style conveys on the one hand a sense of continued movement, on the other this same dissatisfaction with what has just been said. The sentence does not come to a definite end, it merely trails off into silence. But the silence is not necessarily empty. In an interview published in the Guardian in 1962, she comments

on this feature of her style: 'I use those points de suspension to give the impression of constantly bubbling, half-conscious inner activity.'<sup>43</sup>

In 1972 they are still as essential to her:

J'aimerais bien m'en passer, mais ils me sont absolument nécessaires. Ils donnent à mes phrases un certain rythme, grâce à eux elle respirent. Et aussi ils leur donnent cet aspect tâtonnant, hésitant, comme cherchant à saisir quelque chose qui à tout moment s'échappe, glisse, revient, et cet aspect haché ... c'est comme des bribes de quelque chose qui se déferle. Elles sont suspendues en l'air, comme cabrées devant la convention littéraire, la correction grammaticale qui les amèneraient à se figer, à s'enliser.<sup>44</sup>

The mental movements the novel traces, elusive though they are, are not totally random; certain patterns are detected by the narrator, those patterns of approach and withdrawal, attack and defence, we spoke of in an earlier chapter. The idea of ambivalence is particularly strong in Portrait; the narrator makes the following explicit comment:

L'ambivalence: c'est très fort d'avoir découvert cela - cette répulsion mêlée d'attrait, cette coexistence chez le même individu, à l'égard du même objet, de haine et d'amour. (p. 80)

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator isolates traces of two such contradictory impulses in his description of the daughter's handwriting:

Le M immense tracé d'abord avec une désinvolture molle, quelque chose de déjeté, de volontairement vulgaire et comme vautré, où je la reconnais, et puis l'énorme hampe raide et dure qui descend, atrocement agressive, coupe l'adresse, traverse presque toute l'enveloppe comme une intolérable provocation, s'attaque à moi, me fait mal ... (p. 20)

In every relationship in the novel in which tropisms play some part, both impulses are present. People are irresistibly drawn towards their fellows but then register this intimacy in terms of hatred and disgust. The 'bain tiède' (p. 46) of delightful warm closeness into which the

---

<sup>43</sup> Lennon, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Pivot, p. 13.

narrator plunges with his friend gradually appears to him as 'cette promiscuité pénible' (p. 75). If the father suddenly shouts out in anger during an afternoon excursion, one of the most plausible explanations seems to be, in the eyes of the narrator, that, faced with a friendly intimate atmosphere, he has felt the urge to make some violent gesture which will destroy it.

We have seen how the narrator's preoccupations evoke in him a mixture of fear and fascination. Other characters have the same ambivalent reactions. The maid who serves lunch looks frightened and expectant:

Il y avait en elle, tandis qu'elle baissait les yeux, attentive seulement en apparence à présenter le plat bien d'aplomb sur sa main renversée, quelque chose qui se rétractait, se tendait, effrayé et en même temps avide. (pp. 143-4)

The last phrase, 'effrayé et en même temps avide', sums up the impression which the daughter in particular makes on the narrator. His relationship with her follows a see-saw pattern; first one impulse, then the other, will be dominant. Much the same is true of the old man and we find the narrator drawing up two versions of an imaginary situation with a different impulse predominating in each.

The narrator's hatred of the objects of his study increases in proportion to his closeness to them:

Cela me donne envie, à la voir ainsi aplatie, vautrée devant moi, offerte, de la prendre par son cou tendu et de la lancer par-dessus les toits, je voudrais la voir, comme les sorcières des contes de fées, voler par-dessus les cheminées, poussant des cris aigus, tricotant l'air de ses jambes crochues, les pans de son manteau noir déployés au vent. Mais nous ne sommes pas, malheureusement, dans un conte de fées. Je dois maîtriser en moi le dégoût, la haine qui monte. (p. 57)

The way in which these two impulses grow in proportion to one another is of course particularly forcibly illustrated in the relationship of father and daughter. Their intimacy is great because of their family situation. The urge to attack and hurt one another seems correspondingly great, and the temptation is increased by the fact that knowledge of the enemy provides each with ready weapons and makes the task easy. At



moments of crisis, the two impulses become inextricable:

L'abcès a crevé, la croûte est entièrement arrachée, la plaie saigne, la douleur, la volupté ont atteint leur point culminant, il est au bout, tout au bout, ils sont arrivés au fond, ils sont seuls tous les deux, ils sont entre eux, tout à fait entre eux ici, ils sont nus, dépouillés, loins des regards étrangers ... (p. 199)

The theme of ambivalence is emphasised in a number of ways through the structure of the novel. For example, there is the contrast between the picnic scene and the lunch party: a similar social situation, similar provocation experienced by the father but which produces different reactions in each case. The presence of the narrator on the second occasion might be expected to produce the reactions of the first - in the event his absence was perhaps more potent than his presence. Again the ambivalence of the narrator vis-à-vis his material is seen in the progression of the first few sections. The first - in which he seeks to draw others into his perceptions - is succeeded by a passage in which he seeks to distance himself from these perceptions, to withdraw from that intimate awareness of his surroundings which characterises his vision. Into his created idyll of square, old woman and 'alisier' comes the daughter and his antennae spring into action once more. The same contrast operates between - and within - the sections involving the discussion of Tolstoy and interview with the psychiatrist, which follow one upon the other. In the first, the narrator expounds his preoccupations, suggesting that human psychology is more complex than Tolstoy would have us believe. In the second, he abandons his vision; by consulting the psychiatrist, he implies that he wishes to be 'cured' of it. Yet in the first there is present a nostalgia for Tolstoy's apprehension of people which leads on to the psychiatrist, while in the second the narrator detects in himself a residue of pride in his own perceptions which looks forward to his subsequent rebellion against the psychiatrist and his return to his private vision.

The relationship of the old man and his daughter is at the heart of Portrait. And we shall want to ask finally what the narrator achieves where his exploration of these characters' mental life is concerned. What substitute does he offer for Grandet/Eugénie or Prince Bolkonski/Marie? That money is an issue between them is still clearly a fact, equally that the blood-relationship is relevant. But what underlies the ready-made descriptions offered by neighbours and acquaintances? In answering these questions, however, one must remember that Nathalie Sarraute is not simply concerned to offer a particular answer to a particular case. In describing the relationship of father and daughter, the narrator is also saying something about the other figures in the novel and about relationships between people in general. Many of the narrator's reflections, while bearing on the father/daughter relationship, are thus couched in general terms indicating their wider application.

The narrator's starting-point, where father and daughter are concerned, is the notion of masks, the sense that the father constantly wears a mask in the presence of his daughter. The sources of such a mask are infinitely complex:

Il est difficile de savoir exactement si c'est malgré lui, sans qu'il sache bien pourquoi, qu'il durcit ainsi de plus en plus, ou bien si c'est délibérément qu'il force ainsi sa ligne, pour punir celui qui se livre devant lui à ces pitreries dégradantes, lui rendre plus cuisante sa turpitude; ou encore si c'est pour décourager l'adversaire, pour se défendre, en faisant le mort, comme fait le renard à l'approche de l'ennemi, contre ces attouchements, ces frémissements répugnants, ou si c'est au contraire dans l'obscur espoir d'exacerber ces efforts, de corser le jeu, et de prolonger ainsi, de savourer plus longuement une sorte de subtile et secrète volupté. (pp. 65-6)

In the course of the novel we see the narrator exploring scenes where first one, then another motive is paramount. All enter into the relationship between father and daughter but the most important gradually emerges as that of self-defence. The mask is a defence-mechanism. Against what?

The claims of the other person, 'the rights of the daughter'? This remains too superficial a definition, a formula supplied by the social group. It is rather a defence against that restless inner anguish which Nathalie Sarraute sees as the natural state of the human psyche. It may be identified with the fear of death or with a more generalised meta-physical angst; Nathalie Sarraute is more interested in recreating the mental sensation than in finding the appropriate label.

Awareness of the subterranean life in oneself or others, whether conscious or unconscious, is always disturbing and a developed awareness will produce a strong sense of anguish. It may begin as - or be successfully reduced to - 'un malaise vague, comme une démangeaison légère que je gratte ici et là' (p. 39), but it may also become 'une angoisse intolérable, un froid, comme un trou béant qui s'ouvre en moi' (p. 34). Certain circumstances seem to foster the awareness of this life and with it such feelings: chiefly, the want of a practical activity to occupy one's attention or the lack of people around one who engage confidently in such activities. Certain hours, because of their emptiness, are particularly favourable. At night such feelings are common:

Ainsi la nuit, dans cette atmosphère raréfiée que fait la solitude, le silence - l'angoisse, contenue en nous dans la journée, enfle et nous oppresse: c'est une masse pesante qui emplit la tête, la poitrine, dilate les poumons, appuie comme une barre sur l'estomac, ferme la gorge comme un tampon ...  
Personne n'a su définir exactement ce malaise étrange. (p. 123)

But the early part of the afternoon, once the excitement of lunch is over and one is left to one's own devices, can be equally treacherous. Then, too, one is particularly open to the vision of 'un univers informe, étrange et menaçant' (p. 157).

The most simple form of escape is the direction of one's attention towards material objects. One fills an empty afternoon with pseudo-

purpose by going on a shopping expedition. Already an important theme in Tropismes, Nathalie Sarraute reintroduces it in Portrait. The most successful kind of shopping expedition is that in which the object of the search can be established not by a particular need but in accordance with generally accepted local practice: in Constantinople one buys carpets, in Dresden china, in Madrid silk shawls. Thus one erects a protective screen against the potential dangers of looking too closely at one's inner life: 'entre eux et un univers informe, étrange et menaçant, le monde des objets s'interpose comme un écran, les protège' (p. 157).

An object can provide a more subtle means of escape in so far as it can be used to define one's general sense of anguish and relieve it by supplying a concrete cause: the father finally masters the feverish activity of his mind by concentrating it on the bar of soap. For this to be a successful device, however, it is necessary that the object remain under one's control. An object may well be productive of further anguish if, like the stain on the bathroom wall, it proves to contain problems which are outside one's power to solve.

The process consists partly in the reduction of the immense to the trivial, of the mentally unmanageable to what can be dealt with. We see this clearly from the stages through which the father's mind passes as he lies awake at night. He moves from a general sense of undefined anguish to a mental image of his life, from this to certain formulations about his life and the way he has been treated: 'quarante années de labeur' (p. 128) or 'ils sont durs avec vous' (p. 127), and from this again to the final stage: 'la barre de savon a été coupée' (p. 131). With this degree of definition comes relief:

Il est arrivé tout au bout. Il a sondé jusqu'au fond. Il n'y a pas à chercher plus loin. Il éprouve, après ce paroxysme, une sorte d'apaisement. L'étreinte se desserre autour de sa gorge, de sa poitrine, il respire plus librement, tandis qu'il retourne se coucher, emportant cela avec lui - ce fait solide et dur - comme un os pour le ranger à son aise dans sa tanière. (pp. 130-1)

Also involved in this process is the moving from a vision which seems irremediably personal and incommunicable to an outlook which can be explained to others and understood and shared by them. Most of what characterized the private vision will of course thereby be lost. As we have seen, the acquisition of material goods is a particularly successful diversion when it is given some sort of universal sanction. But perhaps the most striking image of this aspect of the process is the father's interest in school text-books. In them the raw material of life is categorized and systematized and with their help he can control it and manipulate it at will: 'Tout change. Au gré de son caprice. Le monde, docile, s'élargit à l'infini ou au contraire se contracte; devient étroit et sombre, ou immense et transparent' (p. 118). What one chiefly has to aim at is a rigorous control over one's own mental processes, an ability to adapt one's vision which the narrator compares to the ability to deal dexterously with one of those optical puzzles which contain two separate patterns superimposed on one another. If it is one's physical surroundings which at any given moment provoke feelings of unease in one, one deals with them in a similar way. One attempts to render them harmless not by increasing one's familiarity with them, but by placing oneself at a greater distance from them. The best way to do this is precisely to look at them from the stand-point of another person, to experience them at second-hand. When the narrator is disturbed by the appearance of the streets in his neighbourhood, he tries to look at them as a tourist might do, who brought to them ready-made mental pictures derived from paintings or postcards. Once he can see them as streets in a painting by Utrillo, the personal relationship between himself and them, which seemed so full of latent danger, is destroyed. There are certain places which permanently retain this second-hand quality for him. In the convalescent stage after his psychiatric

treatment, he feels he can go to his Dutch town in complete confidence: 'Elle était, elle avait toujours été pour moi, la ville de l'Invitation au Voyage' (p. 83). The raw material has already been dealt with by another; all he has to do is to accept the finished product: 'C'était de la matière épurée, décantée. Une belle matière travaillée. Un mets exquis, tout préparé. Il n'y avait qu'à se servir' (p. 83).

The same methods are evident in people's attempts to deal directly with their relations with other people. The sensation of flux, of uncertainty in themselves or in others, arouses feelings of terror and so they try to deny it. They refuse to admit the experience:

C'est leur moyen de défense à tous, je l'ai déjà dit, cette inconscience, sincère ou simulée. Ils se mettent en boule quand le danger devient trop grand; se ferment de toutes parts et laissent ces 'vérités', les miennes, que je couve amoureusement, rebondir contre eux sans pénétrer. (p. 112)

Better still, they try to escape from it into some kind of definition:

Tous ces remous en eux, ces flageolements, ces tremblements, ces grouillements en eux de petits désirs honteux, rampants, ce que nous appelions autrefois leurs 'petits démons', une seule bonne grosse image bien assénée, dès qu'elle pénètre là-dedans, c'est comme une particule de cristal qui tombe dans un liquide sursaturé: tout se pétrifie tout à coup, se durcit. Ils se recouvrent d'une carapace. (p. 48)

They choose a role to play, a mask with which to conceal their inner reality from the eyes of others. The narrator and Louis Dumontet occupy extreme positions: the former is without a mask and vulnerable, the latter is his mask. But the average character, and certainly the old man and his daughter, tends to hover uneasily at some point between these two radically opposed positions, being drawn first in one direction, then in the other.

Nathalie Sarraute shows us the process by which such a role can be created, how an individual can go through life collecting material for it. As we saw in Tropismes, she excels in conveying convincingly and recognizably the flavour of these roles and at the same time suggesting their falseness, their artificiality. The old man and his daughter

127

favour attitudes of the 'life is hard' variety: he is the man of experience who knows what life is like, the solid citizen who has had to work his way up; she is the spinster for whom life has not been easy, the daughter who naturally looks to her only close relative for affection and support. The virtue of such roles is that they supply a sense of simple identity which enables people to enter with confidence into contact with others. The cooperation of other people in maintaining these roles is essential, for they are meaningless if their validity is not generally recognized. So the daughter goes about begging for reassuring statements about her position vis-à-vis her father, and the father plunges himself in the atmosphere of regular dinner-parties with his own kind, or visits certain old friends who have a picture of what he is like, which has been consecrated and strengthened over the years. Solitude, as Roquentin bears witness to in La Nausée, is destructive of roles; society fosters them: 'Les gens qui vivent en société ont appris à se voir, dans les glaces, tels qu'ils apparaissent à leurs amis' (p. 32).

Nonetheless the sense of security created is a precarious one for a certain ambivalence in the character's attitude comes into play once more. There is an underlying urge to destroy, to break out and deny the careful creation. Signs of this urge appear in intermittent fashion in the behaviour of the father: he speaks ironically of the categories into which people fit themselves:

Vous connaissez cela, hein, les catégories? Vous connaissez cela? La catégorie du fils, du père, du grand-père, la catégorie de la mère, de la fille? ... Il riait de son rire bizarre, toujours un peu en dessous, il insistait: Hein? hein? les catégories? le Père ... la Fille ... (p. 49)

The climax of the novel, the imagined scene between father and daughter, is an attempt on the part of the narrator to explore a situation between two people in which the world of tropisms gradually grows in strength until the protagonists abandon all pretence. In the relationship between a father and daughter, masks are particularly necessary; family life

means intimacy and intimacy danger. But the consciousness of their inadequacy and the temptation to destroy them are that much greater. This is what happens. As the scene progresses, the roles to which the characters usually try and adapt themselves seem more and more empty and meaningless. Though they have no language in which to express themselves, other than that which belongs to these roles, they realize its irrelevance; its words seem without weight:

Tous les gestes qu'ils font, tous leurs mouvements, ceux qu'elle essaie d'exécuter en ce moment, copiés sur ceux qu'on fait là-bas, à la surface, à la lumière, paraissent ici - dans ce monde obscur et clos de toutes parts où ils se tiennent enfermés tous deux, dans ce monde à eux où ils tournent en rond sans fin - étrangement délestés, puériles et anodins, aussi différents de ceux que font les gens du dehors, que le sont, des gestes de la vie courante, les bonds, les attaques, les fuites et les poursuites des figures de ballet. (p. 201)

The daughter has seen her father as he really is. This is the centre of the novel:

tel qu'elle le connaît, tel qu'elle l'a toujours connu, non pas cette poupée grossièrement fabriquée, cette camelote de bazar à l'usage du vulgaire, mais tel qu'il est en vérité, indéfinissable, sans contours, chaud et mou, malléable ... (p. 216)

Of course, this moment is not a real one but an imaginary one which the characters involved refuse when the narrator presents them with it. Nonetheless, as far as the novel is concerned, this is a moment of truth. The would-be novelist has left literary clichés behind, has gone a long way beyond the comparisons with Mauriac and Julien Green of his acquaintances in the first section of the novel and has expressed his own vision by his own means. He no longer settles for a label, however carefully thought out, and his L'Hypersensible-nourrie-de clichés is abandoned for his own Portrait d'un inconnu.



Chapter 4 Martereau

HUGO    Tout ce qu'il touche a l'air vrai, Il verse le  
café dans les tasses, je bois, je le regarde boire et  
je sens que le vrai goût du café est dans sa bouche  
à lui.

SARTRE

Nathalie Sarraute's second novel, published in 1953, shares the same general preoccupations as all her works but it is in several respects closer to Portrait d'un inconnu than to the novels which follow it: 'When I wrote Martereau, I knew it was going to be the continuation of Portrait d'un inconnu.'<sup>1</sup> It shares with the first novel the device of a first person narrator and in this narrator presents a character similar in many ways to that of Portrait d'un inconnu. In subject-matter it can be said to take up Nathalie Sarraute's exploration at the very point at which Portrait left off: its central theme is the study of a personnage very similar to Louis Dumontet. 'A character that resembles the characters in traditional novels,'<sup>2</sup> again plays a major part. Nathalie Sarraute is still concerned with the difference between this conception of character and that of the modern writer and reader. But her concern is less explicit than it was in Portrait. We are given precise descriptions of what is meant by a tropism:

un très léger recul, un mouvement à peine perceptible, de ceux qu'on perçoit souvent sans l'aide d'un mot, d'un regard; on dirait qu'une onde invisible émane de l'autre et vous parcourt, une vibration chez l'autre, que vous enregistrez comme un appareil très sensible, se transmet à vous, vous vibrez à l'unisson, parfois même plus fort ... (p. 178)

The following passage describes not only Nathalie Sarraute's material but the problems of expression it necessarily poses:

Tout cela, et bien plus encore, exprimé non avec des mots, bien sûr, comme je suis obligé de le faire maintenant faute d'autres moyens, pas avec de vrais mots pareils à ceux qu'on articule distinctement à voix haute ou en pensée, mais évoqué

---

<sup>1</sup> Brée, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

plutôt par des sortes de signes très rapides contenant tout cela, le résumant - telle une brève formule qui couronne une longue construction algébrique, qui exprime une série de combinaisons chimiques compliquées - des signes si brefs et qui glissent en lui, en moi si vite que je ne pourrais jamais parvenir à bien les comprendre, à les saisir, je ne peux que retrouver par bribes et traduire gauchement par des mots ce que ces signes représentent, des impressions fugitives, des pensées, des sentiments souvent oubliés qui se sont amassés au cours des années et qui maintenant assemblés comme une nombreuse et puissante armée derrière ses étendards, se regroupent, s'ébranlent, vont déferler ... (pp. 34-5)

But these formulations occur in passing in the course of the action, in the middle of a drama such as is described. The theoretical discussions of Portrait are absent. Nathalie Sarraute has come to terms with the problems which faced her in writing her first novel. The first two essays of L'Ere du soupçon have been composed and published. Explanations and justifications have been made; repetitions would be otiose.

Martereau may hope to exist in its own right. The decrease in the number of literary references compared with Portrait d'un inconnu may be taken as a sign of this greater confidence.

Nathalie Sarraute has also made progress in dealing with her material. Martereau is a more polished, more carefully constructed whole than Portrait. There is a framework of undramatic event: dinners in a restaurant, a visit to the country, the purchase of a house. The 'plot' is simpler; its time sequence clearer. It is even possible to date the action of the novel.<sup>3</sup> A young man, the narrator, lives with his uncle and aunt and his cousin, their young daughter; he is recovering from illness, and is more or less inactive. The family is looking for a house in the country and one is suggested to them by a man called Martereau who is a friend of the family and for whose apparent solidity and simplicity of character the narrator has a great admiration. The

---

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this, see Jean Roudaut's edition of Martereau, Livre de poche université, Paris, 1967, pp. 313-4. Jean Roudaut suggests 1948 as an approximate date for the action.

uncle asks Martereau to buy this house on his behalf to avoid paying tax on the sum involved. Suspicion is subsequently thrown on Martereau; there are some indications that he intends to keep the house for himself. He does not give the narrator a receipt for the money which is handed over to him, he moves into the house with his wife, he does not answer the uncle's letters. Finally he does hand over the house and it is suggested that his silence was due to offence at the lack of trust shown to him. At the end of the novel, though Martereau's reputation has been completely cleared, certain doubts remain in the narrator's mind. Or rather, in so far as the possibility of doubt has been seen to exist, he can never again have quite the same impression of Martereau as a character as he had initially.

This of course is the real centre of the novel: the transformation of Martereau in the eyes of the narrator from a solid clear-cut character to a mind which acts and reacts in as fluid and personal a way as his own or that of his family. This is the sense in which Martereau takes up the thread of exploration where Portrait abandoned it. Portrait d'un inconnu ended with the entry on scene of Louis Dumontet as a deus ex machina figure who rescues the old man and his daughter from the destructive gaze of the narrator. The second novel is a close examination of just such a character as Louis Dumontet. Nathalie Sarraute has made quite clear what she intended to portray in Martereau:

In my next book, Martereau, the normal, traditional character seen from the outside, having a name, an outward appearance, and so on and so forth, the Mr. Dumontet from the Portrait of a Man Unknown is Martereau. But Dumontet himself had stopped the tropisms, had brought everything to a standstill; while Martereau will himself disintegrate. At the beginning, he arouses the envy of the narrator, a young man who lives among people who are all activated by tropisms. But Martereau, for a futile reason arouses suspicion. Through this tiny hole which has been made in the solid shell that protects all characters in life and in novels, through this narrow chink the narrator sees that Martereau is activated by the same movements.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

The number of parallels between the treatment of Dumontet and that of Martereau is striking. Like Louis Dumontet, Martereau is the only character in the novel to be given a proper name, with all that the possession of a name implies. Here this one proper name gives the novel its title. For once the nouveau roman, which Jean-Bertrand Barrère accuses of austere, colourless titles,<sup>5</sup> has reverted to a more traditional practice: that of naming the novel after its principal character. But here, of course, the choice is an ironic one, in so far as the character qua character is under attack.

At the beginning of this novel, Martereau makes on the narrator a very similar impression to that created by Dumontet at the end of Portrait. This is how the narrator of Portrait describes Dumontet:

Bien calé sur sa chaise, renversé un peu en arrière, balançant son pied, il s'étalait devant moi avec une sorte d'outrecuidance. Extrêmement sûr de lui. Impassible, Imposant. Un roc. Un rocher qui a résisté à tous les assauts de l'océan. Inattaquable. Un bloc compact. Tout lisse et dur. (p. 222)

In Martereau this character is the narrator's chief study and he therefore goes into greater detail. Moreover the difference in emphasis between the outlooks of the two narrators leads to certain variations. However the general impression is very much the same. For the narrator in the early stages of the novel, Martereau possesses the same solidity, the same hardness:

C'était ce jour-là, quand Martereau était venu nous voir, quand je l'admirais tant, compact et dur qu'il était, immobile à souhait - une boule parfaitement lisse. Les jets de vapeur brûlante dont mon oncle l'aspergeait ne laissait pas la moindre trace, pas une ternissure, pas une moiteur sur son poli étincelant. (p. 177)

Things are innocent, uncomplicated to Martereau; words do not for him contain those treacherous undercurrents of which the narrator is constantly aware:

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Mais, depuis peu, un certain nombre de romanciers ont au moins ceci de commun que, par réaction de salubrité ou par renversement publicitaire, ils marquent une prédilection pour l'austérité d'un mot gris qui distingue à peine le roman de l'essai' (La Cure d'amaigrissement du roman, Paris, 1964, pp. 9-10).

Les mots ne sont pas pour lui ce qu'ils sont pour moi - des minces capsules protectrices qui enrobent des germes nocifs, mais des objets durs et pleins, d'une seule coulée, on aurait beau les ouvrir, faire des coupes, bien examiner, on n'y découvrirait rien. (p. 133)

Nor do human relationships: he manages to form a conventionally sentimental picture with his wife without presenting or provoking any of the awkwardness the narrator commonly senses in such situations. Louis Dumontet, of course, gave proof of a precisely similar ability to fulfil a conventional role successfully and convincingly when he appeared as the daughter's fiancé. Even the passage of time, the conduct of one's day, is something quite different for the narrator and for Martereau. For the latter it is comfortably filled with necessary and reassuring activities:

le temps de Martereau: une bonne matière solide et dense sur laquelle on se tient d'aplomb, dont on franchit allègrement les différents paliers: on en a parcouru un d'un pas ferme, on saute à pieds joints sur le suivant. (p. 189)

While for the former it is frighteningly empty: 'une matière informe et molle, un fleuve boueux qui me traîne lentement ... un vide effrayant' (p. 189). Martereau also manages to communicate this assurance and simplicity to other people. The narrator feels after an encounter with him that his own situation and his relationship with his family partake of the same simplicity; he is looking after his health and his uncle and aunt are pleased to be able to help him. Martereau has a clarifying, purifying effect on the narrator similar to that made by Louis Dumontet on the old man and his daughter:

D'un coup, comme par enchantement, ils disparaissent, tous les grouillements, flageolements et tressaillements, toutes les souillures et les plaies qu'ont laissés en moi leurs attouchements malsains, leurs louches caresses, leurs morsures. Tout se lisse, se durcit, tout prend des contours nets, un aspect bien nettoyé, rangé et astiqué, très rassurant. Le mauvais rêve, l'envoûtement se dissipe: je vois clair comme tout le monde, je sais où je suis, qui je suis. (pp. 91-2)

Both Martereau and Dumontet have a physical exterior which corresponds to their inner characteristics. Both are big impressive men, comfortably large and reassuring. Their similarity even extends to the same hobby, fishing.

Such then is the impression made by Louis Dumontet/Martereau. In this novel, however, the figure is subjected to close examination and does not stand up to it. In terms of conventional plot and character, doubt is cast on the honesty of Martereau. He buys a house with the uncle's money and it seems possible that he is out to make some degree of profit for himself. But this is not really the point. If it were quite clear that Martereau was a rogue and could be classified as such the narrator would be content:

Je retrouve cette sécurité exquise que Martereau m'a toujours donnée. D'un fait à l'autre, la pensée se tend, nette, droite, le plus court chemin. Joignant l'un à l'autre des points exactement situés, elle trace un dessin qui a toute la précision d'une figure géométrique. Il suffit de le regarder: la définition s'impose. Aucun doute n'est possible. Martereau est un filou. (pp. 243-4)

If it were established that Martereau was engaged in an adulterous relationship with the narrator's aunt, the effect would be similar:

Martereau a donc accompli ce tour de force: il nous a saisis de sa poigne solide et nous a tirés au grand air, hors de notre mare stagnante. Cela peut donc se produire chez nous aussi - de vrais, de larges mouvements. Pas nos flageolements habituels, innommables, à peine décelables, nos pâles miroitements, mais quelque chose de fort, de net, de bien visible: une vraie action. Quelque chose que chacun aussitôt reconnaît et nomme: un adultère ... (p. 253)

Martereau's outlines would be different but they would be clear-cut.

However this is not the case. He appears to the narrator misunderstood and admirable, deceiving and dishonest by turns. More important than this, the narrator becomes aware of a nebulous area of uncertainty within Martereau himself and pervading his actions and reactions. In the end, though his honesty would seem to have been satisfactorily proved, this does not help. The period of suspicion, and the discoveries about

Martereau which this had involved for the narrator mean that Martereau's value to him as a well-rounded personality without cracks or undercurrents is lost. In the narrator's final encounter with Martereau this is made very clear:

à peine une nuance, comme un minuscule rouage mal huilé dans un mécanisme d'horlogerie parfaitement entretenu, réglé, mais c'est là, je l'ai perçu, il ne m'en faut pas plus, moins que rien maintenant suffit, le pli est pris entre nous, mon équilibre si fragile est menacé, rompu, j'oscille, je vacille. (p. 282)

In this novel Nathalie Sarraute is primarily intent on showing that this kind of character is non-existent, that the impression made by Louis Dumontet/Martereau must in the nature of things be a sham, that the undercurrents, the tropisms of which the narrator is conscious in himself and in his family are in fact present in every human being.

Some of the differences between Portrait d'un inconnu and Martereau become understandable in relation to the central intention we have just examined. For example, the more conventional story, the neat structure of plot. Some such basic plot was obviously necessary for the presentation of a character like Martereau: a well-rounded traditional character would need to express itself, at least for the purposes of the argument, in conventional dilemmas. And at the same time as the simplicity of the character of Martereau is shown to be a sham, the significance of such an alternative of choices as the plot presents can also be exploded. The one stands or falls with the other.

As far as the examining eye is concerned, the theme of the novel being such as it is - destruction of the initial image presented by Martereau - a slightly different foil is needed from that required by the content of Portrait. The task must not seem too easy, or the result a product of wishful thinking. And the narrator of Martereau is different from the narrator of Portrait. This, of course, is nonetheless one of the aspects in which Martereau remains closer to Portrait than to the



succeeding novels: the use of a narrator, a 'privileged' figure, as Nathalie Sarraute calls him, who 'has to try and catch the tropisms' and who 'helps the reader by explaining what is going on'.<sup>6</sup> Here the narrator still fulfils this function. He supplies the reader with a careful description of the movements which fascinate him. He indicates the significance of the character of Martereau and repeatedly stresses the contrast between this figure and his own family:

Pourtant j'ai beau regarder, je ne surprends pas en Martereau le plus léger frémissement, rien, pas une ride. Impassible, souriant, dur et pur à souhait, délicieusement innocent, Martereau nous regarde, amusé, tandis que nous dansons sans que rien puisse nous arrêter notre habituelle danse de Saint-Guy ... (p. 125)

Apart from this similarity of function, there are parallel details in the presentation of the two figures. Both are handicapped in their health and relatively inactive, apart from the energies they devote to these shared preoccupations. Yet there are differences. The narrator in Martereau is a younger man, as if he were being presented as only at the beginning of a career in which the other is already well advanced. Though his uncle considers him a dilettante and rather feeble, his relatives have not concluded that he is mentally ill. His illness is a physical one (at one point he goes to hospital for an X-ray), though it sometimes appears that there is a certain amount of indulgence involved in it: he himself is extremely sensitive to any suggestion of the kind; one of the leitmotifs in the later stages of his relationship with Martereau is the latter's suggestion that he is suffering from a 'maladie des riches' (p. 201). Micheline Tison Braun emphasises the different social origins of the two narrators and of the social milieu in each novel generally:

---

<sup>6</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

Une crevasse sociologique sépare Tropismes et Portrait de Martereau. Les deux premiers ouvrages (...) peignent la moyenne bourgeoisie semi-provinciale d'avant-guerre, encore imbue de traditions. (...) Dès qu'elle a réglé son compte à cette société du passé, avec ses mythes séculaires et ses décors déjà vermoulus, Nathalie Sarraute s'attaque au milieu très moderne des gens d'affaires, riches et nouveaux riches, déjà connu avant guerre et qui s'épanouit dans la prospérité renaissante des années cinquante.<sup>7</sup>

One might quarrel about the dating of the action<sup>8</sup> but the differences between the two milieux are accurately enough described and there is no doubt that passages which resemble social satire are to be found in Nathalie Sarraute's work. She has a considerable ear for dialogue and for characteristic rhythms of speech. But such passages can only be understood as social satire if viewed in isolation, seen in relation to the novel as a whole they have a different function. To speak of Nathalie Sarraute dealing with the pre-war outmoded bourgeoisie and moving on in her next novel to the post-war modern variety is altogether misleading. It gives this material a totally false emphasis and endangers a proper understanding of the novel. The social personae the figures in Martereau represent are not interesting in themselves but only in relation to the mental activity they conceal.<sup>9</sup>

What is most important where the two narrator figures are concerned, then, is the difference in attitude towards the tropisms which they both sense and observe and interpret to the reader. The elements composing their separate attitudes are the same; the balance of these elements is slightly but significantly different. The young man in Martereau is also fascinated by these undercurrents:

Je retrouve non sans plaisir, tandis que je la suis, cette sensation de vertige léger, de très légère nausée comme celle qui précède les syncopes, que j'éprouve toujours quand je me laisse aller ainsi. (p. 58)

---

<sup>7</sup> Tison Braun, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> See note 3 above.

<sup>9</sup> For a reading of the novel which attempts to see it as social statement without distortion of the text, see Peter Bürger, 'Nathalie Sarraute: Martereau', in Pabst, op. cit., p. 245.

He too is constantly prompted by curiosity: 'toujours cette maladive curiosité' (p. 63). But the element which accompanies the fascination, that of fear and distaste, seems even stronger than in Portrait. The narrator of Portrait is at least as much a deliberate purveyor of the manifestations he observes as he is a sufferer from them. The narrator of Martereau appears chiefly as sufferer. The wistfulness which made its appearance in Portrait is even more evident here. The young man is often described, directly or indirectly, as an 'écorché vif' (p. 132). He is anxious for other people's sympathy - he refers to himself as a 'liane, algue tremblante' (p. 258) - and regrets that this desire is accompanied in equal measure by a constant fear of people, an awareness of their slightest hostility. He has little time for his own perceptions and would like to see people differently:

C'est là pour moi, avec eux, le pire: cette impossibilité de prendre parti en face d'eux. De les aimer pour de bon ou de les haïr. De leur passer un carcan autour du cou, de leur coller un numéro sur la poitrine pour bien savoir à quoi s'en tenir. Tout le monde (sinon, comment vivrait-on?) y parvient sans effort, avec une rapidité, une sûreté qui chaque fois me confond ... (...) Moi j'ai essayé bien des fois de les imiter. En vain. Je n'y arrive pas. (pp. 49-50)

The moments when he is happiest are those when he escapes his perceptions, when, for example, he goes with the money for the house to Martereau:

Je me sens délicieusement en règle, en ordre: un mécanisme de précision qui vient d'être nettoyé, bien épousseté, huilé et remonté. (p. 162)

He longs to have people about him who are different from himself and his family. This is made very clear by what Martereau means to him:

Il était la patrie lointaine dont pour des raisons mystérieuses j'avais été banni; le port d'attache, le havre paisible dont j'avais perdu le chemin; la terre où je ne pourrais jamais aborder, ballotté que j'étais sur une mer agitée, déporté sans cesse par tous les courants. (pp. 85-6)

And Martereau is not the only example we have of the narrator's nostalgic longing for simplicity and normality. Before Martereau is introduced, the

reader is initiated into these desires through the impression made on him by a man and a young boy sitting at a table in a restaurant:

C'est une véritable volupté que j'éprouve à les contempler. En eux je nous retrouve, je nous reconnais. C'est notre image, notre portrait tel un peintre bien doué aurait pu les dessiner. Ils possèdent ce qui nous manque, à nous autres, modèles informes, chaos où s'entrechoquent mille possibilités - le style, l'outrance révélatrice, la simplicité et la netteté audacieuse du trait. (p. 39)

Moreover, in describing Martereau's fascination for him, the narrator admits to a longing which was already a factor in his childhood. Then he used to envy other children whose relationships with themselves and with the adult world were simple, uncomplicated. As he grew older he attempted to satisfy this longing by half-imaginary constructions; he would set his current prefiguration of Martereau in those foreign contexts he found particularly propitious:

J'aimais l'imaginer s'épanouissant sous d'autres cieux. Je découvrais pour lui et pour moi, pour cette nostalgie qu'il éveillait en moi, des terres plus grasses, des climats plus propices. (p. 87)

These 'climats plus propices' are those which have already played such a role in Nathalie Sarraute's work, Holland and England. In Tropismes, sketch XVIII presents the most extreme example of the image substituted for life, in the form of a country cottage in England, with the mistress of the establishment upstairs, Ada the cook in the kitchen, and muffins for tea. In Portrait it is the Holland of Baudelaire's 'Invitation au voyage' which presents the same kind of coherent reassuring picture. Here in Martereau we have first a stereotyped image of Holland: in a small town setting the familiar Dutch interior, with tulips and tiles and a copper kettle, all simplicity and calm. But England presents even better material. The Dutchman is surpassed by the figure of the king of England, 'une belle poupée articulée' (p. 88), who is the public personality par excellence, who at every stage of life and in every role appears in the consecrated, expected form. However, none of these earlier

attempts measure up to the reality of Martereau: 'Martereau en chair et en os, meilleur cent fois que les plus beaux jouets et les plus somptueux coffrets' (p. 90). He is not only a wholly real figure but one with whom the narrator and his family come into direct contact.

Martereau represents for the narrator a secure and simple world, reminiscent of childhood, if not of his own then of the childhood he would like to have had and which, it seems, he now seeks to find or to create. The theme of childhood is once again of some importance in this novel. The emotion the narrator feels in entering Martereau's house is that of a traveller returning to the house in which he was born: 'cet attendrissement du voyageur qui revient dans sa maison natale' (p. 194). He sees himself and his cousin as characters in children's stories: 'sages petits Chaperons Rouges allant chez leur mère-grand' (p. 162), 'le Petit Poucet et sa petite sœur qui cherchent leur chemin dans la forêt' (pp. 240-1). By the end of the novel, Martereau is playing the part of wolf or ogre: 'ses dents d'ogre luisent' (p. 276). The stories themselves suggest that the vision of childhood as secure and happy is a false one. If it appears so, it is only that the menace is temporarily concealed; somewhere there is an ogre or a wolf waiting to pounce on the unwary. The narrator's dreams of a certain kind of character are thus, it is hinted, the childish fantasies of someone who has failed to accept the adult world. Thus Martereau's failure to greet the narrator when he meets him in the street is interpreted as a disinclination, for once, to assume the childish disguise the narrator requires of him:

Il a senti (...) qu'il lui faudrait, dès que je l'apercevrais, revêtir pour me faire plaisir le déguisement enfantin, retrouver aussitôt et me servir ce que j'attendais, qu'étais: le sourire bonhomme, le regard clair, le geste aisé, la franche poignée de main qui me font tant de bien, me remettent si bien d'aplomb ... (p. 180)

The Red Riding Hood story, where the reassuring, familiar member of the

adult world - the grandmother - is transformed into the wolf, has its counterpart in the narrator's own childhood: the incident involving his mother and the servants. This episode is evoked at a turning-point in the novel, when the first serious criticism is made of Martereau ('il savait très bien, lui, ce qu'il faisait' p. 172), when for the first time the narrator registers a serious threat to his image of the character. Such a threat represents the same shattering of his security, of his sense of the rightness of things, as did the revelation of his mother's meanness and her lack of good faith:

Ce n'est pas une illusion, une fausse réminiscence; non, j'ai éprouvé cela exactement, je reconnais la sensation: cet arrachement, ce déchirement, tout tremble, craque et s'ouvre ... je suis comme fendu en deux, en moi un air glacé s'engouffre ... Ces mots qu'il vient de prononcer, son ton nasal, assuré, ont touché le point fragile, rouvert la vieille fêlure jamais bien ressoudée, cette déchirure que m'avaient faite autrefois, quand j'étais petit, leurs rires pointus, leurs mots chuchotés entre elles pour que je n'entende pas, mais j'entendais, assis près d'elles à la cuisine, attendant qu'elles finissent de servir mes parents et m'emmènent me coucher ... Je me tendais de toutes mes forces pour entendre, pour comprendre, pour regarder en face la menace, le danger. Elles montraient le plat rapporté de la table: 'Tiens, regarde un peu ce qu'elle nous a laissé, tu aurais dû la voir choisir les morceaux. Elle ne trouvait rien de trop petit pour nous. Regarde: rien que des tendons et des os.' Et leur rire gouailleur: 'Oh! dis donc ... ici on n'a pas besoin d'avoir peur. On ne risque pas de s'empâter. Avec elle au moins on est sûr de garder sa ligne ...' (pp. 172-3)

The imagined reunion and reconciliation with Martereau is expressed in terms of the mother comforting the upset child:

Tout va se remettre en place aussitôt, reprendre forme, ce n'était rien, qu'est-ce que c'était? un vilain rêve, de folles idées, mais qu'est-ce qu'il a encore, mon poussinet, mon grand nigaud ... assise sur le bord de mon lit et moi blotti contre elle ... la douceur soyeuse de sa peau si fine, plus soyeuse que la soie, ses doigts dans mon cou, sur mon front ... Mais comme tu as chaud ... Je me serre contre elle, je ferme les yeux, je m'assoupis, je hume la délicieuse odeur qui n'est qu'à elle, qu'à moi, mon secret, je l'ai découverte, inventée, c'est l'odeur de la certitude, de la sécurité ... (p. 174)

The child blames himself for not being strong enough to resist the new and critical image of his mother presented to him by the servants:

142

Quelqu'un de plus fort que moi aurait tenu bon, se serait durci, serré, mais j'étais déjà si mou, malléable, il fallait si peu de chose, un seul petit coup de bistouri suffisait ... je m'ouvrais mollement avec horreur et délectation ... (p. 173)

The child himself experiences guilt at allowing himself to entertain this new image of his mother, to question his mother's good faith. In challenging the mother, the supreme representative of the adult world, the child feels himself to be at fault. The phenomenon is a familiar one and the reader, recognising it as such, will keep this sense of guilt in its proper proportion.

Thus the portrayal of the narrator, and the description of what Martereau means to him, make it plain that the disintegration of Martereau qua character is less easily blamed on the narrator than it might have been in Portrait. The narrator here is less readily suspected of complicity for it is clear that he will have no desire to destroy his initial idea of Martereau, no interest in depriving himself of this realisation of his dream.

The narrator of Portrait does of course experience a similar nostalgia for well-defined, 'life-like', characters and, like the narrator of Martereau, he establishes parallels between his present feelings and experiences belonging to his childhood:

Comme autrefois dans mon enfance, quand j'avais peur, terriblement peur (c'était un sentiment d'angoisse, de désarroi) lorsque des étrangers prenaient mon parti contre mes parents, cherchaient à me consoler d'avoir été injustement grondé, quand j'aurais préféré mille fois que, contre toute justice, contre toute évidence, on me donne tort à moi, pour que tout reste normal, décent, pour que je puisse avoir, comme les autres, de vrais parents à qui on peut se soumettre, en qui on peut avoir confiance (c'est drôle, ces vieilles angoisses confuses, presque oubliées, de l'enfance, dont on se croyait guéri, et qui reviennent tout à coup, avec exactement la même saveur, dans les moments de faiblesse, de moindre résistance ... (p. 20. Our italics)

But these feelings are at their strongest in the early sections of the novel. After the visit to the Dutch museum, the narrator discovers a new strength of conviction, a new enthusiasm for his visions, and pursues

them more positively and more successfully than before. We have already said that the narrator of Martereau seems less a purveyor of tropisms and more a sufferer from them. We might elaborate on this by saying that he is less a novelist than his counterpart in Portrait. In various ways his position resembles that of the novelist but he is not a novelist in the sense that the other could be said to be one. Both narrators are actors as well as observers; the narrator of Portrait is very well aware that his participation in certain scenes is a factor in determining what course they will follow. Nonetheless he is primarily an onlooker, the central relationship in the novel being that of father and daughter. If one wishes to reformulate this in a way which puts the narrator at the centre of things, it must be in terms of the onlooker and what he observes or the novelist and his material. The narrator of Martereau is far more thoroughly integrated into the 'plot': as nephew he has his place within the family circle and he acts as essential link between the family and Martereau. Looked at in this light, he comes to seem as close to Alain Guimiez in Le Planétarium as he did to the narrator of Portrait. Nathalie Sarraute, in her use of the figure here, has prepared the way for dropping the device of the single narrator figure altogether. The nephew of course has aesthetic interests and from this point of view stands in a very similar relation to the uncle as the narrator of Portrait did to the old man. The old opposition of the bourgeois and the artist is again evoked, with the artist being made to feel inferior, inadequate, incapable of making his way in the world. Proust is again left to doze, solitary and neglected in some dusty square. A few evocative phrases conjure up all that is lost:

Nous foulons aux pieds les violettes, les pâquerettes, nous ne nous arrêtons jamais pour jeter un regard aux aubépines en fleurs, nous fixons sans les voir les collines à l'horizon, les nuages et les forêts de sapins, il me pince le nez, j'ingurgite, il parle, avec lui on n'a jamais fini de parler ...  
(p. 39)



The nephew however is a designer of sorts; along with a colleague he sells furniture (there are in the house some chairs of his which, according to the uncle, are very uncomfortable). Yet towards Martereau he behaves in a similar way to the narrator of Portrait: he tries to build up a picture, using snatches of conversation, re-evaluating past encounters; he rejects one version and tries another; he constructs series of alternative scenes. Moreover he suspects himself of inventing what he sees or suspects in Martereau or other people:

C'est moi entre eux le trouble-fête. Moi le catalyseur. (p. 124)

Il n'y avait rien: rien que bulles d'air, billevesées, mirages, fumée, reflets, ombres, ma propre ombre après laquelle je courais, tournant en rond. (p. 279)

Je reproduis comme toujours en moi tous ses mouvements, les remous en lui, les déroulements, ou bien est-ce que ce sont mes propres mouvements qui se répercutent en lui? - je ne sais pas, je ne l'ai jamais su: jeu de miroirs où je me perds. (p. 283)

The narrator of Martereau is an actor, caught up in a series of relationships; he is a more ordinary and thus more universal figure than the narrator of Portrait. If he resembles a novelist, it is in the sense that we all do, since in the course of living we are constantly involved in making fictions. We create relative, temporary orders and patterns, this is what Nathalie Sarraute's human beings do in order to relate to one another, this is what Professor Kermode suggests all novelists do on our behalf.<sup>10</sup>

If Martereau represents the ideal world discovered to be false, then the family in Martereau represent the real world from which the narrator would like to escape. Martereau is all the more precious to the narrator because his family possess none of Martereau's characteristics.

---

<sup>10</sup> Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending, New York, 1967.

In his family he is surrounded by people who share and encourage the tendencies he himself suffers from. His cousin is young and very little more than a pale imitation of her mother: 'une caricature de sa mère, coquette, mijaurée' (pp. 267-8) is how she is usually presented. Her main importance is to serve as a weapon in the parental warfare; for her father, she is an 'élément indispensable dans la fabrication de son vitriol' (p. 156). But the narrator's aunt and uncle are much more formidable; they too are 'des compliqués' (p. 132). They are perhaps not so aware of it as the narrator. Indeed his uncle refuses to grant any kind of recognition to his perception. He rejects any suggestion of reactions on the part of Martereau which he had not noticed. 'J'aime les réalités solides. Les faits', he declares (p. 206). His feelings on the subject are violent: 'Cette rage, ce mépris qu'il y a dans son ton quand il me rabroue: "Ah! non, je t'en prie, pas de psychologie"' (p. 207). Yet the degree of his anger perhaps betrays him. In fact his relationship with his wife is governed by the action of tropisms:

Elle n'a pas eu besoin de bouger un cil, elle ne l'a même pas regardé, mais il a senti tout de suite ... un long dressage difficile l'a préparé ... un courant sortant d'elle, des ondes invisibles, puissantes, comme celles qui gouvernent les avions à distance, dirigent tous ses mouvements ... il ploie, se redresse, avance, recule, frétille, se tend ... (p. 53)

Similarly all the other relationships within the family group, be it aunt and nephew, aunt and daughter or uncle and nephew. The lengthy first section of the novel presents us with a number of examples of the shifting alliances and antagonisms within the group.

Already in Tropismes Nathalie Sarraute portrayed the family circle as a particularly rich breeding-ground for tropisms. A number of sketches take place in some sort of family background. In Portrait d'un inconnu the theme reappears: the object of the narrator's attention is the relationship between father and daughter. Here in Martereau it occupies a central role; the first eighty-four pages are devoted to establishing

its characteristics; it is one of the two main poles of interest in the novel. The first section of the novel which sets the family atmosphere by a series of conversations is followed by one in which Martereau, and what he stands for, is introduced. This pattern is echoed in the next two sections: first there is the visit to the country to look for a house without him and then with him. All through the novel the narrator underlines the contrast between the atmosphere of the family in which he lives and the atmosphere which Martereau seems to create. The contrast extends to the circumstances of the two trips and the actual houses they visit. The family goes in quite unsuitable weather and the narrator has to wander about in the mud. When Martereau is there, the weather is mild: 'C'est le premier soleil des tout premiers jours de printemps' (pp. 140-1). In the first case they are overcome by gloom:

Les émanations nous enveloppent, nous nous étreignons les uns les autres, nous nous griffons ... il faut s'arracher à cela tout de suite, s'échapper au dehors, à l'air libre ... (p. 117)

In the second, while the narrator is able to enjoy the sights and sounds of spring, the uncle is impressed by the solidity of the house and the cheerful aspect of the rooms: 'Mais regarde ces pièces: c'est clair, c'est gai, pas comme vos vieux trous moisiss' (p. 141). In his edition of Martereau, Jean Roudaut emphasises this contrast between the two houses and points out how it is again a contrast between the damp (soft or viscous) and the dry (hard or pure):

Aussi les deux maisons visitées seront-elles en totale opposition: celle présentée par Martereau est en meulière, équipée de manière moderne: 'nous nous attardons dans la grande cave propre, brillamment éclairée, à examiner la chaudière'. La première maison visitée, sous la pluie et dans la boue, était humide, moisie, envahie de 'je ne sais quels vagues relents ... des restes refroidis d'autres vies ...' Ce sont deux nouveaux aspects des mondes complémentaires de l'humide et du sec.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> op. cit., p. 271.

It is important too that Martereau, and the other minor figures which share the same attributes in the narrator's eyes, tend to be seen not as isolated figures but in their relationship with others and especially in a family context. The pair in the restaurant, for example, are envied by the narrator in terms of their relationship with one another and compared with the very different pair which the narrator and his uncle constitute. In the same way Martereau is seen with his wife and the picture they form is compared with that of the uncle and aunt. Past stages of Martereau's family life are presented to us by means of the album shown to the narrator. The photographs show Martereau in the role of fiancé, young husband, father, and participating, with apparent ease, in the emotions proper to each:

Comme l'acier incandescent, leurs sentiments se laissent couler dans des moules tout préparés, ils y deviennent des objets durs et lourds, très résistants, lisses au toucher, sans une rugiosité, sans une faille ... (p. 99)

Their presentation in the form of photographs emphasises the static, unchanging quality of these roles.

This is perhaps precisely where the main point of difference lies between Martereau's family relationships, as the narrator originally sees them, and his own. Whether past or present, the latter are essentially fluid in character. In the first few pages of the novel we see the narrator's aunt trying to establish a pattern in her past life, trying to build up a picture of herself which she then offers for the narrator's admiration. The picture is enormously detailed, the evidence skilfully presented. Yet the slightest sign of disbelief, or lack of sympathy, on the part of the narrator makes her drop one version and begin to elaborate another. For all are artificial constructions which collapse easily if attacked. As is said of her later, 'elle aime cela, rogner, modeler, couper sur ces patrons qu'elle a dans la tête' (p. 262). The reality of these people is other: 'cette matière informe et molle,

si fade, celle dont nous sommes faits ici' (p. 238). Or again: 'nous autres, modèles informes, chaos où s'entrechoquent mille possibilités' (p. 39). Every now and then one of the possibilities surfaces, takes a specific shape. They find a role which temporarily quiets the restless inner activity, or at least channels it in one particular direction. Against the common enemy represented by Martereau the uncle becomes 'un vieil homme pondéré et juste, chargé d'expérience' (pp. 192-3), and the narrator 'l'ardent jeune lieutenant (...) qui attend dans un silence déférent les ordres du général' (p. 192). But this is due to outside pressure, 'un fort courant venu de l'extérieur' (p. 192), and when the pressure is removed, the role disintegrates. No role is permanent. The family group is characterised by a constant shifting of roles, exchanging of one attitude for another. In the eyes of the uncle the aunt and cousin in the restaurant may appear as 'des perruches ... des pies voraces ...' (p. 29), or as 'ses hôtes d'honneur (...), des visiteurs de marque' (p. 51). Two hours after criticising her daughter to the nephew, the aunt returns with her from a shopping expedition:

les bras chargés de paquets, laissant fuser leurs rires pointus ... jamais on ne pourrait croire que c'est la mère et la fille, disent attendris les gens, on dirait vraiment deux sœurs, deux amies ... (p. 73)

The sense of identification with a role is a pleasant one: 'Je me sens délicieusement en règle, en ordre: un mécanisme de précision qui vient d'être nettoyé, bien épousseté, huilé et remonté' (p. 162). But the image itself suggests artificiality and the sense does not last very long. The mental activity below the surface reasserts itself and modifies the pattern. What precipitates such new activity is very often an apparently harmless word or phrase, 'ces petits mots sucrés et corrosifs', as Nathalie Sarraute says of Dostoevsky's diminutives in L'Ere du soupçon (p. 25). The prime example of such a word or phrase in the family circle is the uncle's 'vous'. Here the content of the

word is understood by the others because of their long familiarity with its usage, though it can take pages to spell out its meaning: 'Tout cela nous le savons - pas in so many words, bien sûr, mais d'une façon autrement plus rapide, subtile, complexe et évidente' (pp. 151-2).

Another example is the uncle's 'Tu lui as demandé un reçu?' (p. 168). Apparently 'une simple question très naturelle', it is in fact 'la mèche de la machine infernale qui va nous pulvériser' (p. 168). It is a turning-point in the novel; its effect on the narrator is so great that his earlier security is never recaptured. Another similar phrase, less dramatic in its immediate impact, but equally important, is the uncle's 'Taper toujours sur le même clou'. It becomes a leitmotif in the narrator's attempts to penetrate the relationship between his uncle and Martereau. He reverts to it on a number of occasions each time modifying his account of what led up to it in the uncle's mind and, more important still, what followed upon it in Martereau's.

In the course of the novel, Martereau is gradually drawn into this world of the narrator's. At the outset, certain aspects of the personage and certain words sum up his attraction for the narrator: 'Alors sa poignée de main forte et cordiale, sa tape sur l'épaule: "Et comment va, jeune homme?" opèrent sur moi un effet immédiat' (p. 91). In a moment of panic, this represents the reassurance which the narrator seeks:

Revoir Martereau tout de suite: son bon sourire, le regard placide et droit de ses grands yeux clairs, sa solide poignée de main, sa bonne grosse main ... 'Tiens, tiens, c'est vous? Quel bon vent? ... Et comment ça va-t-il? Quoi de neuf? Qu'est-ce qu'on devient?' (p. 174)

These details of Martereau's appearance and these conversational gambits become leitmotifs in the novel accompanying Martereau on his various appearances. Their very repetition arouses queries, provokes doubts in the reader's mind. The narrator's impression of Martereau gradually changes. Physically he seems to shrink:

151

Dans l'entrée, tandis qu'il détourne la tête et m'ouvre la porte, je suis frappé par son aspect amaigri. Son cou mince comme un cou d'adolescent flotte dans son col trop grand. (p. 202)

The 'gros doigts', so solid and reassuring, take on a threatening, importunate air. The questions are accompanied, it seems fleetingly to the narrator, by a 'soupçon de ricanement' (p. 199). The comments on the narrator's scarf conceal all kinds of private thoughts relating to the narrator's idleness, the family's wealth, the aunt's indulgence.

As we saw, the first serious criticism of Martereau reminds the narrator of a similar criticism, made by the servants, of his mother. This latter had represented his first discovery in childhood, that people may be different from what we think them, that different versions of them may exist. And as the narrator's unease concerning Martereau grows, it is most often in terms of the latter's domestic relationships that this is expressed. As we saw, the narrator has been particularly impressed by Martereau's ability to present a convincing sentimental picture with his wife. The narrator can contemplate this picture which is presented to him without a sense of awkwardness:

sans que j'aie envie de détourner les yeux, sans qu'apparaisse sur mon visage ce petit sourire contraint, faussement crédule et attendri, un peu honteux, qui vous tire malgré vous les lèvres en pareil cas, quand les gens se mettent ainsi devant vous en position - un déclic et ce sera fait, ne bougez pas - et veulent qu'on les regarde. (p. 98)

Already present however is a suggestion of artificiality: 'un déclic et ce sera fait, ne bougez pas' (p. 98). Later the narrator's sense of this has increased and his reaction is different: 'Silence. On contemple. Je sens une gêne, une honte légère, j'ai envie de détourner les yeux, mais je n'ose pas' (p. 187). The image of the photograph has been replaced by that of 'les amoureux sur les cartes postales en couleurs' (p. 186). When his suspicions of Martereau are at their height, his imaginings take the form of four variations on a scene between Martereau and his wife which are full of just those feelings

which characterize scenes in his own family circle. Each variation has the same external action; the uncle has been to dinner with Martereau and his wife and has just left; they are alone. Madame Martereau begins to tidy the room, to empty ashtrays and clear the table, and Martereau himself walks up and down thinking about the evening and finally, displaying some degree of irritation with his wife, leaves the house. The few remarks uttered are substantially the same; it is the 'sous-conversation' which varies. In each the narrator explores different possibilities for the secret mental activity which must bridge the gap between the spoken words, which prepares them and which follows from them. In the next section Martereau's involvement with the family takes on symbolic form in the suggestion of adultery and in the last he seems to have taken the uncle's place for the narrator himself; he sees in Martereau a reaction which is characteristic of his uncle.

In the essay 'Conversation et sous-conversation', Nathalie Sarraute speaks with enthusiasm of Ivy Compton Burnett, designating her, in rather hyperbolical terms perhaps, as 'un des plus grands romanciers que l'Angleterre ait jamais eus'.<sup>12</sup> She has since been irritated by a critical tendency to perceive an influence where she claims that none exists. It is, however, true that there are points of resemblance between these two writers. One being, of course, that which Nathalie Sarraute is discussing in the above-mentioned essay, a novel use of dialogue. The presentation of dialogue by each is different; Ivy Compton Burnett has no objection to the 'he said' and 'she said' which Nathalie Sarraute shuns.<sup>13</sup> But the substance is similar:

---

<sup>12</sup> L'Ere du soupçon, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> For an extremely interesting analysis of what Nathalie Sarraute substitutes for 'he said', etc., see Anthony S. Newman, 'La fonction déclarative chez Nathalie Sarraute', Poétique, no. 14, 1973.



155

Les mouvements intérieurs, dont le dialogue n'est que l'aboutissement et pour ainsi dire l'extrême pointe, d'ordinaire, prudemment mouchetée pour affleurer au dehors, cherchent ici à se déployer dans le dialogue même.<sup>14</sup>

The predominance of the family is another point of resemblance. Ivy Compton Burnett's novels are all set in some small community, usually the family - in which people are constantly together: 'Rien de plus limité que le cercle familial où se meuvent ses personnages.'<sup>15</sup> Both she and Nathalie Sarraute see such a situation as creative of tensions and potentially leading to violence. But whereas Compton Burnett makes her characters resort to crime, to fraud or murder, violence in Nathalie Sarraute's work remains psychological. Her characters' weapons are silence, slammed doors,<sup>16</sup> and, of course, words. The family atmosphere is extremely violent. The slightest moment of relaxation may leave one open to attack and so one lives in a constant state of tension. Each confrontation seems like a battle. The following scene is typical:

La victime assoiffée de sacrifice, toute titubante déjà de la volupté du martyre, est venue d'elle-même, pantelante et nue, se livrer à sa merci. Rien ne presse. Il prend son temps. Nous sommes seuls, enfermés ensemble, portes closes, toutes issues bouchées. Aucun secours possible du dehors. Totale sécurité. Impunité assurée. Il se plante devant moi solidement ... il me regarde bien dans les yeux, son regard pointe tout droit vers l'endroit vulnérable, s'enfonce en moi comme un dard ... (p. 45)

Such aggression and such fascinated fear are typical. But this is as far as its violence goes. The language is metaphorical not literal. And there is something a little unreal about the warfare we witness. When someone outside the family takes seriously the uncle's remarks, he is put out, thrown off balance. For these battles are not to be taken seriously: 'C'est un jeu entre nous, rien de plus. Un simulacre. Une

---

<sup>14</sup> L'Ere du soupçon, p. 121.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> 'La rupture est l'élément - l'événement - tragique des romans de Nathalie Sarraute. C'est aussi l'arme la plus redoutable et certains personnages s'en servent avec une habileté raffinée' (Culin, *op. cit.*, p. 124).

corrida sans mise à mort' (p. 48). This idea of a game recurs on a number of occasions: 'ces jeux entre nous, ces combats ...' (p. 83), 'nos jeux à nous' (p. 75), 'j'observe scrupuleusement les règles du jeu' (p. 7). It is not that the tension and mutual hostility are not genuine, but partly perhaps because there is such a gulf between the hostility and the actual words spoken, and partly because reactions have with time become established in a pattern and always follow a familiar course. It is familiar ground that the narrator is covering; the scenes he is experiencing, he has experienced before. This idea of pattern is particularly stressed in the relationship between uncle and aunt, who have, of all the characters, lived together for the longest period of time. The narrator compares the interaction of these two personalities to a system of 'vases communicants': 'Il y a entre eux un système de compensation: celui des vases communicants. Quand dans l'un le niveau descend, aussitôt dans l'autre on le voit qui monte' (p. 144). And once the pattern of silence, slammed doors and the rest is embarked on, it must be followed through to the end: 'Les rôles - sans que ni lui ni elle n'y puissent plus rien changer - sont distribués entre eux pour la soirée' (p. 56).

Nathalie Sarraute is not arguing that the family alone produces these undercurrents, hostile or otherwise; after all, the burden of the novel is the process by which the narrator learns to sense their existence in his relationship with Martereau. In later novels she moves firmly outside the family into a wider social sphere. What she is arguing is rather that, in the normal circumstances of family life, these undercurrents which exist in every relationship become more easily sensed and observed. The family plays a similar role to the neurotic narrator. Familiarity breeds tropisms, it also breeds awareness of them. Thus it is that the 'vous' of the uncle contains, for his family's ears, all sorts of bitter reproaches, that the aunt's silence is so filled with

155  
meaning and such an effective weapon.

The general development of this novel is similar to that of Portrait; the pattern is one of gradually increasing tension until finally the excitement dies away and each novel ends on a prosaic note, whether on a café terrace or in a garden. But the structure of Martereau seems lighter, more highly and successfully organised. Composed of eight sections in all, the novel has a turning-point at the beginning of the fifth. This is where the important action begins; the previous four sections have in a sense been the exposition, they have set the scene, introduced the actors, and provided us with a situation. At the beginning of the fifth, with the uncle's question 'Tu lui as demandé un reçu?' (p. 168), the process of questioning is set in motion; the gradual reassessing of past events begins here:

Ce geste de Martereau quand il a tourné la clé dans la serrure ... Ses gros doigts replets qui retiraient la clé ... Son air quand il s'est tourné vers nous ... (p. 173)

As we have seen, the whole first section of the novel sets the atmosphere of undercurrents, the pattern of constantly changing relationships in which the narrator and his family live. The second section introduces Martereau and, by contrast as well as by explicit statements, shows what he means for the narrator. After these two come the two concerning the choice of a house and these are contrasted in a similar way. In various ways however the sharp outline of this contrast is blurred and hints are given of what is to come. One section connects subtly with the next. The first ends with one of these eloquent passages which are typical of Nathalie Sarraute's writing:

Il me semble quand je tressaille que c'est moi le coupable; moi la brebis galeuse, la bête puante qui ferait - si j'osais me plaindre à eux - se détourner avec dégoût tous les braves gens: ils refuseraient d'examiner mes blessures, toutes ces prétendues morsures, ces atteintes, ces coups bas que personne d'autre ne reçoit, ne perçoit, dont personne jamais ne parle, ne s'occupe, dont personne n'a jamais songé à apprendre à qui que ce soit à se préserver; moi qui pêche en eau trouble, qui trouble les eaux calmes par mon image réflétée, mon souffle;

150

qui vois dans l'air la trajectoire invisible de Dieu sait  
quels cailloux que personne ne m'a lancés, et qui rapporte ce  
que personne n'attend; moi qui sans cesse éveille ce qui  
veut dormir, excite, suscite, guette, quête, appelle; moi  
l'impur. (p. 84)<sup>17</sup>

On this self-characterisation follows immediately the first sentence  
of the next section: 'Ce n'est pas par hasard que j'ai rencontré  
Martereau' (p. 85). The juxtaposition gives the latter a meaning other  
than that which the narrator intends (or that we assume he intends) and  
provides an indication of events to come. Further hints of approaching  
disintegration are present in the endings of the second and the fourth  
sections. At the end of the second, Martereau is quoted as seeing  
himself with his minor infidelities as being like all other men:

Tous les hommes sont ainsi, 'des coqs', comme disait leur  
médecin (...) des coqs, sauf de rares exceptions, mais ces  
exceptions-là, il faudrait examiner de plus près leur cas:  
il y a toujours chez ceux-là, croyez-moi, disait le bon  
docteur, quelque chose qui cloche. (p. 103)

In a section devoted to the presentation of Martereau as the 'patrie  
lointaine' (p. 85), the 'havre paisible' (p. 86), this phrase 'quelque  
chose qui cloche' strikes a discordant note. This note is more explicitly  
struck as the action progresses. At the end of the fourth section:  
'un accord final attendu, nécessaire, mais pas très habilement plaqué'  
(p. 166).

Also of significance is the fact that the second section on Martereau  
is very much shorter than that on the family, and, in the fourth, the  
passage concerning the visit to the country is a small part of a section  
otherwise invaded by family; important though the figure is for the  
narrator, he has perhaps not been scrutinised closely as yet. The  
sections concerning the family potentially cast doubts in a number of

---

<sup>17</sup> For a valuable commentary on this passage and others in Martereau,  
see Edwin P. Grobe, 'Symbolic Sound Patterns in Nathalie Sarraute's  
Martereau', French Review, 40, 1, October 1966.

ways on what we are told of Martereau: the aunt's series of character sketches are revealed as fictions, the narrator's submission to one of them as a giving way to temptation; the simplest words are shown to conceal great complexities. The narrator's achievement of a magic sense of security in the car ride through the wet countryside is shown to be an illusion; the collapse is rapid. Equally the sections concerning Martereau contain parallel suggestions of mistaken views. Martereau's fellows are dreams or people observed from afar. As we saw, a certain artificiality is suggested in the picture presented by Martereau and his wife. A hint is given of a menace to come: 'sages petits Chaperons Rouges allant chez leur mère-grand' (p. 162).

In the second half of the novel there is some further surface action. The narrator calls on Martereau in town, two months later he visits him in the country. There follows a visit to the hospital and a final trip to the country, where Martereau is packing up in preparation for leaving. These are accompanied by the narrator's attempts to penetrate further into episodes now past. Like the aunt in the first section, we find the narrator using the same material over and over again in order to create each time a new pattern. Three sections are devoted to the development of the narrator's suspicions. The first charts his desperate attempt to find reassurance and his growing unease face to face with Martereau. In the second he begins to see Martereau differently and imagines the series of scenes between Martereau and his wife. Going over past episodes, he sees the visit to the country in a new light: Martereau is a figure out of Kafka, joining forces with the uncle in a plot against the narrator, a helpless, uncomprehending victim. As the uncle and nephew discuss Martereau, the aunt interrupts with a contemptuous remark. Her treatment of the uncle is compared to the cabaret artist's behaviour towards the respectable teacher in Professor Unrat and this image then conjures up a new possibility in the narrator's

mind. The third of these sections develops this possibility. Martereau has had a secret relationship with the aunt and all the past episodes have to be understood in this light. He is first seen laughing at the uncle; the phrase 'taper sur le même clou' is registered as just the kind of thing the uncle would say. Then he is seen registering the remark as hurtful; the uncle is fighting to win back his wife and has won the first round. The whole affair of the house is motivated by revenge, is to be understood as an attempt to get his own back on both aunt and uncle. The Kafka image changes: the narrator now forms a group with the uncle and aunt and Martereau is manipulating them all.

Thus the narrator in Martereau works over and over his material, until finally in the last section he has to give up and settle for an uncertain relationship with Martereau, similar to that with his uncle, in which he will alternate between finding Martereau's remarks innocent and full of hidden meaning. The old Martereau will never be recaptured. It is clear that, though Martereau does not contain the explicit theoretical element so important in Portrait, it is very close to Portrait in its concerns. The rounded character of the traditional novel is again under attack and is this time exposed as a sham. Louis Dumontet who was so strong, so invincible, is proved under the pseudonym of Martereau to be a weakling. The shift in ground between the two novels is summed up in one of the few passages in Martereau which comes near to being explicitly theoretical:

Mais quelques-uns parmi les gens très peu nombreux avec qui j'ai pu me risquer, avec grande prudence toutefois, à toucher à ces choses que personne d'ordinaire n'effleure, même en pensée, m'ont affirmé que j'avais tort. Les forts, m'ont-ils assuré, ne sont pas ceux que vous croyez. Les faibles en l'occurrence ce sont eux, ceux qui figent ainsi sous vos yeux comme au jeu des statues dans la posture de l'amour heureux. C'est à eux qu'il semble tout le temps qu'en vous un œil impitoyable et moqueur les observe. Ils ont honte, ils ont peur, dociles et timorés qu'ils sont, de sentir qu'il ne peut manquer, cet œil reprobateur, de voir combien ils sont différents du modèle parfait déposé en chacun de nous et imposé par l'univers entier. Ils s'efforcent de vous tromper en vous présentant une image aussi ressemblante que possible: un peu forcée, mais est-ce leur faute? un peu figée et plate comme sont les copies ... (p. 188)

Chapter 5 Le Planétarium

In Le Planétarium I have no more doubts

NATHALIE SARRAUTE

The publication of Le Planétarium in 1959 marks a turning-point in Nathalie Sarraute's career. In 1956, the volume of essays entitled L'Ere du soupçon attracted some attention; among the reviews was a long article in Critique by Alain Robbe-Grillet.<sup>1</sup> In the same year Portrait d'un inconnu was reprinted. 1957 saw the re-editing of Tropismes. Both Tropismes and Portrait d'un inconnu received a certain amount of critical attention, though not always favourable.<sup>2</sup> Le Planétarium was thus the first novel to appear since she had begun to catch the public's attention as a member of the nouveau roman group and the first to attract widespread reviews.<sup>3</sup>

John Weightman in his article on Nathalie Sarraute quotes the narrator of Martereau as 'speaking obviously for Mme Sarraute herself' when he says '"storms in teacups are my great speciality"'.<sup>4</sup> The same phrase is used by Alain's father in Le Planétarium, when he is reflecting on Alain's attempts to secure his aunt's apartment: 'Une tempête dans un verre d'eau, probablement ... encore leurs histoires d'appartement ...' (p. 266). And Alain himself speaks in similar terms of his possible achievements as a raconteur: 'De hautes cités, des ciels allaient peut-être se refléter dans une mince flaque d'eau sale' (p. 34). The 'plot' or story-line of Le Planétarium is once again of such an order: a storm in a teacup, 'une mince flaque d'eau sale'. It is more complicated

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Le réalisme, la psychologie et l'avenir du roman, Critique, août-septembre, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> The Lettres nouvelles of 1957 contained a review of each by Jacques Howlett (March and June), the Nouvelle Revue française a review of Tropismes by Yvon Belaval and one of Portrait by Georges Anex (February and June), and the Figaro littéraire an article on 'Nathalie Sarraute: anti-romancière' by André Rousseaux (February).

<sup>3</sup> In Esprit, Nouvelle Revue française, Mercure de France, Le Monde, Lettres françaises, Nouvelle Critique, Arts and Carrefour.

<sup>4</sup> The Concept of the Avant-Garde, London, 1973, p. 305. The reference is to Martereau, p. 134: 'Les tempêtes dans les verres d'eau, c'est ma grande spécialité.'



101

than that of Martereau, involving, as it does, more characters and a greater number of strands but the events and preoccupations of the characters are of an even more trivial description. As Nathalie Sarraute herself says, 'Nothing could be more commonplace than this plot.'<sup>5</sup> Most of the characters belong to two families connected by the marriage of the two central figures, Alain and Gisèle Guimiez. The parents of the latter appear, the father and aunt of the former. Only one of the main characters is not a relative, Germaine Lemaire, a writer of some standing who is connected to the others through Alain and his admiration for her. The plot revolves round Tante Berthe's flat which Alain and Gisèle want for themselves and in most chapters there is some mention of it. In the first we see the aunt in possession, in the last Alain and Gisèle have moved in. In the course of the novel, the aunt's first mention of the possibility is recalled, the young people go and look at the flat, Germaine Lemaire is referred to for her opinion of the rightness of their ambition, Alain's father is asked to intervene with his sister on their behalf, outsiders gossip about the couple's behaviour. Various subplots concern other objects which also arouse emotion and acquisitiveness in the characters. The first section of the novel centres on an oak door which Tante Berthe has had put into one wall in the course of redecorating her flat. On returning to her flat, she discovers that the workmen have attached to it an unsuitable handle and protective panel and when these are removed, holes are left in the wood which she tries in vain to disguise. Gisèle's mother wants to give her daughter and son-in-law a present of two hard-wearing leather arm-chairs, while Gisèle and Alain covet a Louis XV bergère which they have seen in an antique-shop. Alain wants to buy a Renaissance statue, hesitates because one arm seems to indicate to him that it is doubtfully genuine, but finally acquires it. Other

---

<sup>5</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

people are again involved in these various objects. Tante Berthe appeals to Alain to help her with the door and later he tells the story for the benefit of guests at his parents-in-law's house; friends of Germaine Lemaire's discuss the merits of leather arm-chairs; a former professor of Alain's laughs at the present fashion of enthusiasm for the Renaissance period, and Germaine Lemaire is asked for and gives her opinion on all three subjects.

The strands of these various plots are manipulated with considerable skill; each section in the novel advances them or plays variations upon them, and the last section gathers them together. The novel is thus provided with a supporting framework, a skeleton to which its real flesh may adhere. But it is, in a sense, no more than a framework. Here the parallels with Martereau are perhaps instructive. The plot is not dissimilar. There the characters were concerned with the buying of a house, here with the renting of an apartment. Here as there, there is a suggestion of criminality; has Alain brought unscrupulous pressure to bear on his aunt in order to take over her flat? What the repetition implies is not so much Nathalie Sarraute's peculiar interest in this plot situation as her indifference to it. It is unimportant in itself. It centres on a perfectly ordinary activity yet one which does leave the participants open to judgments by other parties. Thus it serves her purpose and is used more than once.

To say that the framework is unimportant in itself is not however to say that it is entirely without importance. In talking about Le Planétarium, Nathalie Sarraute herself implies that it is once more a study of tropisms: 'I want the reader to feel the inner movements, the tropisms, to concentrate on them and not to be too much interested by the people in whom these tropisms take place'.<sup>6</sup> Thus any description

---

<sup>6</sup> loc. cit.

of the novel which concentrates on the framework, on the individual temperaments of the various characters tends to falsify it. We might cite as an example the following account by Jean Stewart: 'Alain's weakness and ambition, the jealous possessiveness of his mother-in-law, the complex vanity of the literary lioness are relentlessly exposed from within.'<sup>7</sup> The more ambitious account of the novel by Micheline Tison Braun is not free from the same tendency. One finds it difficult to recognize Nathalie Sarraute's creation in the following outline of Alain:

Ce serait le simplifier grossièrement que de voir en lui le pur arriviste qu'il sera probablement dans dix ans, ou de dire qu'il confond l'idéal et le succès. Il est encore proche de l'état de grâce enfantine où les choses n'ont pas ces noms et ces contours brutaux parce que le désir dans sa fleur leur prête encore une auréole aveuglante.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, though to concentrate on the characters at the expense of the formless inner world of tropisms is to falsify the novel, character and plot are not simply a device intended to give the novel some minimal and artificial shape. They have a role to play in the novel's total meaning. Nathalie Sarraute's anxiety to prevent her readers becoming too interested in them, and her repeated emphasis in her critical utterances on their lack of importance, has sometimes led critics to give them less than their proper significance. This significance has perhaps increased or at least been clarified in the course of the first three novels. As we have said before, what Nathalie Sarraute is engaged in exploring in her fiction is not simply a world of tropisms existing in a vacuum but the relation of that world to the outer world of normal human converse, of masks, of roles, of definable, recognizable characters. This latter world is, according to her, inauthentic compared to the inner world. It is a world of temporary and false constructions, but this is not to

---

<sup>7</sup> The London Magazine, 2, 1962, p. 76. .

<sup>8</sup> Tison Braun, op. cit., p. 141.

say that it does not exist, and it is the constant passage from one world to the other which fascinates her. Moreover it is through the world of the 'lieu commun' that the other is commonly perceived: it is the uncertainty of key, the constant false notes which hint at the other world within. It is worth reiterating these points in a discussion of Le Planétarium, since in Le Planétarium the emphasis is more clearly and strikingly than ever before on the relationship between the two worlds, and on the movement from one to the other. We see most of the characters in Le Planétarium from the inside and therefore are aware in each case of the tropistic activity underneath the surface. We also see them through the eyes of others and therefore see them as 'characters': 'Ce sont les autres qui nous transforment en "personnages". Toutes les consciences qui s'agitent dans Le Planétarium se voient réciproquement comme des personnages.'<sup>9</sup>

Le Planétarium has of course very close links with both those works which precede it and those which follow it. The basic area of exploration is the same. Nathalie Sarraute says as much in an interview on the subject of Le Planétarium: 'Je n'ai jamais cessé de défricher le même terrain.'<sup>10</sup> In connection with Le Planétarium, Monique Nathan writes: 'Cette œuvre (...) s'articule si étroitement avec les précédentes qu'on ne peut qu'être frappé de tant de cohérence.'<sup>11</sup> Those themes which Mimica Cranaki and Yvon Belaval<sup>12</sup> identify as characteristic appear in Le Planétarium as well as in her two previous novels: the atmosphere of family life, the relationships of a youngish man with the people round

---

<sup>9</sup> 'Portrait de l'écrivain vu par lui-même', p. iv.

<sup>10</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute nous parle du Planétarium', p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> 'Notes littéraires et beaux-arts', Critique, août-septembre 1959, p. 108. The comment is quoted by Helen Watson-Williams in her article, 'Etude du Planétarium', Essays in French Literature, no. 1, 1964, p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> op. cit., pp. 68-79.

about him, the figure of a brusque, impatient, elderly man. Yet more than one critic has argued that, in the context of Nathalie Sarraute's work, Le Planétarium represents a 'distinct new departure'.<sup>13</sup> What is it, then, that gives the novel its particularity? Some critics point to the importance of objects as the characteristic and distinguishing feature of this novel. Professor Weightman says that Le Planétarium is 'largely about emotions centred on material objects'.<sup>14</sup> Lucette Finas equally stresses the role of objects in the novel, while interpreting it in a different way: 'Maintenant, le tremblement qui a saisi les formes humaines s'empare des objets.'<sup>15</sup> Again, there is a consensus of opinion for the view that Le Planétarium is concerned with various forms of creative activity. Yvon Belaval, in a notable review of the second edition of Tropismes, wrote: 'Nathalie Sarraute s'est donné pour sujet la création à l'état naissant.'<sup>16</sup> Nathalie Sarraute borrowed the phrase for the prière d'insérer of Le Planétarium: 'Un de ces thèmes, dans le Planétarium, est la création à l'état naissant', and in her conversation with Geneviève Serreau, she gives further support to this interpretation:

Après avoir mis au point définitivement le manuscrit du Planétarium, je me suis demandé si un de ses thèmes principaux n'était pas de nouveau, mais sous un aspect très différent, l'effort créateur à l'état naissant: ces mouvements qui préparent toute création, qui sans cesse cherchent leur objet, s'ébauchent, tâtonnent, souvent avortent, et aussi ces formes dégradées de l'effort créateur telles qu'elles peuvent apparaître chez une vieille femme maniaque ou dans les conversations les plus banales.<sup>17</sup>

Others take the title of the novel as central to an understanding of it. In particular, Helen Watson-Williams in her 'Etude du Planétarium':

---

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Nathalie Sarraute', Merkur, August 1964, p. 787. (Our translation).

<sup>14</sup> Weightman, op. cit., p. 304.

<sup>15</sup> Lucette Finas, 'Nathalie Sarraute ou les métamorphoses du verbe', Tel Quel, no. 20, 1965, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Nouvelle Revue française, février 1957, p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute nous parle du Planétarium', p. 28.

100

'Aussi nous est-il possible de reconnaître ici une image maîtresse qui s'impose à l'action des personnages et qui en éclaire l'expérience intérieure.'<sup>18</sup>

There is much to be said for all these approaches. Certainly objects take on a more central role in Le Planétarium than they have done hitherto. As we have seen, the 'plot' revolves around them and nearly all the psychological action bears some relation, direct or indirect, to an object. Thus Professor Weightman's statement - that Le Planétarium deals largely with 'emotions centred on material objects' - might seem an acceptable one. He wishes, however, to see the intention behind the portrayal of these emotions as a satirical one. Le Planétarium, he suggests, may be seen as a very successful satire of 'the bourgeois obsession with property', and he continues,

Unbelieving French bourgeois are often fond of refectory tables from monasteries or fragments of carving from churches, without seeing that they fuss over them with an intensity that amounts to the worst form of idol worship - that is, the form which is neither religious nor truly aesthetic, but merely proprietary.<sup>19</sup>

That such a characteristic is perceived and portrayed in Le Planétarium is, of course, true. The characters all belong to the middle classes, albeit to different sectors of it, whether business, literary or academic. Both Alain and Gisèle experience very strongly the desire to possess what they admire which Professor Weightman describes:

Une passion les avait saisis, une avidité ... La porte de la boutique était fermée, c'était l'heure du déjeuner ... ils avaient besoin de savoir tout de suite, aucun obstacle ne pouvait les arrêter ... lui, dans ces moments-là, est pris d'une sorte de frénésie ... (p. 75)

A variant on the same reaction is explored in the case of Tante Berthe:

Elle est faite ainsi, elle le sait, qu'elle ne peut regarder avec attention, avec amour que ce qu'elle pourrait s'approprier, que ce qu'elle pourrait posséder ... (p. 8)

---

<sup>18</sup> Watson-Williams, 'Etude du Planétarium', p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> Weightman, op. cit., p. 305.

Hence she is cold and bored in the cathedral until she sets eyes on the door, an object small enough in its physical and aesthetic dimensions to be incorporated into her own home. Such characteristics are identified as bourgeois in the course of the novel. Alain's former professor, Adrien Lebat, sums him up in the following terms:

Ce petit Alain Guimiez ... un bien gentil petit insatisfait, inquiet ... produit très pur de sa classe: jeune intellectuel bourgeois marié à une petite fille gâtée comme lui. (p. 287)

But Alain - and through him Nathalie Sarraute - warns us of the doubtful validity of such labels:

Lebat, voyez-vous, a des grilles qu'il pose sur tout ... c'est trop commode ... il vous a à tous les coups: décomposition bourgeoise ... sentiments de votre classe ... psychologie ... son dernier dada ... (p. 306)

To identify these characteristics with a particular social class and to say no more about them is to remain on the surface of the novel.

Nathalie Sarraute is out to show that, while the desires of Alain and Tante Berthe may on the surface follow a particular class pattern, underlying them is a more fundamental and more universal motivation.

Lucette Finas, in her discussion of objects in Le Planétarium, maintains that Nathalie Sarraute is making a statement about the subjectivity of aesthetic judgments. The passage quoted above continues: 'la poignée de porte, les rideaux de velours, la bergère Louis XV, les fauteuils de cuir, la statue sont-ils beaux, sont-ils laids? Objets d'art ou camelote?'<sup>20</sup> The great majority of the objects in the novel are considered in an aesthetic light (and where the others are concerned - the stove, the grated carrot - questions of approval or disapproval are equally at issue): the door, the flat, the statue, the chairs, the bench, the urn, Gisèle's coat, Germaine Lemaire's style of interior.

---

<sup>20</sup> Finas, p. 69.

In every case opinions differ from person to person or change in the same person. The idea of the leather chairs is anathema to Alain, while Lucette, one of Germaine Lemaire's friends, admires them. The admiration is frivolous, of course, but the point is thereby made all the more forcibly. Is Gisèle's coat as she sees it: 'c'est cet air naïf, pas recherché qui lui a plu' (p. 212), or is what others see in it closer to the truth: 'ce qu'il y a d'un peu gênant, d'un peu vulgaire dans les gros dessins voyants, dans l'étoffe grossièrement tissée' (p. 213)? Alain's own opinion varies, as does that of his aunt about her door. Is a modern style interior preferable to 'le faux ancien'? Tante Berthe is made to hesitate by the workmen's comments on the Brazilian embassy (pp. 15-6), and at the end of the novel we hear that she has switched her allegiances from one to the other: 'Elle veut du moderne partout ... le dernier cri ... Elle a voulu se débarrasser de ce qu'elle appelle ses vieilleries' (p. 299).

The uncertainty extends to people. Is Germaine Lemaire beautiful or not? According to Gisèle: 'Elle est mieux que jolie. Elle est belle. Tout le monde le dit ...' (p. 124); and to her father: 'Je l'ai vue, (...) d'assez près, votre Germaine Lemaire. Eh bien, elle est laide comme un pou. Ça crève les yeux' (p. 124). These points of view are not only diametrically opposed; they are each presented as self-evident truths. Alain himself has at different points held both opinions. More important still, is Germaine Lemaire a talented writer or a sham? Under the impact of hostile criticism, she herself is in doubt. Are her characters waxworks masquerading as living creations?

Judgments of this kind do not simply vary from person to person; they are shown to be dependent on external considerations. The vehemence of both Gisèle and her father where Germaine Lemaire is concerned is provoked by their sense of the other's hostility; Gisèle's uncertainty



189

is revealed by the blanket statement: 'Tout le monde le dit', and her father's defensiveness by the phrase 'votre Germaine Lemaire'. Alain's father is apparently provoked to exasperation and rudeness vis-à-vis Germaine Lemaire because of a determination not to be impressed, itself arising out of his awareness of his son's attitude. The aunt's vision of her apartment is destroyed by a word from one of the workers. Alain of course is constantly ready to let himself be influenced by the opinion of Germaine Lemaire: she approves of the door, disapproves of the bench and he follows suit. Gisèle sticks to her own opinion about the bench but more because of her own personal - and different - reactions to Germaine Lemaire than out of a reconsidered and still convinced appreciation.

The feelings experienced by the characters are however not wholly explained by a recognition of the subjective nature of aesthetic judgments. Such a theme would in any case be somewhat banal. 'C'est que ce ne serait pas tellement intéressant' is Nathalie Sarraute's own comment.<sup>21</sup> Olivier de Magny speaks of the Sarrautian object as an 'objet-prétexte, objet-réceptacle',<sup>22</sup> which reflects and reveals different characters' preoccupations like the corner of the carpet in the scene between Tante Berthe and her brother, or which reflects the change in attitude of a particular character as is the case with Alain's feelings about the bookshop:

C'était devenu un lieu privilégié, sacré, propice aux miracles ... d'un moment à l'autre elle pouvait apparaître (...) Mais elle n'était jamais apparue et peu à peu le lieu saint était redevenue cette boutique commode qu'il connaissait depuis longtemps où il pouvait entrer sans prendre aucune précaution. (p. 163)

Such a use of the material world in the novel is obviously a familiar one and Nathalie Sarraute is more traditional in this respect than are

---

<sup>21</sup> In conversation with the present writer in 1974.

<sup>22</sup> Olivier de Magny, 'Nathalie Sarraute ou l'astronomie intérieure', in Nathalie Sarraute, Portrait d'un inconnu, 10.18, Paris, 1964, p. 238.

some of her fellow nouveaux romanciers. But what is interesting about the great majority of the objets-prétextes in Le Planétarium is that, though on the surface they appear to classify people as very different types (Gisèle's mother's liking for leather armchairs situates her in a different world from that of Alain with his admiration for the Louis XV bergère), in fact they reveal underneath similar preoccupations. For Nathalie Sarraute, the object is principally 'l'instrument dont l'homme se sert pour exprimer son angoisse ou pour la camoufler'.<sup>23</sup> The pre-occupation with objects, displayed by the characters in Le Planétarium, represents a desperate attempt to achieve and to retain control over the world and reveals a clear recognition, at least on the part of the author, of the impossibility of this. Gisèle's mother's despair when Alain refuses the carrots she has carefully prepared for him, Tante Berthe's vain attempt to cling to her original vision of the apartment, Alain's doubts concerning the aesthetic value of his statue: the examples are a mixture of the apparently trivial and the more significant but all involve the same task of imposing order on what is experienced as a fluid world. Hence the need for possession is to be explained not as an example of class mentality but as a product of metaphysical angst. Thus Gisèle's feelings over the bergère: 'Elle aussi avait senti cette fois en elle comme un vide qu'il fallait aussitôt combler, une faim, presque une douleur qu'il fallait apaiser à tout prix ...' (p. 75).

---

<sup>23</sup> Knapp, p. 290. In a lecture given at the University of Kent in 1968 on 'The Obsessional Object in French Literature', Professor Weightman himself emphasised this aspect of objects in Nathalie Sarraute. Speaking of the door in Le Planétarium, he said:

In one sense it is a traditional social object, a treasured possession of a bourgeois nature with something of the spurious antique about it, since it is a copy of a door seen in a church. At the same time, it is perhaps rather more modern than objects in Balzac and Zola, because the old lady's interest in it seems to go far beyond that of mere possession: all her neurotic worry about life focusses on the door; at her age and in her situation, it doesn't really matter much whether the door is a successful piece of interior decoration or not; in any case, she is not quite sure of her aesthetic principles, so she will never really know whether or not the door is right. The door is then an objective correlative of the anguish of living in the mind of someone who has no serious connection with life at all.

171

Possession would mean domination: 'C'était la beauté, l'harmonie même, captée, soumise, familière, devenue une parcelle de leur vie, une joie toujours à leur portée' (p. 75). We have seen the characters in Nathalie Sarraute's earlier works apparently seeking refuge from an undefined sense of anguish in things, in particular in shopping expeditions: 'Entre eux et un univers informe, étrange et menaçant, le monde des objets s'interpose comme un écran, les protège.'<sup>24</sup> The old man in Portrait d'un inconnu narrows down his general and vague anguish to an obsession with the bar of soap, to a phenomenon he can identify and deal with much more easily. According to Alain, his aunt's preoccupation with the holes in her precious door is to be explained in a similar fashion; it is a lightning-conductor, a 'paratonnerre':

Voilà une femme qui a connu les vraies souffrances ... la mort de gens qu'elle aimait, de son mari ... Elle sait que sa mort est proche, elle m'a dit qu'elle sentait que ses forces baissent, qu'elle vieillit, et puis voilà: toute l'angoisse ramassée en elle se fixe là, sur cet éclat, ces trous dans le bois, tout est là, concentré en un seul point - c'est un paratonnerre, au fond ... (pp. 32-3)

And Alain continues:

Moi-même, j'avoue, au bout d'un moment je frottais, repeignais, rabotais avec acharnement, je luttais contre quelque chose de menaçant, pour rétablir une sorte d'harmonie ... C'était tout un univers en petit, là, devant nous ... Et nous, essayant de maîtriser quelque chose de très fort, d'indestructible, d'intolérable ... (p. 33)

Such paratonnerres are shown in Le Planétarium to be doubtfully reliable. The solidity and security of the bar of soap has vanished. The handle affixed by the unsympathetic workmen can destroy the whole apartment; so throughout the novel, people's visions of things are constantly modified and destroyed by themselves and others. Chaos is constantly reasserting itself.

'L'effort créateur à l'état naissant' is clearly an appropriate

---

<sup>24</sup> Portrait d'un inconnu, p. 157.

phrase to describe this constant attempt on the part of the characters to deal with the world and their experience of it. One of the central figures is a writer whom briefly we see in the throes of creation. She sits alone in her study with a half-written page in front of her, under the impact of hostile criticism of her work and suffering from the sense that all she had previously written, and been satisfied with, now seems lifeless. Suddenly the wheels begin to turn again. She searches for the right word and finds it:

Elle a trouvé. Juste le mot qu'il lui faut. Fait tout exprès. Sur mesure. Admirablement coupé. Placé là crânement, comme ce petit nœud de ruban, cette plume que sait planter sur un chapeau d'un geste rapide, désinvolte, audacieux une modiste de génie et qui donne à tout ce qui sort de ses mains cet air incomparable, cette allure, ce chic. (p. 193)

She is able to recapture her previous image of herself and to continue to project it. Tante Berthe, preparing her flat with loving care for the visitors who never come, and dismissed by others as a 'vieille femme maniaque', is involved in the same activity when she attempts to transfer the symphony of green and yellow observed in nature to the decoration of her living-room. The fact that the gap between them is not so great as might at first appear is emphasised by Germaine Lemaire's own sensitivity where people's reactions to her interior are concerned (pp. 102-3). Germaine Lemaire is a writer, Tante Berthe an interior decorator; Alain has, it would seem, ambitions to be the first while at present contenting himself with being the second. But they, and all the other characters, participate in the same 'effort créateur' where their relationships with other people are concerned. Gisèle's mother has established a pattern in her relationship with her daughter ('si délicieuse à manier, à modeler', p. 57), into which she has fitted Alain but which is destroyed by the latter's outburst against her. Gradually in her own mind, and through conversation with her daughter, she reconstructs this pattern, drawing Gisèle back into it, imposing her own vision of

175

their relationship on Gisèle and through her dominating Alain once more. Gisèle experiences the same need to see a particular pattern in her relationship with Alain; equally Alain with Germaine Lemaire. As it is with the major relationships in the novel, so with the minor ones: Alain in his brief encounter with Montalis creates in a short space of time two possible versions of a friendship. First an easy-going camaraderie:

Très bien, au ciel n'importe où, entre amis intimes, entre vieux copains ... on se rencontre à l'improviste, on traîne dans les bistrots, on va les uns chez les autres sans prévenir, on se couche sur le divan ... (p. 181)

and then, when this seems to strike a false note:

C'était autre chose, voilà tout. Quelque chose de très bien aussi. Pas cette camaraderie débraillée, bien sûr. On ne se vautre pas les jambes en l'air sur les divans, débitant tout ce qui vous passe par la tête. Mais c'est encore très acceptable, très honorable. Au-delà de toutes les espérances. Seuls les élus sont admis. Mais l'ordre règne ici, la discipline. Il faut de la tenue. On doit réfléchir avant de parler. Il y a des sujets tabous, il y a des credo communs. (pp. 183-4)

That the activity is the same as that of Tante Berthe attempting to control the various objects in her flat is underlined by the way in which Gisèle's mother's hopes are made to recall those of Tante Berthe. Tante Berthe reassures herself as follows:

On s'affole toujours pour un rien ... c'est comme la porte, aussi, ce sont les nerfs, elle sera très bien, les trous minuscules seront parfaitement bouchés avec un peu de mastic, une couche d'encaustique teintée par là-dessus et, même à la loupe, personne n'y verra rien. (p. 22)

And Gisèle's mother looks back on her view of Alain and the marriage in similar terms:

Elle avait bien remarqué dès le début quelques petits nœuds dans la belle tapisserie qu'elles avaient brodée: quelques vices, sans doute, de fabrication dans la trame si joliment tissée ... Mais il suffisait - elle l'avait espéré - de ne pas faire attention, de ne pas regarder, personne d'autre ne le voyait. (p. 58)

The patterns are constantly shifting. However hard people work to evolve, maintain and protect a particular pattern, always a false note is

struck, making the whole edifice crumble. Again Tante Berthe (as described by Alain) provides the paradigm:

Mais c'était ça, justement, ce petit défaut, ce minuscule accroc, cette petite verrue sur la face de la perfection ... (...) Et par moments, sous certains éclairages, si on se plaçait à certains endroits, on ne voyait plus que ça ... la porte, la chambre s'effaçaient, les petits ronds étaient là, l'œil les devinait, les faisait surgir à intervalles réguliers, les comptait ... un supplice ... (p. 31)

Thus Gisèle, looking back on her wedding-day and remembering the whisper of hostile gossip:

Oui, déjà à ce moment-là, l'édifice n'était pas si beau, si parfait ... Il y avait eu cette très fine craquelure à travers laquelle une vapeur malodorante, des miasmes avaient filtré ... (p. 69)

The patterns can shift in different ways. Mostly it is a question of favourable ones being destroyed by unfavourable ones, of the pattern a particular character wishes to believe in being revealed as a sham. Equally, however, we see the original pattern being painstakingly reconstructed or the character being surprised by a more flattering pattern emerging than the one he had at first perceived. On the one hand, we see Alain in the bookshop imagining an ideal encounter between himself, his father and Germaine Lemaire and then registering the actual one in very different terms. On the other, we find Alain reversing the process in his encounter with the young man whom he had met at the house of Germaine Lemaire. Some of the patterns are new in as much as they involve new acquaintances, but many of them are ones the characters are already familiar with, ones that have been gradually established over a long period of time. These the characters cling to, momentarily reject, fall back into, according to circumstance and company. The young people, Alain and Gisèle, are involved in two main networks of relationship, Gisèle with her parents and with Alain, Alain with the family and with Germaine Lemaire and they oscillate more or less unwillingly between the two. They at least are involved in attempting to create new patterns. Tante

Berthe and her brother, Pierre, Alain's father, demonstrate in their interviews with one another to what extent their relationship is imprisoned within patterns established many years previously.

What is striking where all the characters are concerned is the contrast between the chaos of their inner being and the desperate urge to impose patterns upon it, patterns which necessarily involve the participation of other people or the material world. Gisèle's experience of herself and Alain is quite different from the image of the 'beau jeune couple harmonieux' which she projects for the benefit of others:

Derrière, eux deux seuls le savaient, tout était fluide, immense, sans contours. Tout bougeait à chaque instant, changeait. Impossible de s'y reconnaître, de rien nommer, de rien classer. Impossible de rien juger. (p. 70)

The urge to project an image is again a defence mechanism. If one does not choose one's own, others will impose theirs upon one. Tante Berthe has known this in the past where her husband Henri was concerned and fears it again in her relationship with Alain - that others will label her as the neglected wife or the ill-treated aunt. As well as a defence against others, it is a defence against one's own sense of vulnerability. All the characters, at times at least, seek a sense of coincidence with their chosen role, which gives them the impression of dominating the circumstances in which they find themselves. This is the significance of the important encounter between Alain and the waiter in the café after Alain's successful telephone call to Germaine Lemaire:

Le garçon approuve de la tête, regarde le poêle avec intérêt. Aucun noyau dur en lui, c'est évident. En lui tout est mou, tout est creux, n'importe quoi, n'importe quel objet insignifiant venu du dehors le remplit tout entier. Ils sont à la merci de tout. Il était ainsi lui-même il y a quelques instants, comment pouvait-il vivre? comment vivent donc tous ces gens avec ce vide immense en eux où à chaque instant n'importe quoi s'engouffre, s'étale, occupe toute la place ... (p. 92)

Alain's sense of possessing a 'noyau dur' is, of course, short-lived.

His dilemma is that of all the characters: even those like Germaine Lemaire and Adrien Lebat, who appear particularly confident in their

powers to the onlooker, clearly have their moments of self-doubt.<sup>25</sup>

The notion of constantly shifting patterns of relationship brings us to the novel's title. Critics have stressed different aspects of the metaphor. Maurice Nadeau explains it as follows: 'Chacune de ces individualités se meut, autonome et fermée, à l'intérieur d'un système, où elles s'attirent, se heurtent, se repoussent, le plus souvent avec une grande violence.'<sup>26</sup> Lucette Finas suggests that among other implications is the following: 'Chaque individualité accomplit sa révolution sous les yeux d'un autre qui en fait autant, à des distances infimes en apparence et réellement infinies.'<sup>27</sup> Helen Watson-Williams supplies a thorough examination of the question in her 'Etude du Planétarium'. She points to a number of occasions in the novel when the metaphor occurs and concludes:

L'image cosmique qui exprime le bouleversement chez Alain nous rapproche de la signification principale de ce titre, Le Planétarium, assez mystérieux au début. Elle ne se révélera entièrement que lorsqu'Alain prendra conscience de l'hypocrisie, de l'ignorance, de la vanité et de l'avidité de cette Germaine Lemaire qu'il croyait être sincère, raffinée, simple et généreuse. Tout son monde à elle, tous les êtres qui gravitaient autour d'elle, comme les planètes autour du soleil, s'écrouleront simultanément. Le système cosmique dont elle formait le point central se révélera comme l'œuvre des appareils à projection.<sup>28</sup>

One of the aspects of the metaphor which Nathalie Sarraute has stressed on a number of occasions is that a planetarium is an artificial universe: 'Les personnages vivent dans un monde artificiel en mouvement.'<sup>29</sup> Each

<sup>25</sup> Valerie Minogue suggests a different interpretation of this scene in her analysis of the role of Alain in the novel, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Le Planétarium: The Narrator Narrated', Forum for Modern Language Studies, 9, 1973, p. 30. We shall return to this question later.

<sup>26</sup> Le Roman français depuis la guerre, Collection Idées, Paris, 1963, p. 169.

<sup>27</sup> Finas, p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> Watson-Williams, 'Etude du Planétarium', p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> In a letter to the present writer dated 1968.



figure has a 'character' imposed on him by the others: Tante Berthe is 'une maniaque' (p. 32), Gisèle's mother a 'vieille femme qui fourre son nez partout' (p. 52), Alain's father is a 'brave gros barbon' (p. 169), and Alain himself the typical 'jeune intellectuel bourgeois' (p. 287). In fact of course these 'characters' are all artificial constructions; the true state of things is a constant and chaotic mobility. One 'character' can thus be readily substituted for another. Each point in the novel's universe, person or things, exists in relation to others, the door in relation to the yellow walls and green curtains of Tante Berthe's flat, Alain himself in relation to his father, his wife, his aunt, Germaine Lemaire and others. But the possibilities of combination are endless. The same door may create a quite different impression in a church and in a hairdresser's salon: 'Tout dépend de l'ambiance, tant de choses entrent en jeu' (p. 1). The same person will appear in a totally different light from separate points of view; or the influence of a third person may impinge on one character's view of another; Alain's father's attitude may change that of Germaine Lemaire: 'Elle a vu tout d'un coup ce qu'il était en réalité, un gamin en culottes courtes que son père tenait par la main, un affreux petit bonhomme, mal venu, niais, sournois, vantard...' (p. 164).

As we have seen, people long to escape such fluidity. Thus they seek support from others, a planet into whose orbit they can move and within which they can then fulfil roles they themselves have chosen. Thus Gisèle with Alain:

Devant elle partout il déblayait, émondait, traçait des chemins, elle n'avait qu'à se laisser conduire, à se faire souple, flexible comme avec un bon danseur. C'était curieux, cette sensation qu'elle avait souvent que sans lui, autrefois, le monde était un peu inerte, gris, informe, indifférent, qu'elle-même n'était rien qu'attente, suspens ... (pp. 72-3).

But Alain himself is not so strong as he appears to Gisèle; he too needs an exterior 'point de repère' and he seeks it in Germaine Lemaire.

Before he speaks to her on the telephone he feels as Gisèle does without him: 'lui qui n'est plus que désordre, désarroi, lambeaux palpitants' (p. 89), and after, reassured and made welcome: 'lui, dressé, très droit, lui fort, maître de tous ses mouvements' (p. 90). And other apparent planets like Adrien Lebat and Germaine Lemaire herself reveal themselves to be desperately in need of the support of their admirers if they are to continue in their roles.

Those features of Le Planétarium which we have explored are by no means new in the work of Nathalie Sarraute. She herself has denied that the role of objects in this novel is in any way different from what it was in her previous ones: 'On n'a pas plus affaire à des objets dans Le Planétarium que dans mes livres précédents.'<sup>30</sup> Looking back, she has agreed that 'l'effort créateur à l'état naissant' was a theme present in her very first work.<sup>31</sup> Suggestive is the fact that Le Planétarium was the title of a further volume of sketches announced in the first edition of Tropismes but which never found a publisher. We come back to our earlier question: wherein lies the particularity of Le Planétarium? A revealing phrase occurs in Nathalie Sarraute's Third programme talk: 'In Le Planétarium, I have no more doubts'.<sup>32</sup> Once again the best approach to this novel is by means of the previous one. In Martereau we were shown how even Martereau/Louis Dumontet was subject to tropisms. In Le Planétarium, this is the point of departure: everyone, without

---

<sup>30</sup> In a letter to the present writer dated 1968.

<sup>31</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute nous parle du Planétarium', p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429. This does not imply that she wrote the novel with greater ease. In fact she tells us that this was not the case: 'Here I met with greater difficulties than in my previous books' (loc. cit.). She recalls spending days over one paragraph alone: 'Il n'a l'air de rien et il m'a gâché mes vacances en Espagne' (Demeron, p. 2).

exception, is implicated. The similarity of all human beings at this level is, then, this new novel's major theme. It is formulated for us by Alain in the second section, as he tells the story of his aunt and her door:

Je ne parviens pas à croire à une différence fondamentale entre les gens ... Je crois toujours - c'est peut-être idiot - que quelque part, plus loin, tout le monde est pareil, tout le monde se ressemble ... (p. 34)

Nous nous ressemblons comme deux gouttes d'eau, vous ne vous en êtes jamais aperçue avant? Sinon je ne m'y intéresserais pas tant. (...) Ça ne vous intéresserait pas tant, vous non plus, si vous-même et nous tous ici, nous n'avions pas un petit quelque chose quelque part, bien caché, dans un recoin bien fermé ... (p. 42)

It is echoed in the last words of the novel, this time spoken by

Germaine Lemaire: 'Je crois que nous sommes bien tous un peu comme ça.'

The aunt and her door are thus offered to us as a paradigm, a pattern in which all the characters' efforts can later be seen reflected. The pattern repeats itself on a surface level. Germaine Lemaire collects things and likes to hear appreciative comments on her flat; she expresses interest in Alain's installation: 'moi aussi, c'est ma passion' (p. 215). The last section, in presenting Gisèle and Alain in their new flat, takes us back to the beginning: the famous door still figures in people's preoccupations. Alain's treasures may be different from those of his aunt but their source is similar. He has transplanted his 'vieux banc' from another setting, just as his aunt did her door.

Tante Berthe is out to impress, afraid of what her non-existent visitors will think. This again, as Germaine Lemaire says at the end of the novel, is a trait common to all the characters. Germaine Lemaire's own need for praise is referred to on many occasions. Gisèle, her mother, Alain, all struggle to make people see them as they want to be seen. Even Lebat, apparently so self-confident, has feet of clay. Vanity, labelled as such, is not of course what Nathalie Sarraute is interested in. Critics have remarked on the Proustian flavour of this particular

novel<sup>33</sup> and it is interesting to note the comments she makes in L'Ere du soupçon on the theme of snobbery in Proust:

Il se pourrait que le snobisme mondain de Proust, qui se répercute, avec un caractère d'obsession presque maniaque, dans tous ses personnages, ne soit pas autre chose qu'une variété de ce même besoin obsédant de fusion, mais poussé et cultivé sur un sol tout différent, dans la société parisienne, formaliste et raffinée, du faubourg Saint-Germain du début de ce siècle. (p. 40)

It is rather the manifestation of inner movements, 'ce qui s'appelle rien' (p. 144). But what is interesting in this context is that, whatever level of contact the novel evokes, or whatever aspect of people's mental activity is explored, it is always the similarity between characters which is emphasized. The point is most strikingly made in the two sections devoted to the scene between Pierre and Berthe. These remind us of the four scenes between Martereau and his wife, involving as they do a similar repetition. In Martereau, however, these were imaginary scenes and each presented a different version. Here the same 'real' scene is narrated, once from the point of view of Berthe and once from the point of view of Pierre and the point of repetition here is the similarity of the inner life revealed.

Some of the effects of this new emphasis in Le Planétarium may best be perceived through an examination of the figure and role of Alain. Though the point of view in this novel is diversified in a way it was not in previous ones, Alain undoubtedly occupies the centre of the stage. He is the spokesman in eight of the novel's twenty-one chapters and in three more his viewpoint appears along with that of one or more of the others. He is the connecting link between the main orbits of the novel: the family groups and Germaine Lemaire. Alain is a young man who, like his counterpart in Martereau and the rather older narrator of Portrait

---

<sup>33</sup> See, especially, Georges Raillard, 'Nathalie Sarraute et la violence du texte', Littérature, no. 2, 1971, p. 96.

d'un inconnu, is 'un peu névrosé',<sup>34</sup> extremely sensitive in his relationships with other people. Like the narrator of Martereau, he is viewed by his family as a dilettante, and accused of wasting his time on trivial matters instead of working on his thesis and preparing himself for a profession. It is in his first and his last appearances in the novel that he resembles most closely the embryo novelist of Portrait d'un inconnu, sharing the same aspirations and the same doubts. In the second section he is called on to tell the story of the aunt and her door to his mother-in-law's guests. An excursion into anecdote becomes something more serious. The attempt to amuse and to impress becomes the effort to create: 'Il sait faire surgir des mirages: de hautes cités, des ciels allaient se refléter dans une mince flaque d'eau sale ... il a ce pouvoir ...' (p. 34). He expects his excursions into psychological description to meet with the same sort of response as did those of the narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu at the hands of the psychiatrist: 'En voilà une découverte ... Tout le monde le sait depuis longtemps. On s'extasiait là-dessus il y a vingt ans ...' (p. 28). But his vision is clearly the same; the following statement might well come from the narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu or from Nathalie Sarraute herself:

On n'a pas encore découvert ce langage qui pourrait exprimer d'un seul coup ce qu'on perçoit en un clin d'œil: tout un être et ses myriades de petits mouvements surgis dans quelques mots, un rire, un geste. (p. 39)

When he points out that there is nothing to choose between himself and his aunt, or anyone else for that matter, he is certainly expressing Nathalie Sarraute's own view.<sup>35</sup> Equally, at the end of the novel, he

<sup>34</sup> Pingaud, 'Dix romanciers face au roman', p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> In a discussion held at the University of Glasgow in 1965, Nathalie Sarraute maintained that nephew and aunt were for her interchangeable.

plays the kind of spokesman role which was played by the narrator figures in the two earlier novels. He argues with Germaine Lemaire about the validity of Lebat's approach to people and to art, maintaining that the 'grilles' he imposes, the labels he attaches, lead to a conventional, ultimately sterile vision of things:

'Bon, peut-être, sur l'œuvre d'un autre, là, peut-être, je ne dis pas ... il est très intelligent ... Mais sur la matière elle-même, la matière brute, non élaborée, d'où l'on part, sur laquelle on crée ...' Elle égrène un petit rire 'argentin' ... 'Ha, ha, ha, les boutons de porte. Les fauteuils? Les petites manies des gens?' 'Oui, n'importe quoi, vous le savez ... Il me semble que si on s'y cramponne vraiment, ça peut mener ...' (p. 307)

Alain is, of course, caught up in his particular situation, his sense of disillusionment where Germaine Lemaire is concerned, and he is still desperately trying to shore up the world which is collapsing around him. In the passage quoted above, he nonetheless functions as interpreter and defender of the novel Nathalie Sarraute has written. Nathalie Sarraute has supported such a view of the character:

Dans Le Planétarium, Alain Guimiez pourrait presque être un écrivain: déjà il trouve une substance vivante dans des choses qui paraissent à tous sans intérêt, qui ne sont pas admises, que tous dédaignent et qui lui appartiennent à lui seul, et c'est la raison pour laquelle Germaine Lemaire, écrivain académique, ne le comprend pas.<sup>36</sup>

In the earlier part of the novel, he exhibits a Swann-like disposition to fritter away his talents, to dissipate them in social activities instead of seeking the solitude he needs to write. Yet his professed interest in 'les petites manies des gens' suggests a greater degree of insight than Germaine Lemaire achieves. The prière d'insérer seems to promise the possibility of a valid creative effort on the part of Alain: 'Mais peut-être chez un des personnages, cet effort pourra-t-il un jour aboutir à travers bien des faiblesses et des égarements.'

---

<sup>36</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute et les secrets de la création', p. 4.

Alain, however, is not a privileged narrator in the way the central figures of Portrait d'un inconnu and Martereau were. Nathalie Sarraute underlined this fact in her Third programme talk: 'No privileged narrator has to try to catch the tropisms. Everybody feels them and is affected by them.'<sup>37</sup> The underlying mental activity of other people was, of course, the main preoccupation of the narrators of Portrait d'un inconnu and Martereau. But in these novels the only descriptions we can, as it were, be sure are valid, are those given by each narrator of his own mental processes. As far as other people are concerned, they may be right, they may be wrong; we have no means of judging. There is arguably progression as between the novels. In Martereau it often seems to be implied that the narrator's understanding of his family is superior to that of his counterpart vis-à-vis the old man and his daughter. He after all knows them intimately in a way the narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu cannot know the objects of his study. One can, therefore, see Nathalie Sarraute moving in Martereau in the direction of the position she will adopt in Le Planétarium but the step she takes in Le Planétarium is, nonetheless, a much greater one. Here there is no one point of view within the novel from which statements are made but several. The point of view changes from section to section and, indeed, within sections, and we are placed inside the minds of Alain, Gisèle, the latter's mother and father, the former's father and aunt, Germaine Lemaire and even inside those of a number of unnamed acquaintances of the couple who gossip about them. Though each character's view of a particular situation may be doubtfully valid, and may, indeed, be proved inadequate later in the novel, no doubt is thrown on the description of the view which the author is conveying to us. Thus we have direct and

---

<sup>37</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

genuine information about, and experience of, the mental processes of various characters, instead of only one. Instead of approaching her material through the figure of a narrator who is hesitant and uncertain about his conclusions, she now presents us with it directly and expects us to give her credence: 'Aussi dans Le Planétarium, j'ai voulu me substituer à chaque personnage, devenir cet appareil de prise de vues placé aux limites de la conscience.'<sup>38</sup> Alain's role in other ways is different from that of the narrators of the earlier novels; less privileged as an observer, he is at the same time more submerged in the action. He is one of many, not a man apart. Martereau had set out to show how the Louis Dumontets of life and fiction were a sham, that the undercurrents the narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu perceived in people were part of everyone's psychological life. In Le Planétarium, there is no more need for argument, everyone is from the outset declared to be similar:

Ça ne vous intéresserait pas tant, vous non plus, si vous-même et nous tous ici, nous n'avions pas un petit quelque chose quelque part, bien caché, dans un recoin bien fermé ...  
(p. 42)

There is arguably a development in Le Planétarium similar to that in Martereau, involving Alain and Germaine Lemaire. The latter has been described as 'un Martereau femelle, statufié et divinisé, une idole',<sup>39</sup> and the end of the novel sees a disillusionment parallel to that of the narrator of Martereau. Its last words - spoken by Germaine Lemaire - echo ironically Alain's outburst: 'Vous êtes sévère ... Je crois que nous sommes bien tous un peu comme ça'. Alain's earlier statement of belief had excluded Germaine Lemaire and it has taken him the novel to

---

<sup>38</sup>Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute nous parle du Planétarium', p. 29.

<sup>39</sup>Finas, p. 69.



realize that she is not to be excluded; it is ironic that, in the middle of his disillusionment with her, it is nonetheless she who formulates the conclusion.

It is, however, Alain who undergoes this development, not the reader; the reader is not in this novel limited to Alain's vision, he perceives and understands more than Alain does. As Nathalie Sarraute's confidence grows, so she needs less and less to depend on her characters. Alain is much more caught up in the action of the novel, more unreflectively involved in the mechanisms of escape than were the two narrator figures. If he sees Germaine Lemaire as a refuge, a 'patrie lointaine',<sup>40</sup> it is not in the same way as the narrator of Martereau sees his idol; Germaine Lemaire is for Alain an escape from bourgeois values, a literary lion, an arbiter of taste, a supreme representative of the artistic world to which he wishes to belong, the ideal person therefore to confirm him in the view he would like to take of himself. Alain is certainly very sensitive to the mental activity of others, very much affected by it, but he is much more a victim of it than was the narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu, more even than the narrator of Martereau. He is carried away by the mental processes Nathalie Sarraute explores more often than he attempts to dominate them. Indeed he still escapes into the analytical approach which the narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu used to practise at school with his friend but which he has long since abandoned. Dissecting the characters of relatives and friends is a favourite pastime of Alain and Gisèle when they are alone together:

Le soir, après le départ des amis, prenant encore un verre, entre eux (...) ils s'amusaient à trouver la formule de chaque invité, à faire des classements ... (...) Il était si drôle quand il/ saisissait les gens, les tenant dans le creux de sa main, les lui montrait, quand il les dessinait d'un trait si juste, si vif, il savait les rendre si ressemblants, il les imitait si bien ... (p. 71)

---

40 Martereau, p. 85.

He sums people up, labels them in the way that the narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu could not. To Gisèle, he says: 'Ta mère est surtout une autoritaire' (p. 72), and that Sarrautian vision of her mother which Gisèle entertained is lost:

Elle avait eu peur (...) quand, blottie contre lui, elle avait vu sa mère, jusque-là comme elle-même incernable, infinie, projetée brusquement à distance, se pétrifier tout à coup en une forme inconnue aux contours très précis ... (p. 71)

He welcomes, as a similar exercise in self-defence, his friend's offering where Tante Berthe is concerned: 'Tu sais, ta tante est dure. Elle est méprisante' (p. 229).

Valerie Minogue has provided an interesting discussion of Alain's role in the novel, which she sees as that of 'the narrator narrated':

We could say that Nathalie Sarraute's profound suspicions of the personnage and role of the narrator has led her to create a narrator who, going beyond the self-doubts of the earlier narrators, gives up all the privileges of his role, becoming explicitly what he suspects himself to be - just another narrator among others, one whose self-projections will have no more and no less validity than all the others.<sup>41</sup>

This thesis is one which in general would not enter into conflict with ours. There is however one point where our interpretation would differ: Dr. Minogue sees the scene in the cafe, where Alain enters into conversation with the waiter, as exposing 'the narrator's impulse to step out of the flow of time and movement, to distinguish himself from the rest of the world, and crystallise into the solid forms of a character'.<sup>42</sup> It is certainly a process of crystallization which is taking place and one which lasts no more than a brief half-hour but it is no different from that experienced by other figures in the novel. Alain is under the influence of the successful phone call to Germaine Lemaire - it is that which leads

---

<sup>41</sup> Minogue, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Le Planétarium: The Narrator Narrated', p. 226.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 230.

to the temporary sense on his part of autonomy, of being master of his reactions. Once again his similarity to others is stressed.

Thus, for the first time in Sarraute's work, all the characters are seen in the same light; the only privileged onlooker is the author and, through her, the reader. The principal means through which her psychological material is conveyed are imagery and dialogue. It has been suggested that the number of images in her novels has gradually decreased and that the technique of dialogue, actual and unspoken, 'conversation' et 'sous-conversation' has replaced them. Nathalie Sarraute herself claims that there is no such decrease: 'Je ne me suis pas du tout aperçue de la diminution du nombre des images, et jusqu'à maintenant je ne suis pas d'accord avec cette opinion.'<sup>43</sup> Dr. Fleming's index to the imagery in Nathalie Sarraute's fiction up to and including Les Fruits d'or makes it clear that on a straight numerical basis there are, in fact, fewer images in Le Planétarium than there were in Portrait d'un inconnu. What makes a numerical comparison of this kind somewhat misleading is the fact (which Dr. Fleming himself points out) that extended metaphors are much more common in Le Planétarium than in the earlier novel, so that imagistic language is as omnipresent a feature here as it was previously. Equally as far as dialogue is concerned, Nathalie Sarraute distrusts the notion of an evolution in her work: 'Je ne crois pas que cela soit le fait d'une évolution: simplement les nécessités du moment me poussent dans une direction ou une autre.'<sup>44</sup> There are fewer dialogues in Portrait d'un inconnu than in the later novels:

Parce que dans le Portrait d'un inconnu il s'agissait d'un personnage qui n'assiste jamais aux scènes: ce qu'il cherche ce sont ces mouvements intérieurs des personnages. Alors, forcément, il y a moins de dialogues.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Knapp, p. 284.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>45</sup> *loc. cit.*

Le Planétarium, in as much as it dispenses with the narrator figure, does represent in Nathalie Sarraute's work 'a distinct new departure'. One can, however, detect in the earlier works an evolution in this direction, while in Le Planétarium, vestiges of the old narrator are to be found in the figure of Alain. Equally the notion of two levels of dialogue is inherent in Nathalie Sarraute's work from its beginnings. Le Planétarium certainly marks a turning-point in Nathalie Sarraute's career, but it is in some ways closer to the novels which precede it than to those which follow. It is the final achievement of what its author was working towards in the earlier works, the novel which the narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu might have written, had his faith in himself not proved too weak in face of the hostility with which he met.<sup>46</sup> There are of course signs of later development: the relation of writer to his created work, the fate of the work once delivered up to its reading public are beginning to emerge as themes. But the emphasis is still very much on the close-knit group or groups, and in particular the family circle, and the undercurrents to be felt and observed there. With Le Planétarium one has the impression that Nathalie Sarraute has at last found satisfactory expression for her initial inspiration and can now abandon it for fresh fields.

---

<sup>46</sup> It is worth re-emphasising in this context that Le Planétarium was a title Nathalie Sarraute had around in 1939; Tropismes announced a forthcoming volume (which of course never materialised) to be entitled Le Planétarium.

Chapter 6 Les Fruits d'or

Pas un livre, pas un auteur jeté en pâture à cette foule qu'une espèce de levain travaille qui ne soit aussitôt supputé, disséqué, interprété, sondé, prolongé déjà par un avenir imaginaire, évalué dans toutes ses possibilités.

JULIEN GRACQ

Vous en êtes encore ... aux Fruits d'Or?

NATHALIE SARRAUTE

Preoccupations and stylistic devices which have become familiar to readers of Nathalie Sarraute's work reappear in her fourth novel. It operates on the same level of human psychology and professes the same basic assumptions about it. It presents once more the parallel strands of conversation and 'sous-conversation' and does so by means of images and imaginary scenes.<sup>1</sup> But Les Fruits d'or is also very different from its predecessors. Micheline Tison Braun sums up this difference at the beginning of her chapter on the novel:

Du point de vue technique, ce livre consomme la rupture, encore imparfaite, avec le roman traditionnel. Plus d'intrigue suivie: le centre d'intérêt du livre est un livre dont le lecteur ignore tout, sauf ce qu'on en dit, les personnages humains qui le jugent ne sont que des fulgurations anonymes et intermittentes de ce ON qui se trouve être le personnage essentiel du roman. Avec Les Fruits d'or, une nouvelle technique romanesque a pris son essor. Toutes amarres coupées, la forme semble exister d'une vie autonome, avec une franchise, une véhémence, une fantaisie qui enchantent.<sup>2</sup>

Les Fruits d'or is a more depersonalised novel than any of Nathalie Sarraute's previous works. She herself describes it as her 'most abstract work':

I believe that in The Golden Fruits I went further than ever before in this direction [i.e. the direction of tropisms]. It is my most abstract work. I mean that the characters are dispensed with even as appearances. There are only intellectual tropisms vis-à-vis a work of art. It is the conversation that provides the apparent element.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> An image count will again suggest a reduction in the number of images as compared with the early novels but this is partly due to the greater use of extended metaphor. Nathalie Sarraute herself has made apparently contradictory pronouncements on the subject: 'J'ai l'impression que dans Les Fruits d'or, il y a autant d'images qu'il y en a dans le Portrait d'un inconnu' (Knapp, p. 284), and 'Déjà dans Les Fruits d'or, j'ai remplacé les images par des scènes imaginaires' (Le Clec'h, p. 4). This is perhaps to be explained by the fact that the imaginary scene is itself a kind of extended metaphor or image. There is the occasional example of its use in the early novels (e.g. Martereau, p. 277); the device is central to Vous les entendez?

<sup>2</sup> Tison Braun, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> Schneider, p. 36.

Bernard Pingaud speaks of 'l'anonymat des héros de Nathalie Sarraute - qui va, dans Les Fruits d'or, jusqu'à empêcher l'identification des interlocuteurs ...';<sup>4</sup> Helen Watson-Williams of the 'largely anonymous Parisians'<sup>5</sup> of the novel. A fair proportion of the characters are identified with their occupation or with a particular outlook; many of them one eventually knows by name. Proper names, of course, are used in the same way as in Le Planétarium, identifying a character only after the reader's introduction to that character is over and usually only in conversation. Their use here is rather more sparing perhaps: in Le Planétarium nearly all the main characters and a good number of the minor ones were eventually labelled in this way; in Les Fruits d'or, this is not the case. What makes the characters of Les Fruits d'or more anonymous, however, is not so much a name or the lack of it but their number. Les Fruits d'or presents us with what is still a fairly limited milieu: a cultivated Parisian circle interested in the arts, and particularly literature, whether as amateurs or professionals. But it is very much less limited than the largely family circles of Nathalie Sarraute's previous works. Moreover there are few, if any, characters, who can be regarded as central, appearing and reappearing and concentrating one's attention on them in the way that Alain Guimiez or Tante Berthe or Martereau might be said to do.<sup>6</sup> Most of the characters, at least, in Les Fruits d'or appear for a few pages, play their part, are reacted against, perhaps, in the next few pages and then disappear for good.

---

<sup>4</sup> Pingaud, 'Le personnage dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute', p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Watson-Williams, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Golden Apples', Essays in French Literature, no. 3, 1966, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Watson-Williams argues that there is at least one central character in the novel: 'It would seem that while we are following the fortunes of the inset novel we are also following the experiences of one single young man who may be seen as Mme. Sarraute's hero' (ibid., p. 87). We shall return to this question later. Even if her contention is true there is a large part of the book in which this character does not appear.

Each character appears only in his rôle as representative of this Parisian milieu, as voicing a particular sentiment or attitude which will characterize the group of averagely cultivated readers to which he belongs. There are a number of characters who appear to be related to one another by ties of friendship or marriage: the man and woman in the first scene of the novel, the third party to that scene and the critic Brûlé, Jacques and his over-talkative wife; but these personal relationships only appear in so far as they impinge on the general character of the circle. It is as if the section in Le Planétarium devoted to the public reaction to the Guimiez couple's behaviour: 'Et les Guimiez, qu'est-ce qu'ils deviennent?' (p. 233) had been expanded to novel length. Personal relationships, private tensions figure in this section but only in motivating or resulting from, utterances on this one subject. So it is in Les Fruits d'or.

The central character in Les Fruits d'or is no single individual but the anonymous crowd, the ON about whom Micheline Tison Braun speaks. If there is a central point on which the novel focuses, it is not a man but a novel: 'Cette nouvelle œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute ne comporte ni personnages, ni intrigue. Son héros est un roman.'<sup>7</sup> The novel within a novel which gives its name to the latter is of course no new idea. But Nathalie Sarraute is not concerned with the mechanics of creation or with the interplay of fiction and reality as previous authors who have adopted this device have been. This is not altered by the fact that her characters may occasionally touch on such subjects. She is not indeed particularly concerned with the author at all. Though his name, Bréhier, is mentioned fairly frequently, we never meet him. Various

---

<sup>7</sup> The opening words of the prière d'insérer to Les Fruits d'or. This, like all the prières d'insérer after Martereau, is by Nathalie Sarraute herself. The original blurb for Martereau was not, and is described by her (in conversation) as 'abominable'.



people claim to know him personally, and report conversations with him or recount gossip about him, but he always appears through the eyes and words of others and a degree of distortion is implied. Some of the accounts seem to contradict one another. His novel has a mysterious ending. Is this subtlety on Bréhier's part, a hermeticism designed to separate the sheep from the goats, as his friend Orthil maintains:

'Bréhier prend le large. Que seuls ceux qui m'aiment me suivent.'

(p. 117)? Or is it stupidity, simply a desire to write in a fashionable way, as other people, who also claim to know Bréhier, suggest:

Et cette obscurité de la fin, qui a tant ébahi les gens ... personne n'osait dire qu'il n'y comprenait rien ... mais Bréhier non plus, c'est évident ... Seulement il fallait se mettre au goût du jour ... (pp. 203-4)

We are given very few objective facts about him. We know that 'Les Fruits d'Or'<sup>8</sup> is his first published novel and that he has already produced at least one volume of short stories. But it is not clear what relation these bore to his subsequent novel or whether they gave any evidence of talent or not. The critic who argues that they do apparently maintained the contrary when they first appeared. There is also some mention of a texte inédit but it is not altogether clear whether this exists or not. Most important of all, Bréhier's own view of his novel and any reaction he might have to what is now happening to it is completely unknown to us.

Nor is Nathalie Sarraute primarily concerned with the novel itself. It is first introduced as a topic of conversation by a speaker who admits to doing so for reasons which have nothing to do with the book itself:

---

<sup>8</sup> Throughout our study we have adopted the conventional practice where capitalization in French titles is concerned, hence Les Fruits d'or. The novel within the novel, however, is printed as 'Les Fruits d'Or', which spelling we retain.

'Je me demandais si c'était un test, une épreuve que tu voulais lui faire subir pour voir si ... vraiment ... ce livre ... il trouvait ... Mais qu'est-ce que tu t'imaginais?'  
 Mais rien. Je m'en moque, de ce qu'il pense. Je voulais juste l'apaiser. Revenir sur son terrain.' (p. 18)

Little information is given to us about the content of the novel. Two scenes in the novel are touched upon: one very briefly: 'Ce début de chapitre, quand Olivier regarde par la fenêtre avant de quitter la maison ...' (pp. 161-2); the other in rather more detail:

On assiste à la naissance de l'amour ... Vous vous souvenez ... cette scène sur la terrasse, au bord du lac, à Mouchy, quand Estelle frissonne et Robert ou Gilbert ... je ne m'en souviens plus ... Oui, c'est ça, Gilbert se lève sans un mot et va lui chercher son châle. (p. 62)

The irony at the expense of the speaker who has some difficulty remembering the character's name throws doubt even on this small amount of information.

At first it seems likely that the novel is of a fairly traditional psychological type, one of those imitations of Adolphe or La Princesse de Clèves for which Nathalie Sarraute professes such scorn.<sup>9</sup> Its classical style and type of beauty is admired by the first critic:

Pure œuvre d'art - cet objet refermé sur lui-même, plein, lisse et rond. Pas une fissure, pas une éraflure par où un corps étranger pût s'infiltrer. Rien ne rompt l'unité de ces surfaces parfaitement polies dont toutes les parcelles scintillent, éclairées par les faisceaux lumineux de la Beauté. (pp. 45-6)

Another speaker praises it for its lack of 'profondeurs' (p. 60). The nature of the title - suggesting, as it does, great perfection, polish and artifice - would seem to support this supposition. But another speaker comments on the 'modernity' of the work: 'Elle est touffue, baroque, lourde et même gauche, parfois' (p. 54). Moreover there is some mention of an ironic intention on the author's part in the choice of this particular title: 'Et puis, il a trouvé "Les Fruits d'Or". C'est le côté trompe-l'œil qui l'a séduit. Il m'a dit: "Je voulais que le

---

<sup>9</sup> See L'Ere du soupçon, p. 149.

199  
lecteur crève de faim devant ça" (p. 116). We hear of an alternative title which he had considered but rejected: 'Pléonasmes'. All of which seems very much in the vein of Nathalie Sarraute herself.

There is also ambiguity as to whether 'Les Fruits d'Or' is a good novel or a bad one. Reviewers and critics have disagreed on this point. One states:

We may sympathise, at the end, with those voices which are still loyal, in spite of the reversed stampede; but we feel fairly sure that the novel which has been discussed was never really any good at all.<sup>10</sup>

Another maintains that:

The work of art, in this case the literary work, has powers of endurance and vitality that can restore it from temporary victimisation and that can reinstate it after apparent obliteration.<sup>11</sup>

It is true that Nathalie Sarraute's critical presentation of the Parisian circle that rushes to proclaim the novel a masterpiece encourages the reader to think that its admirers must be mistaken and its subsequent oblivion more deserved than its success. It is also true, however, that the lone voice at the end of the book appears to represent the only wholly genuine reaction to the novel and as such to be deserving of particular credence. As we shall see, this ambiguity is essential to the main subject-matter of the novel.<sup>12</sup>

What Nathalie Sarraute is here concerned with, then, is neither author nor novel itself but with the confrontation of a novel - any novel? - and its reading public, with the critical reception a book receives and what motivates it. The fortunes of a novel; such a phrase could stand as sub-title for Les Fruits d'or. The idea of making a

---

<sup>10</sup> Philip Toynbee, 'Novel within a Novel', The Observer, 25 July 1965, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Watson-Williams, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Golden Apples', p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> Nathalie Sarraute has confirmed this view in conversation with the present writer in 1974.

novel out of what happens to a work once it leaves the author's hands first arose, Nathalie Sarraute has said,<sup>13</sup> out of the scene in Le Planétarium where Germaine Lemaire sits in her study looking at the page in front of her and thinking about what a hostile critic has said of her work:

Mais alors, tout ce qu'elle a aimé, tous ces trésors qui lui ont été confiés depuis toujours, à elle, l'enfant prédestinée, et qu'elle a recueillis, préservés en elle avec une si grande piété, avec une telle ferveur ... (...) tous les sons, toutes les formes, toutes les couleurs contenaient ce venin, dégageaient ce parfum mortel: Madame Tussaud. (pp. 109-1)

It is a phenomenon which clearly preoccupied Nathalie Sarraute while she was working on Le Planétarium. In the essay 'Ce que voient les oiseaux', dated January 1956, she expresses concern at certain tendencies in contemporary writing and criticism of the novel. One of these is the extraordinary success of certain novels which may be completely forgotten some years later:

Il arrive de temps en temps qu'une sorte de vertige, explicable chez des gens occupés à tant lire, prenne les plus écoutés des critiques: ils se mettent tout à coup à crier au chef-d'œuvre, à porter aux nues un ouvrage dénué de toute valeur littéraire, comme le prouvera, quelque temps après, l'indifférence, puis l'oubli où sa faiblesse ne manquera pas de le faire glisser.<sup>14</sup>

The general public, Nathalie Sarraute goes on to say, follows in the wake of the critics, first carried away by enthusiasm, then some months or years later, disillusioned or forgetful. Les Fruits d'or is the study of this phenomenon. It is possibly concerned with a better novel than the nameless example of 'Ce que voient les oiseaux', which Nathalie Sarraute describes as 'une plate et inerte copie',<sup>15</sup> but the quality of the work has very little to do with the treatment meted out to it by its

---

<sup>13</sup> In a discussion held at the University of Glasgow in 1965.

<sup>14</sup> L'Ere du soupçon, pp. 129-30.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

public. A character in the novel voices the same kind of unease as Nathalie Sarraute expressed in her<sup>e</sup> article, at a stage when enthusiasm for 'Les Fruits d'Or' is on the wane:

Comment se fait-il qu'à tout moment on assiste à ces extraordinaires revirements sans que personne paraisse s'en étonner, sans que personne s'en préoccupe ... C'est comme des hallucinations collectives, ces énormes engouements sans qu'on sache très bien pourquoi ... et du haut en bas de l'échelle littéraire ... les plus grands critiques, les écrivains ... tous comme un seul homme ... Tenez, en ce moment ... pour Les Fruits d'Or ... (p. 167)

Some years earlier very similar observations had been made by Julien Gracq in his polemical essay, 'La Littérature à l'estomac', written in 1950: 'On ne sait s'il y a une crise de la littérature, mais il crève les yeux qu'il existe une crise du jugement littéraire.'<sup>16</sup> He maintains that it is a matter of status in France to talk well about literature but that one has the impression that everyone is engaged upon some elaborate pretence. This is because, according to him, people talk about works of literature rather than read them. This does not prevent them casting their vote where each new publication is concerned. Julien Gracq refers to the flurry of activity which greets each literary work as 'cette curieuse électoralisation de la littérature' and adds 'nous sommes entrés avec elle dans une ère d'instabilité capricieuse ou les constellations risquent de se bousculer et de se remplacer assez vite'.<sup>17</sup>

The story of the rise and fall of such a constellation, the novel entitled 'Les Fruits d'Or', gives the novel its primary structure. It is not an isolated case but an example of a general phenomenon: 'Tenez, en ce moment ... pour Les Fruits d'Or ...' (p. 167. Our italics). Other examples are mentioned: 'Les Masques' by Bouilly (p. 150) and 'L'Etrave' by Pithuit:

---

<sup>16</sup> Julien Gracq, Préférences, Paris, 1961, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

'Vous vous rappelez quand tout le monde portait aux nues le petit ... comment? Comment déjà? Mais si ... il y a trois ans ... Vous voyez qui je veux dire ...'  
 'Pithuit? C'est de lui que vous voulez parler?'  
 'Oui, de lui, de lui, de lui, ha, ha, le petit Pithuit ... Vous vous rappelez ... la révélation du demi-siècle ... le plus grand génie ...' (p. 149)

Moreover, like Swann's love for Odette in Du côté de chez Swann, the public's enthusiasm for 'Les Fruits d'Or' is set in a framework which reminds us that it must, by its very nature, be an evanescent emotion. It has been preceded by other enthusiasms and new ones will take its place when its day is over. In the first section of the novel we are introduced to the current enthusiasm for Courbet,<sup>18</sup> indeed for a particular painting by Courbet: 'Tu sais que c'est exactement la même reproduction qu'ils ont tous chez eux, qu'ils portent tous sur eux en ce moment ...' (p. 8). In the last section 'Les Fruits d'Or' is forgotten: '"L'homme moderne aux prises avec les grands problèmes de notre temps" ... c'est cela qui les occupe en ce moment' (p. 217). But it is the particular example of 'Les Fruits d'Or' with which we are in detail concerned: mentioned in the first section, it provides the last words of the novel, dismissive though they are: 'Vous en êtes encore ... aux Fruits d'Or?' (p. 227).

The beginnings of the 'cyclical process',<sup>19</sup> to which 'Les Fruits d'Or' like other works is subject, are accompanied by some irony. It is first mentioned, as we have seen, by someone whose motives have nothing to do with the book itself; a chance impulse introduces it as a subject of conversation. The enthusiastic article which, for us at least, launches it on its successful career and which forms the starting-point for the long social gathering at which the book is canonised, also seems to depend

---

<sup>18</sup> As Bernard Pingaud points out ('Le personnage dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute', p. 31), the choice of Courbet takes us beyond the novel to include other forms of art.

<sup>19</sup> Watson-Williams, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Golden Apples', p. 81.

199

on a chance impulse. The third party to the conversation about Courbet in the first section of the novel goes to call on a friend, the critic Brûlé, and asks him what he thinks of 'Les Fruits d'Or'. 'C'est un livre admirable' is the reply. Once alone the critic now has to build his article on this possibly rash utterance: 'Admirable, il a dit cela. Il faut l'écrire: un livre admirable' (p. 42). The critic's subsequent thoughts appear to promise an article which has little to do with the novel: the use of an imperfect subjunctive is the only precise reference to the text. But the article, once embarked on, creates its own momentum; a lyrical sequence on classical style leads on to greater and greater heights of praise: in the first section 'Shakespeare et Courbet' (p. 13) stood on the heights together, now Bréhier's novel is 'ce qu'on a écrit de plus beau depuis Stendhal ... depuis Benjamin Constant' (p. 46).

The three introductory sections are followed by the longest in the novel, presenting a social gathering at which 'Les Fruits d'Or' is the one topic of conversation: its title figures in the first and last sentence. This one gathering presents in microcosmic form the various processes and occasions through which the novel achieves success. Its meaning is discussed and its value established; those people who hesitate to agree with the majority decision are identified and dealt with in a summary fashion: 'Maintenant ils sont sur le qui-vive. (...) Il y en a d'autres qui se cachent, des récalcitrants sournois, des velléitaires ... On inspecte, on fouille ...' (p. 74). Subsequently all opposition comes to an end. People who know Bréhier personally are at a premium because of the insights they can pass on; critics who had previously been hostile to Bréhier's work, disown their earlier utterances. In the seventh section of the novel (which has fourteen sections in all), the high point of enthusiasm is reached. 'Les Fruits d'Or' is unanimously acclaimed as a work of infinite riches:

Ah sacré bouquin ... On peut l'examiner, le découper en tous sens, en horizontale, en verticale, en transversale, en diagonale, on peut le prendre par tous les bouts, poser sur lui n'importe quelle grille ... Dans chaque passage, chaque phrase, chaque membre de phrase, dans chaque mot, dans chaque syllabe, si l'on sait voir, quelles richesses inexplorées, quelles résonances, quelles perspectives immenses, infinies, ne trouve-t-on pas? (p. 126)

Nathalie Sarraute ironically lists the contradictory adjectives which people are prepared to apply to it: 'Clair. Sombre. Perçant. Confiant. Souriant. Humain. Impitoyable. Sec. Moite. Glacé. Brûlant' (p. 127). Its popularity is so immense that it is now regarded as a turning-point, a source of wisdom dividing the generations: 'Il y aura ceux d'avant et ceux d'après Les Fruits d'Or' (p. 132). There is irony again in this statement for it marks a turning-point in the book's career; those who admired it before and those who denigrate it from now on are the same people. The loss of favour, that follows from this point, is gentle but inexorable: 'Il y a comme un revirement ... On n'insiste pas, on glisse à un autre sujet ... il y a dans l'air comme des réticences. (...) C'est comme si on s'était donné le mot' (p. 168). A provincial visitor to Paris expresses disapproval of the book; a critic has difficulty in finding material in the text to support his laudatory article. Soon the rout is complete. It is proved that the novel can be imitated easily and successfully; Bréhier is said to be a shallow man, capable only of writing superficial books; those who saw something of interest in 'Les Fruits d'Or' must have put it there themselves. Finally the book is condemned as unoriginal, a mixture of Mademoiselle de Scudéry, La Fontaine, Sterne and Thomas Mann (p. 213); its proper fate is oblivion: 'La fosse commune ... évidemment ... c'est tout juste assez bon ... Les bouquins de ce genre n'ont droit qu'à l'oubli' (p. 215). At the end of the novel there seems to be only one reader left who has any time for 'Les Fruits d'Or' and he is treated with polite scorn: 'Vous en êtes encore ... aux Fruits d'Or?' (p. 227).



Les Fruits d'or, then, portrays the rise and fall, in the public's esteem, of a literary work. But it is evident, even from the preceding summary of the action, that Nathalie Sarraute concentrates on certain aspects of the phenomenon and not on others. This becomes particularly clear if we compare her work with what the prière d'insérer implicitly acknowledges to be the major literary precedent:

Les péripéties balzaciennes qui entourent le lancement d'un livre ne sont pas le domaine de Nathalie Sarraute. Il n'est ici question ni d'éditeurs, ni de publicité, ni des jeux des prix littéraires.

This does not mean that the various critics and private individuals who express opinions of 'Les Fruits d'Or' seem more interested in works of art for their own sake than are the struggling journalists of the Illusions perdues; for the most part, they are not. Helen Watson-Williams speaks of 'their ever diminishing intimacy with the work itself'.<sup>20</sup> All kinds of personal preoccupations and fears influence their opinions about the book. But Les Fruits d'or is not simply a satire of the launching of a novel in literary circles in Paris. Nathalie Sarraute has maintained that, had satire of this kind been her intention, the portrait of literary Paris might have been very much more negative.<sup>21</sup> The success of 'Les Fruits d'Or' is not engineered from materialistic motives; it just happens. It is an example of the 'hallucinations collectives' (p. 167), of which one of the characters speaks. It is not the various manoeuvres that can be made with a conscious end in view which interest Nathalie Sarraute, but rather the mental reactions people experience when faced with a work of art and forced to make up their minds what they think of it. How do people deal with a novel? Why do they praise it? On what grounds do they criticise it? What goes on in their minds as they talk

---

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> In conversation with the present writer in 1974.

about it? How do individual reactions mesh together to form a collective one? What constitutes public opinion? These are the questions Nathalie Sarraute is asking. The answers, of course, are complicated; even within this fairly limited Parisian sphere many different types of people are involved: men, women, laymen, professionals, critics, academics, fellow novelists. They bring different considerations to bear; they express different viewpoints. Out of their arguments and conversations there emerges a full account of the various approaches to literature which people commonly practise. The picture is a largely negative one. The critics contradict one another; the average reader is hesitant, limited by his own experience, too ready to submit to the authoritative opinions of others. No-one seems able to deal with the novel in its entirety; even references to particular parts of it are rare. Nathalie Sarraute is clearly making, through her novel, certain statements about the inadequacies of literary criticism and of aesthetic judgments generally.

The satirical presentation of characteristic types of speech and thought is no new feature in Nathalie Sarraute's work: there are the vignettes in Tropismes of the women in the teashop and of the professor at the Collège de France, or the portrayal of the fashionable authoress in Le Planétarium. But in Les Fruits d'or satire is a stronger and more constant element. Nathalie Sarraute has a number of targets but chief among them is perhaps the professional critic. For the purposes of satire, these critics fall into three main groups, the traditional, the avant-garde - the structuralist - and the academic. A representative of the traditionalists initiates the enthusiasm for the novel by building, as we have seen, an appreciation of its classical style on the unguarded comment: 'admirable'. For him it is 'une pure œuvre d'art. (...) Ce qu'on a écrit de plus beau depuis Stendhal ... depuis Benjamin Constant ...' (p. 46). There are two representatives of the second group:

L'un maigre, osseux, tordu, est pareil à un arbre rabougri que dessèche et plie le vent du large. (p. 91)

L'autre, gros et lourd, tout lisse, tendu, comme plein à craquer de quelque chose de rare et de précieux. (p. 92)

They address one another literally and figuratively above the heads of the company:

'Ce livre, je crois, installe dans la littérature un langage privilégié qui parvient à cerner une correspondance qui est sa structure même. C'est une très neuve et parfaite appropriation de signes rythmiques qui transcendent par leur tension ce qu'il y a dans toute sémantique d'essentiel.' L'autre, en face de lui, a une brève contorsion, comme traversé par une soudaine et courte bourrasque, et aussitôt s'apaise et incline la tête lentement: 'Oui. Evidemment. Il y a là un envol qui abolit l'invisible en le fondant dans l'équivoque du signifié.' (p. 93)

Then there are the most professional of all, the academics: 'Les grands corps de l'Etat. Le gouvernement. Les membres des assemblées. Les cinq académies. Les grandes écoles. Les facultés ...' (p. 49). They come into their own particularly when the enthusiasm for 'Les Fruits d'Or' is on the wane, to classify, pigeon-hole, dispose of:

Notre esprit est ainsi fait qu'il parvient à contenir en lui tout entière, inscrite comme sur les cartons d'un jeu de loto, la littérature du monde, découpée en petits carrés numérotés. Que quelque chose d'inconnu surgisse et aussitôt nous le saisissons, nous le tournons et le retournons. Montrez-moi ça. Faites voir un peu ce jeton. Quel est son numéro? Ah voilà. Attendez ... je vois ... Sa place est là, voilà son casier ... (p. 208)

These are the confident, the people who claim to know what they are doing, who assign to themselves the right to determine the opinions of others, and they are harshly treated. Other familiar types are also satirised, perhaps more gently. The doctor whose professional life leaves him little time to read and who therefore sticks to the classics; the woman who is upset by seeing some echo of her personal life in the novel and therefore speaks angrily against it; the people who attain a special authority by professing intimate knowledge of the author; the simple man who knows what he likes. These characters are each spotlighted briefly as they contribute to the discussion and then fall back, named or nameless, into the anonymous mass of the novel's public, the 'morne troupe

captive' (p. 94), who stumble about in the darkness trying to find their leader, trying to understand what is being said to them. Sometimes they think they have understood: there are the women who, on discovering the novel can be seen as a superior love-story, feel that they are on home territory. Sometimes they want to rebel, to fall in behind the woman who asks that someone show her just why 'Les Fruits d'Or' is such a good novel:

Le livre en main. Qu'on leur montre. C'est tout ce qu'ils demandent. Elle a su, avec une force, un courage qu'ils admirent, exprimer dans ces seuls mots toutes leurs modestes revendications. Qu'on leur explique, le livre en main. (p. 86)

But such rebellion is shortlived. Mostly they try to submit, to accept. One of them tries to respond to the structuralist critics by seizing on the one word he has understood: 'Que c'est vrai, ce que vous dites, comme vous le montrez bien. Une œuvre vraiment poétique. Ah vous avez raison, nous sommes comblés' (p. 95).

All of them, whatever line they adopt, want certainties. They want to be sure, convinced beyond any possible shadow of doubt. But the secret, the magic discovery, the certainty which the 'morne troupe captive' search for, is not to be found. The critics speak with confidence, yet when they can be understood, they seem to contradict one another. One of their number at least is forced to contradict himself: Mettetal, who had in the past written a hostile review of an earlier work by Bréhier, and now maintains that he saw the talent of 'Les Fruits d'Or' already evident there. Many counters of the so-called discipline of literary criticism are used and found to be problematic. In what does originality consist? If an author can be successfully imitated is he proved to be less great? How important is the intention of the author? Can one counter accusations of banality by saying that the platitudes present in the book are consciously and deliberately put there? Does any information we might have about the biography of the author signify? Some of the

205

speakers in Les Fruits d'or argue that the lack of wit and of taste Bréhier has frequently exhibited in his life proves the nullity of his novel; yet when it is pointed out that the same was true of Rimbaud they refuse to think it relevant 'Ça, c'était Rimbaud!' (p. 205). What is the most important feature in a work of art? Is quality to be seen in the individual parts or rather in the whole, and the relation of these parts to one another? Should one look for sincerity, spontaneity, or calculation? Should the interest of a work of art be eternal or is it properly dependent on the period in which it is written? Should the novelist depict realistically the psychological uncertainties of life or should he rise above these and provide his readers with more solid ground than they find in their contacts with people they know?

Even if people were to agree on the answers to such questions, they would continue to differ when it came to applying these standards to particular works. One critic says that 'Les Fruits d'Or' possesses a coherent structure, another that it does not. One speaker picks on the episode with the shawl to illustrate the qualities of the novel, another finds it banal, a third points out that its value can only be perceived in context. The argument is circular and has no issue, The critic's position is dependent on his prestige, on his being able to browbeat his opponents, rather than on the inherent strength of his arguments. When he has his back to the wall, like M. Parrot once the enthusiasm for the book is on the wane, all he can say in self-defence is 'C'est très beau' (p. 163).

Utterances such as M. Parrot's are not the main substance of the book but its 'apparent element'; they are contained in a sea of mental reactions which prepare, provoke and result from them. The existence of tropisms is no longer a problematic issue; there is argument as to whether they are suitable material for literature but this is only one

of many points of discussion; no character is concerned with proving or disproving their existence. We find them referred to in conversation as to an accepted phenomenon:

Je me souviens qu'un jour, j'avais à peine cillé, même pas cillé - comment aurais-je osé? - j'avais dû faire à mon insu un de ces mouvements intérieurs imperceptibles ... mais les autres, pour peu qu'ils soient sur le qui-vive, les sentent, je ne sais comment ... et aussitôt une brave dame m'a rappelé à l'ordre, très sûre d'elle, soutenue par tous: Vous n'aimez pas les Fruits d'Or? (pp. 167-8)

Indeed the figures in Les Fruits d'or seem, if anything, more generally sensitive to them than was the case in the previous novels, even Le Planétarium. It is an effect which is largely created by the increased depersonalisation we have already remarked on in this novel. Our viewpoint shifts from mind to mind more rapidly than was the case in Le Planétarium, and we enter infinitely more minds than we did there. Thus the figures in Les Fruits d'or are minimized qua 'characters' even more and we concentrate on their interaction at a subterranean level. The characteristics of the world of tropisms remain the same. There is the same pattern of defence and aggression, of intimacy followed by disgust, the same need of mutual support:

On veut tant, n'est-ce pas? préserver sa tranquillité, se blottir, comme tout le monde, serrés les uns contre les autres dans la bonne, l'apaisante douceur de l'innocence, de l'ignorance ... (p. 96)

The characters experience the same mixture of fascination and distaste:

Elle se tient si effacée, toujours un peu à distance, elle aussi, mais sans que rien de louche chez elle n'affleure, aucun de ces mouvements surnois qui, d'ordinaire, vous donnent l'éveil et vous font vous élancer, sous l'effet d'une irrésistible poussée, à la découverte du point secret d'où ils sont partis. (p. 106)

What does the approach through tropisms achieve where the theme of Les Fruits d'or is concerned that other possible approaches would not? It obviously reveals what lies behind the spoken utterances on the novel. An anonymous writer hastens to praise 'Les Fruits d'Or' lest his accusing audience suspect that he is thinking of his own unnoticed publication and

is jealous of Bréhier's success (pp. 75-9). It emphasizes the gulf between thought and speech. A man attacks the speaker who had praised the episode with the shawl, asks for proof, points out contradictions in the argument, but, it emerges, is achieving all this only in his mind. When it comes to speech, all he can do is to whisper to his neighbour: 'Moi, je dois dire que ce geste, ce geste avec le châle ... il me semble qu'un geste aussi banal ...', and his voice is 'un mince filet qui sort difficilement' (p. 73). It also enables Nathalie Sarraute to show the various mental processes people go through in trying to come to grips with the novel, organising their ideas into a particular pattern, carried away by some point which has occurred to them or trying to adapt for their own use something they have heard. We see such a process at work in the woman who suddenly identifies the novel with the idea of elegance:

Et voilà que des mornes et grises étendues, des formes pétrifiées qui se dressent dans le jour blafard, quelque chose peu à peu se dégage ... C'est comme un souffle tiède, une familière, intime, rassurante bouffée ... quelque chose qu'elle reconnaît ... (...) Cela montait vers elle des images de magazines, de revues de mode ... des portraits de duchesses, des princesses, des reines ... cela se dégageait de leurs visages fermés dont nul sentiment n'infléchit les lignes rigides (...) Une onde tiède la parcourt (...) devant ces signes (...) de la distinction suprême, de la plus aristocratique élégance. (pp. 57-8)

Equally in the man who outlines his ideas on art: 'Tout l'art consiste en cela, de s'élever au delà de ces grouillements nauséabonds' (p. 61), and finds that 'Les Fruits d'Or' fits into this pattern:

Il ferme les yeux, se tait ... Nobles villes aux dômes étincelants, aux places harmonieuses, aux spacieuses demeures, sveltes colonnes, palais peints de délicates couleurs, ruelles paisibles pavées de douces vieilles pierres ... là il s'est toujours promené, là depuis sa naissance, il a toujours vécu, c'est là que s'est écoulée sa vie ... la vraie vie ... Un nouveau monument s'élève, en parfaite harmonie ... une demeure à son goût, à sa mesure, à la mesure de l'homme ... il s'y sent chez lui ... (p. 61)

We see how possibly quite genuine insights can collapse under external pressures, when Parrot tries to recapture his view of the novel under the hostile eyes of his critics and fails:

Mais c'est d'eux que cela provient, de celui-ci qui l'a provoqué et qui l'observe maintenant, qui se tait ... Il y a quelque chose dans sa présence silencieuse, dans leur silence à tous, assis en cercle autour de lui, dans leur attente lourde de méfiance, qui, comme par un effet de succion, tire de ces mots qu'il lit toute leur sève, pompe leur sang, ils sont vidés ... des petites choses desséchées ... (p. 161)

Such aspects of people's approach to a work of art might of course well be conveyed to the reader by more descriptive, analytical means. What Nathalie Sarraute is able to do is to recreate for us, in amplified form, the mental sensations as registered by the individuals concerned. By concentrating on these, she suggests, without need to argue the point, that therein lies the secret explanation of the surface pronouncements, rather than in rational thought. Moreover she gives an account, through the impact of individual on individual, individual on group and vice versa, of the workings of public opinion vis-à-vis a work of art, which by means of her method, retains the vast complexity of the phenomenon. What does emerge very clearly is that 'Les Fruits d'Or' has been a counter in an elaborate game. It is a way of entering into contact with other people, a way of being accepted by others. As Julien Gracq says in his polemical essay:

Quand on observe une fois, sans y prendre part, sans entrer dans le jeu, une conversation littéraire, on éprouve avec un léger vertige l'impression qu'on a affaire pour plus de moitié à des daltoniens qui font 'comme si': ils parlent, ils parlent intarissablement de choses qu'ils ne perçoivent, à la lettre, même pas, qu'ils ne percevront jamais; ils s'en font pourtant une espèce de représentation immunisante, avec ce flair particulier aux aveugles: ils peuvent tourner autour, et la conversation chemine, aisée, entre les précipices, comme le somnambule sur sa gouttière.<sup>22</sup>

At the centre of all this critical and mental activity is the novel 'Les Fruits d'Or'. By the end of the book, it has been praised, reviled and generally mishandled in every possible way:

---

22 Gracq, op. cit., p. 23.



On peut l'examiner, le découper en tous sens, en horizontale, en verticale, en transversale, en diagonale, on peut le prendre par tous les bouts, poser sur lui n'importe quelle grille ... (p. 126)

At the beginning it seemed unattackable, like Louis Dumontet at the end of Portrait d'un inconnu, or Martereau when the narrator first knows him.

The similarity of description is striking:

Pure œuvre d'art - cet objet refermé sur lui-même, plein, lisse et rond. Pas une fissure, pas une éraflure par où un corps étranger pût s'infiltrer. Rien ne rompt l'unité des surfaces parfaitement polies dont toutes les parcelles scintillent, éclairées par les faisceaux lumineux de la Beauté. (pp. 45-6)

Or again:

Une petite chose parfaite. Refermée sur elle-même. Ronde. Pleine. Pas une faille, pas une faute de goût. Je n'en ai pas trouvé. Pas une erreur dans la construction. Et si subtil, n'est-ce pas? Si savant sous sa simplicité apparente. (p. 50)

We are reminded equally of the words used in L'Ere du soupçon to describe the healthy effect that the American novel had supposedly exercised on the French product: 'L'objet littéraire pourrait retrouver les contours pleins, l'aspect fini, lisse et dur, des belles œuvres classiques' (p. 13).

As Bernard Pingaud suggests, however, these words make the reader of Sarraute suspicious: 'Nous avons appris à nous méfier de ces qualificatifs.'<sup>23</sup> His suspicions are justified. As the novel proceeds, 'Les Fruits d'Or' disintegrates. Is the construction so perfect? This is soon denied. Are there no faults in taste? This is doubtful. Is it so subtle? This too is questioned. Is it a work of art, after all? At the end of the novel we are still in doubt. Professor Weightman sees this as a fault of the book:

---

<sup>23</sup> Pingaud, 'Le personnage dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute', p. 32.

I can only record my opinion that it is an interesting exercise which, in the last resort, fails to carry conviction. The flaw may be that the nature of 'Les Fruits d'Or' is never suggested, even by implication, and so we can hardly judge how appropriate or inappropriate the reactions are; the book is ingenious but has a hollow in the middle.<sup>24</sup>

In some sense, of course, the nature of the novel is suggested frequently; it might be a psychological study in the tradition of Constant, it might be a book of a particularly modern kind, reflecting the spirit of the times. It might even be a novel by Nathalie Sarraute herself, a strange book which could have had the title 'Pléonasmes' and now has the title 'Les Fruits d'Or'. When a writer tackles such a subject, it is hardly surprising that a personal element should be present. However while such interpretations are made possible by the text itself, the latter also provides evidence that none of them is altogether satisfactory. 'Les Fruits d'Or' cannot be similar both to Constant and to a novel by Robbe-Grillet. Nor can it appear to neglect the psychological discoveries of the last fifty years (p. 115) and rise above 'ces grouillements nausébons' (p. 60), if it is a novel by Nathalie Sarraute herself. We do not know at the end of the novel what kind of work 'Les Fruits d'Or' is, we could not describe it, or put it in any particular category. However this is not necessarily a fault. One could argue that this is not only what Nathalie Sarraute intended but that she achieves thereby an effect which contributes admirably to the theme of her work. If Nathalie Sarraute wants to do the same for a literary work as she did for a character in Martereau, see it as the centre and object of tropisms, it is proper that the book itself be a silent witness or an unresisting victim of the activity of others. As Bernard Pingaud says: 'Le livre étant par nature muet, c'est toujours entre eux que se battent, à propos de lui, les

---

<sup>24</sup> Weightman, op. cit., p. 307.

personnages.'<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as we have seen, Nathalie Sarraute wants to concentrate on the mental reactions of people to 'Les Fruits d'Or'. If her subject-matter then is what people actually do with the novel, how they react to it, each different reaction is as interesting a reaction as another.

Our lack of knowledge of 'Les Fruits d'Or' at the end of the book makes a further point. Nathalie Sarraute has endeavoured to show the inadequacy of the usual critical criteria for dealing with a literary work by demonstrating their dishonesty, their inconsistency, their partiality, their vagueness. By leaving us at the end, after so much activity, no wiser as far as 'Les Fruits d'Or' is concerned, she underlines the uselessness of this activity. In the last analysis, all that has been said has really very little connection with the book itself; to classify, discuss, evaluate will bring one no closer to the work of art, or what is significant about it. Such activities involve other people and distract from the book itself. They are peripheral, or even hostile, to what they are supposed to further: aesthetic experience.

Up until now, we have been concerned with the negative aspects of the novel: the satire of the fashionable literary coterie, the description of the inadequacies and contradictions of critics. There is, however, also a positive side to Les Fruits d'Or: a description of what constitutes, for Nathalie Sarraute, genuine aesthetic experience. Hints of true appreciation of the work of art are given throughout the book; the still small voice is heard, at least by the reader if by no-one else, in the midst of the clamour of the crowd; its apotheosis comes at the end of the novel, in a final section when the noise and bustle is over and the language is no longer frenzied but simple and calm. Bernard Pingaud

---

<sup>25</sup> Pingaud, 'Le personnage dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute', p. 31.

was the first to emphasise this central aspect of the novel: 'La clef du roman est dans ces dernières pages, discrètes, presque allusives, où la fidélité inquiète d'un homme à une œuvre s'exprime dans le langage des tropismes.'<sup>26</sup>

The last section of the novel rounds off its major themes in a number of ways. The present (if not necessarily final?) fate of 'Les Fruits d'Or' is made clear and the new enthusiasms of the literary circle outlined. More important than this, it provides an example of what in Nathalie Sarraute's view is the proper approach to 'Les Fruits d'Or' or any other work and which contrasts in all its aspects with the hectic activity surrounding the novel we have witnessed so far. If the account of this approach is simpler and briefer it is because of its nature. What constitutes genuine aesthetic experience? The most complete description of it is the following:

Je ne sais pas bien ce que c'est ... c'est quelque chose comme ce qu'on sent devant la première herbe qui pousse sa tige timidement ... un crocus encore fermé ... c'est ce parfum qu'ils dégagent, mais ce n'est pas un parfum, pas même encore une odeur, cela ne porte aucun nom, c'est une odeur d'avant les odeurs ... Il me semble que c'est cela ... C'est quelque chose qui me prend doucement et me tient sans me lâcher ... quelque chose d'intact, d'innocent ... comme les doigts fluets d'un enfant qui s'accrocheraient à moi, la main d'un enfant qui se blottirait au creux de ma main. Une candeur confiante se répand partout en moi ... chaque parcelle de moi en est imprégnée ... (pp. 218-9)

The speaker goes on to say that this is above all what counts. If the 'grands bâtiments', the 'fresques à la mesure de notre temps' (p. 218), possess this they are worth something, if not, they are worth nothing:

Qu'importe les bâtiments et les constructions aux dimensions du monde si elles ne contiennent pas le crocus encore fermé, la main d'enfant ... Est-ce là ou non? C'est toute la question. Il n'y a, croyez-moi, que cela qui compte ... (p. 219)

One of the important characteristics of this experience is that it is difficult to describe: 'It is almost indefinable, expressible only by

---

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 34.

metaphor, an experience of empathy for which everyday words seem clumsy and inadequate.<sup>27</sup> It consists in a strong impression of life and of purity, accompanied by a sensation of pleasure. The terms ('quelque chose d'innocent, d'innocent ...') are reminiscent of those Roquentin employs where the jazz tune in La Nausée is concerned.

What are the characteristics of this man who is capable of appreciating a work of art properly? He is solitary, alone with the book.<sup>28</sup> In the words of Pingaud:

Pour devenir lecteur, il faut accepter une solitude identique à celle du romancier, renoncer aux fausses garanties mondaines, revenir à ce vide d'où l'œuvre est issue et où, seule, elle peut reparaître.<sup>29</sup>

He stands outside the crowd, who do not listen to anything he has to say. To him, they are 'ils', the others: 'C'est qu'ils sont si affairés, il y a toujours chez eux un tel vacarme' (p. 216). He is a simple and modest man with no particular qualifications to justify his appreciation; he is no critic, no scholar:

Je le sens très bien, mais je ne sais pas l'exprimer ... je n'ai à ma disposition que de pauvres mots complètement usés à force d'avoir servi à tous et à tout ... il me faudrait posséder le vocabulaire perfectionné de ces savants docteurs. Je sais qu'ils me trouveraient ridicule s'ils m'entendaient. (p. 218)

It is suggested, moreover, that this characteristic is no individual peculiarity. If there are others who, like him, appreciate 'Les Fruits

27 Watson-Williams, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Golden Apples', p. 86.

28 Julien Gracq suggests that the foreign reader is far more apt to find himself in this position than is the French:

Le public, pour un écrivain étranger, ce sont ces petites lampes anonymes qui s'allument paisiblement après le repas du soir, quelque chose comme l'image bucolique d'une tranquille rumination éparse dans la campagne - pour l'écrivain français c'est une drogue, constamment à portée de sa main. (op. cit., pp. 39-40)

29 Bernard Pingaud, 'Le personnage dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute', pp. 33-34.

d'Or' they will be like him in this way also: 'Il doit y en avoir bien d'autres comme moi à travers le monde. Timorés comme moi. Un peu repliés sur eux-mêmes. Pas habitués à s'exprimer' (p. 224).

The critics whom we have seen at work are finally discredited. In the course of this last section the speed of their changes of favour is accelerated: 'Des noms défilent sans cesse, je ne cherche même pas à les retenir' (p. 217). They have abandoned 'Les Fruits d'Or' for a 'Grande Fresque' which presents 'l'homme moderne aux prises avec les grands problèmes de son temps' (p. 217), and which they declare to be better than War and Peace. In a short space of time, however, even Tolstoy's superior is abandoned and they return to a book like 'Les Fruits d'Or':

On pourrait croire que c'est de vous qu'on parle. La grande fresque est oubliée, le vaisseau de l'Histoire a sombré ... il s'agit de nouveau d'un petit joyau bien poli ... une perfection ... ce qu'on a écrit de plus beau depuis quinze ans ... depuis vingt ans ... (p. 222)

The reactions are the same in each case: 'Ce sont toujours les mêmes cris, les mêmes pâmoisons' (pp. 216-7), until the current enthusiasm is abandoned and they pass on to the next. They make so much noise and are so busy that genuine, intimate, solitary contact with a book is impossible. Their ears are filled with what Julien Gracq describes as 'le murmure enfiévré d'une perpétuelle Bourse aux valeurs'.<sup>30</sup> Their immodesty and their empty phrases are contrasted with this individual's modesty and his description of the true experience; the latter follows in each case ironically on some signs of the former. The central character of this section marvels at the antics other people perform and sometimes feels that perhaps he is wrong, yet partly because these antics seem to him so inherently absurd and partly because for him the

---

<sup>30</sup> Gracq, op. cit., p. 21.

novel still comes alive on every subsequent reading, he retains a sense of confidence:

Quand je vois les gens compétents dépecer tranquillement une œuvre quelconque et examiner les morceaux séparés: Là, ce n'est pas mal, c'est très bien venu. L'auteur a réussi son coup. Vous avez vu la scène à la porte du cimetière? Excellent. Et la petite vieille assise sur le banc au bord de la pelouse? ... Il n'y a pas à dire, ce sont de beaux morceaux ... je m'étonne toujours, je me demande comment ils l'ont. Moi, n'importe quoi, n'importe quel petit bout, pris au hasard, s'insinue en moi ou non. Et quand il le fait, il tire après soi tout le reste. Cela forme un tout indivisible. Comme un être vivant. Mais pour eux, il faut croire que les choses se passent autrement. Alors, comme je me sens auprès d'eux si démunis, il m'arrive de douter. Même à propos de vous, cela m'est arrivé. Mais chaque fois que je retourne auprès de vous, prêt à reconnaître que je me suis trompé ... aussitôt entre vous et moi ça recommence ... Alors je finis par me sentir très sûr ... D'autant plus que j'ai pu constater que tous ces connaisseurs qui m'impressionnaient tant, se laissent distraire si facilement ... ils varient sans cesse, ils renient, ils oublient ... (pp. 221-2)

With this final sentence the critics are disposed of.

What of 'Les Fruits d'Or'? It has survived in the only way possible by becoming part of a man's life:

Nous sommes si proches maintenant, vous êtes tellement une partie de moi, qu'il me semble que si vous cessiez d'exister, ce serait comme une part de moi-même qui deviendrait du tissu mort. (p. 225)

But of course its future fate remains shrouded in uncertainty: 'Je me demande par moments ce que vous deviendrez plus tard, sans moi ... où vous allez aborder? où échouer?' (p. 225). If there are enough readers like this one it may survive. No one can tell. All we know is that it will be not the critics and the literary circles who ensure the survival of works of art. The novel ends of a note of furious rejection where they are concerned. Their reactions are as regular as clockwork; when the work is fashionable, they all praise it, when it goes out of favour they are equally predictable: 'rien que de savoir cela à coup sûr, de l'attendre, me jetait dans une espèce de fureur' (p. 226).

There are a number of imperfect experiences of the aesthetic in the course of the novel leading up to the final experience of the last

section. All those characters for whom the novel suddenly, momentarily, comes alive are on the verge at least of true appreciation. The third party of the first section, resisting the influence of the critic, his friend, still feels something of this as he opens the book:

J'entends comme un très faible son ... un très léger tintement ... les ondes, d'un mot à l'autre, d'une phrase à l'autre se propagent, quelque chose résonne très discrètement, je l'entends, je n'y peux rien. (p. 38)

The young man (later identified as Henri), who longs to contradict and argue with the man who drew particular attention to the shawl episode, knows what the experience should be like:

Si vous avez réussi à découvrir une seule parcelle de quelque chose d'intact, qui vibre, qui vit, c'est de cela qu'il fallait parler, c'est cela qu'il fallait leur montrer et pas cette camelote. (p. 71)

The critic, Parrot, forced into the arena out of his solitary study, recaptures it momentarily only to lose it again when he has to formulate it in words to his hostile audience:

De toutes ses forces ramassées, il cherche à détourner ces ondes maléfiques qu'ils émettent ... Et voilà que dans ces mots, dans ces phrases apparaît comme un à peine perceptible gonflement ... cela palpète doucement ... Il se décide, il s'éclaircit la voix ... mais les mots, dès qu'il les prononce, pareils à des bulles qu'on envoie dans un air trop lourd, s'amenuisent, se réduisent, il ne reste presque rien, il n'y avait rien. (p. 162)

An anonymous speaker towards the end of the book (arguably the same as the one in the final section) feels it more strongly than any of the previous figures, perhaps because the general enthusiasm for the novel is now over:

Et soudain, c'est comme un effluve, un rayonnement, une lumière ... je distingue mal sa source restée dans l'ombre ... Cela afflue vers moi, se répand ... Quelque chose me parcourt ... c'est comme une vibration, une modulation, un rythme ... c'est comme une ligne fragile et ferme qui se déploie, tracée avec une insistante douceur ... c'est une arabesque naïve et savante ... cela scintille faiblement ... cela a l'air de se détacher sur un vide sombre ... Et puis la ligne scintillante s'amenuise, s'estompe comme résorbée et tout s'éteint ... (p. 195)

Nathalie Sarraute does not over-simplify the picture; the false and the true shade off into one another in complex fashion. There are examples of experiences resembling true appreciation even though they are provoked by



217

some second-hand comment rather than by contact with the book itself. The women who decide they appreciate it because it is a true story, or because it has the quality of elegance, register something which is at least closer to the true experience than are the intellectual constructs of the critics.<sup>31</sup>

Helen Watson-Williams argues that there is a central figure in Les Fruits d'or, that 'while we are following the fortunes of the inset novel, we are also following the experience of one single young man who may be seen as Mme Sarraute's hero'.<sup>32</sup> He is, she says, the third party of the first section of the book, who is lost from sight when 'Les Fruits d'Or' enters the public arena, and who reappears, when its moments of fame and notoriety are over, to express a continuing appreciation of the novel, to challenge the majority view and to provide a description of genuine aesthetic experience. The argument is very persuasive. Importance is given to this figure, it is suggested, by the part he plays in the initial sections:

partly through the indirect presentation of him that results from outsiders' discussion, chiefly through the revelation of his state of mind when he anxiously recalls the same incident of offering the Courbet card to unsympathetic companions and so revives his accompanying sense of humiliation.<sup>33</sup>

The character is shown to develop, since each time he goes back to the novel the experience of pleasure grows, his determination to defend the work increases. Thus the form of the novel depends on these two strands, novel and reader:

---

<sup>31</sup> Helen Watson-Williams points to the experience of the woman who reacts violently to the account of the shawl episode as an example of someone who finds the aesthetic experience too distressing and therefore rejects it (pp. 85-6). It seems rather that the violence of the woman's emotion is to be explained by a quite personal source. She has seen her husband put a shawl on someone's shoulders in this way and rejects the meaning which might therefore equally be read into his gesture. She is one of those people whose judgments in aesthetic matters are influenced by external factors.

<sup>32</sup> See note 6.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 88.

210

With this ultimate identity of book and reader the narrative design, including as it does both the account of the book's fortunes and the development of the young man, is brought to its common conclusion.<sup>34</sup>

There are two passages in particular which support this argument that the third party of the first section and the lone individual of the last are one and the same person. The latter looks back at one point to a stage before the enthusiasm began when he first encountered 'Les Fruits d'Or' and which seems to describe part at least of the past experience of the man in the first section with his friend the critic:

Déjà autrefois, quand on venait de se rencontrer, vous et moi, avant qu'ils se soient tous emparés de vous et qu'ils aient commencé à organiser en votre honneur toutes ces grandes réceptions avec fastes et déploiements de service d'ordre, je me montrais toujours prudent. J'attendais, comme ils font souvent, que l'autre commence ... je voulais voir quelle direction il prendrait pour lui emboîter le pas. (p. 220)

The other passage is that in which the individual at the beginning of the novel is the first to experience that true appreciation of 'Les Fruits d'Or', which is expanded and deepened in the last section:

J'avoue que là, il me semble que je perçois ... je n'y peux rien ... j'entends comme un très faible son ... un très léger tintement ... les ondes, d'un mot à l'autre, d'une phrase à l'autre se propagent, quelque chose résonne très discrètement, je l'entends, j'en'y peux rien. (p. 38)

There are, however, certain objections to the argument. Even if the man of the early sections and that of the last are the same, are the anonymous protagonists of the third last section and that of the last the same? One must at least admit to certain doubts. The tone of the section beginning on page 188 is considerably more hysterical and frenzied; the speaker appears less simple, tries to operate in the critics' own terms and is destroyed by them. The speaker at the end knows he cannot argue with them about the book and all he says to those, to whom he feels he can recommend it, is 'Entre nous, c'est un fameux bouquin (...) Il faut le lire absolument' (p. 223). Equally one wonders why these separate appreciations of the novel should be attributed all to this one person;

---

<sup>34</sup> ibid., p. 90.

there are others who clearly have a separate identity: the man called Henri, and the critic Parrot. It seems arguable that one ought not to try and make the characters less anonymous than Nathalie Sarraute appears to have intended them to be. Could one not see the pattern rather in terms of the emergence at the end of a number of readers, such as the last speaker posits, each coming into direct contact with the book but in isolation from one another, thus contrasting with the sheep-like crowd of the literary circle? The initial sections in any case justify themselves by initiating us into a number of the important themes of the book: the subject of collective enthusiasms is touched on through Courbet, the idea that these may hamper true appreciation is introduced and we are led into a critic's study and then into a literary salon. The article which opens the discussion is, in all likelihood, the one whose composition we have just witnessed: 'depuis Stendhal, Brûlé a raison, depuis Constant' (p. 49). Nor does our rejection of this particular theory imply that the novel as a whole has on that account a less satisfactory construction. For the most part the sections of the novel, and the sections within sections, are carefully linked together. Sometimes the link arises out of their sense content, the way in which they trace another stage in the novel's career or raise, always in connection with this particular novel, another problem of literary criticism. Sometimes they take up a point in the preceding section, show someone reacting to it, drawing perhaps a third person into the arena. Sometimes a theme touched on in an earlier section recurs, for example the reappearance of Rimbaud in the second last section of the book, or the reference to 'ces savants docteurs' (p. 218) in the last section. The structure depends on such a close interweaving of themes and on the paralleling of slightly altered situations. The emphasis at first is on the contradictory views of 'Les Fruits d'Or' and gradually develops into discussion of the major problems which the novel provokes. In the earlier part of the novel, we have the isolated doubters; towards the end, the isolated admirers. There

220

are the people who demand that they be shown precisely what others mean about the book: 'Le livre en main' (p. 86); on the first occasion they only ask in order to join in the general appreciation; on the second the request is a challenge. The phrase which ends the long section, devoted to the social gathering and providing a microcosm of the way in which the novel achieves success, has an equally ironic flavour. It will be echoed at the end of the book, there expressing surprise that someone should still bother with 'Les Fruits d'Or', here that the question of its merit should still be considered open to discussion.

The prière d'insérer to Les Fruits d'or makes the following claim: 'C'est à certain aspects essentiels du phénomène esthétique que touche ce roman de Nathalie Sarraute.' On the one hand, it describes the experience of at least one reader who approaches the book in a proper way, in solitude without pretensions, letting it come alive in his own mind. On the other, it criticises the professional readers and fashionable literary circles. It does not provide any sure means of testing the value of a book; there is no certainty that 'Les Fruits d'Or' will survive the death of its one admirer. There is none of the consensus of opinion about 'Les Fruits d'Or' which would support - without proving - a conclusion about its worth. On the other hand it does describe the experience which must form the only initial firm basis for such a conclusion: the appreciation of one reader.

Les Fruits d'or is a difficult work to write about, as many reviewers and critics have said. The mise en abyme technique which Nathalie Sarraute uses here ensures that, like Les Faux-monnayeurs, Les Fruits d'or carries within it its own defence. When we find in Les Faux-monnayeurs the following question being put to Edouard: 'Ne craignez-vous pas, en quittant la réalité, de vous égarer dans des régions mortellement abstraites, et de faire un roman, non d'êtres vivants, mais

d'idées',<sup>35</sup> we are aware of Gide being ironic at his own expense and we are disarmed.<sup>36</sup> Similarly where Nathalie Sarraute's novel is concerned, so many of the commonplaces of criticism are contained in its pages that the critic writing about Les Fruits d'or is already parodied in those who speak of 'Les Fruits d'Or'. Not only this; it also throws doubt on the whole value of the activity, suggesting that the communication of aesthetic pleasure, essentially a solitary affair, is difficult if not impossible. All one can usefully say is: 'Entre nous, c'est un fameux bouquin. (...) Il faut le lire absolument' (p. 223).

---

<sup>35</sup> Les Faux-monnayeurs, Paris, 1925, pp. 241-2.

<sup>36</sup> Nathalie Sarraute herself remains resistant: 'je n'aimais pas Les Faux-monnayeurs ... ça paraissait assez superficiel' (Boulle, op. cit., p. 343). It is amusing that of all her novels Les Fruits d'or has tended to meet with criticism of a kind frequently made of Les Faux-monnayeurs, e.g. 'Les Fruits d'or est une œuvre décevante, négative et gratuite, mais d'une fascinante rigueur intellectuelle' (Marie-Laure Vernière-Plank, Nathalie Sarraute. Tradition et 'modernité' d'une œuvre contemporaine, Ph.D. thesis, Fordham, 1967-8, p. 221).

Chapter 7 Entre la vie et la mort

Ce que je veux, c'est présenter d'une part la  
réalité, présenter d'autre part cet effort pour  
la styliser.

GIDE

Entre la vie et la mort has close links with the previous novels and, we would wish to argue, represents a culmination of certain themes contained in them. Its relationship to Les Fruits d'or is of course particularly close: 'Chaque roman est pour moi comme un prolongement, un approfondissement du précédent.'<sup>1</sup> Those sections of Entre la vie et la mort which deal with the public reception of the writer's work are very much in the spirit of the previous novel, and the reader who comes to Entre la vie et la mort, having already read Les Fruits d'or, may well feel that the latter novel sets the former in a context which further enlightens it. But there is more to the relationship than this: the basic concern of each novel is closely linked to that of the other. As was the case with Martereau and Portrait d'un inconnu, Entre la vie et la mort might be said to take up the exploration where Les Fruits d'or left off. The final section of Les Fruits d'or presents the one reader who, despite the noisy activity and contradictory pronouncements of the critics and the book's public at large, has managed to capture and to preserve a sense of direct contact with the work, thus recreating for himself what the writer had attempted to convey in his novel:

C'est ce contact direct, justement, cette sensation première à la racine d'une œuvre que j'ai tenté de montrer dans Entre la vie et la mort, sensation constamment menacée, détruite, et renaissant pour être à nouveau mise en péril de mort.<sup>2</sup>

Les Fruits d'or is of course concerned with readers, Entre la vie et la mort with writers, but both aim to explore the relationship with the work of art and to identify what the distinguishing characteristics of

---

<sup>1</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute et les secrets de la création', p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

the latter are. The formulations of the modest reader in Les Fruits d'or are hesitant:

Je ne sais pas bien ce que c'est ... c'est quelque chose comme ce qu'on sent devant la première herbe qui pousse sa tige timidement. (p. 218)

Entre nous, c'est un fameux bouquin. Tombé dans l'oubli, je n'ai jamais compris pourquoi. Il faut le lire absolument. (p. 223)

Entre la vie et la mort attempts to take such statements further and, though it is dealing with the subject from the angle of writer rather than reader, the work of art remains at the centre.

The links with Les Fruits d'or are particularly evident. But more perhaps than any previous novel, Entre la vie et la mort can be seen as bringing to culmination themes contained in all Nathalie Sarraute's earlier work. She herself admits as much in an interview with Geneviève Serreau:

C'est un livre qui était contenu en germe dans tous les autres. Je crois pour l'avoir découvert progressivement au cours de mes autres livres, que la situation de l'écrivain 'entre la vie et la mort' est pour moi la plus révélatrice de toutes. C'est une expérience limite qui rejoint les expériences partielles de tous mes romans.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of the novel, like that of Les Fruits d'or, occurred to her while she was engaged in writing Le Planétarium: 'En fait, déjà quand j'écrivais Le Planétarium, j'ai pensé que je pourrais essayer un jour de montrer l'effort créateur d'un écrivain.'<sup>4</sup> Les Fruits d'or grew out of the scene in Le Planétarium where Germaine Lemaire confronts her work, both past and present, in the isolation of her study. In that scene, the writer's isolation from the outside world is shown to be incomplete; her friends are in another room waiting for her to finish writing and join them; the presence of a wider public outside the flat

---

<sup>3</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.



makes itself felt through the hostile criticism which preys on her mind and influences her opinion of her work. Les Fruits d'or explores some of the implications of the experience outlined in this scene; it is, as we saw, concerned with the way in which the work, once published, takes on a life independent of its creator, with what happens to it once it is delivered into the hands of its readers. Entre la vie et la mort develops other aspects of the scene. Germaine Lemaire resembles the successful writer of the later novel whose sense of mastery over his medium is complete:

Son style toujours docile peut, quand il le faut, porté à l'incandescence, forer lentement une matière dure qui résiste, et, par moments, il peut glisser - un souffle, un frémissement, un coup d'aile qui effleure les choses sans courber leur duvet léger ... 'Vraiment, je crois que je suis arrivée à faire à peu près ce que je veux avec les mots' - elle peut oser dire cela.<sup>5</sup>

N'importe quels mots, les plus démunis, les plus vieux, les plus affaiblis, usés dans les tâches les plus humbles, peuvent, choisis par lui, être investis de grands pouvoirs.<sup>6</sup>

In both cases hostile criticism from an outside source leads the writer suddenly to doubt his own achievements: 'Mais c'est là. Là précisément, dans cette aisance, dans cette satisfaction, dans cette joie; c'est dans cette maîtrise si grande et dans cette perfection: Madame Tussaud.'<sup>7</sup> Germaine Lemaire turns in vain to her favourite work in an attempt to shake off the hostile influence:

Comme c'est inerte. Pas un frémissement. Nulle part. Pas un soupçon de vie. Rien. Tout est figé. Figé. Figé. Figé. Figé. Complètement figé. Glacé. Un enduit cireux, un peu luisant, recouvre tout cela. Une mince couche de vernis luisant sur du carton. Des masques en cire peinte.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Le Planétarium, p. 190.

<sup>6</sup> Entre la vie et la mort, p. 210.

<sup>7</sup> Le Planétarium, p. 190.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 191.

A related image is used by the writer in Entre la vie et la mort:

Il a osé forcer, asservir ce dont autrefois il ne s'approchait qu'avec tant de précautions (...) cette petite chose impalpable, timide, tremblante, qui chemine, progresse doucement, propulsant les mots, les faisant vibrer (...), il l'a obligée à surveiller sa ligne, à se faire toute mince pour bien porter ces modèles de grand couturier, ces phrases qu'avec tant de soins, d'efforts il a dessinées (...) elle doit avoir fini par acquérir la grâce anonyme et grêle, la désinvolture appliquée des mannequins ... (pp. 224-5)

The ultimate reactions of the two writers are of course different. By an effort of will, Germaine Lemaire finally rejects this hostile view of her work and continues to write as she had done before. The writer of Entre la vie et la mort, as the above extract from the novel makes clear, realises and admits to his own failing as a writer and, profiting from his renewed clarity of vision, rejects the academic writer he has become and returns to the struggle for authenticity he had previously engaged in. A parallel is provided not only by Germaine Lemaire but also by the other writer of Le Planétarium, potential if not actual: Alain, and in some respects it is a closer parallel. Alain, the suggestions are, promises to be a better writer than Germaine Lemaire in as much as his insights are new and belong to him alone: 'Déjà il trouve une substance vivante dans des choses qui paraissent à tous sans intérêt, qui ne sont pas admises, que tous dédaignent et qui lui appartiennent à lui seul.'<sup>9</sup> It is the perception of such a 'substance vivante' which is the initial distinguishing feature of the writer in Entre la vie et la mort and it is his renewed fidelity to this which marks his return to authenticity as a writer.

In Entre la vie et la mort, the central themes of Nathalie Sarraute's previous work find their most explicit formulation: the study of man

---

<sup>9</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute et les secrets de la création', p. 4.

as private and public animal and the relationship between the two, the exploration of 'l'effort créateur'. The situation of the writer is seen as resuming these basic aspects of human experience in their acutest and most manifest form. Micheline Tison Braun has pointed out the link between the central figure of this novel and the figure she describes as the 'solitaire hérissé' of Tropismes:

On reconnaît sans peine dans ce Il le solitaire hérissé de Tropismes, parvenu à la maturité créatrice, et l'on retrouve, à travers lui, le problème posé dans Tropismes: qu'est-ce que ce Moi et ce Je que nous appelons notre personnalité? Sur quel plan, dans quelles conditions et par quels efforts est-il possible de dégager un être unifié, authentique, de cette pensée de tout le monde que les mots charrient et de ce fluide anonyme où baignent toutes les consciences?<sup>10</sup>

The link will seem all the more striking when one remembers that the second sketch, in which the 'solitaire hérissé' makes an appearance, and in which people's existence is seen as spurious and language as irremediably tainted by the commonplace, was the first which Nathalie Sarraute composed.<sup>11</sup> Thus themes embarked on in 1932 find their ultimate expression in 1968.

There is another sense in which this novel resumes the experience represented by Nathalie Sarraute's previous fiction: in as much as it narrates the career of a writer, it is, to some extent at least, autobiographical. This is, of course, a statement one must hasten to qualify. It is not necessarily autobiographical on a personal, anecdotal level; the figure of the father, for example, is a representative one and very different in fact from Nathalie Sarraute's own father: 'Je ne connais pas d'homme plus généreux qu'était mon père et j'ai décrit un père avare.'<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Tison Braun, op. cit., pp. 194-5.

<sup>11</sup> See chapter 1, note 78.

<sup>12</sup> Knapp, p. 287. The remark concerns more specifically Portrait d'un inconnu but the father in Entre la vie et la mort has an equally ungenerous disposition even if his lack of generosity displays itself in matters other than financial.

Nonetheless the general shape - and some of the details - of the writer's career is clearly reminiscent of Nathalie Sarraute's own (if equally of many others). A long period of obscurity, 'un si long effacement' (p. 19), is followed by considerable public acclaim. The fictional writer's beginnings are similar to those of the real author: the 'mince paquet de feuillets' (p. 110), which he offers to the publisher, cannot but recall Tropismes. The situation of the writer as described in the seventh section of the novel is very much that of the narrator of Portrait d'un inconnu (and through him, of Nathalie Sarraute herself). Words overheard produce in him reactions he feels impelled to examine:

C'est là en lui, il ne sait pas ce que c'est ... c'est comme un fluide, comme des effluves ... un mot quelconque, tout à fait banal, a transporté cela, un mot a pénétré en lui, s'est ouvert et a répandu cela partout, il en est imbibé, cela circule dans ses veines, charrié par son sang, des caillots se forment, des engorgements, des poches, des tumeurs qui enflent, pèsent, tirent ... Et avec l'obstination des maniaques il cherche à découvrir d'où viennent les élancements, il palpe les endroits douloureux pour trouver leur place exacte, délimiter leurs contours ... (pp. 69-70)

He too wants to communicate his insights but he is nervous of his public which is disapproving, and attempts to mollify them by producing character-sketches, only to find the tables are turned against him when these are dismissed as gossip. Equally familiar are the hesitations expressed by the writer, the tone of self-doubt in the conversation with the publisher:

'Vos projets?' 'Je vais continuer ... enfin je crois ...'  
'Vous croyez? Quand avez-vous terminé ça?' 'Oh, il y a bientôt un an ... Mais je n'osais pas, je voulais garder juste pour moi ... même détruire, parfois ...' (p. 110)

The writer's lack of confidence renders him vulnerable to pressures from outside, to the expectations of others:

Rien que vous n'approuviez. Tout ce que vous souhaitiez. Je suis de mon temps, croyez-moi. Un temps qui m'offre - ingrat que j'étais - une mine à exploiter. Je m'étire à sa mesure ... énorme ... Je suis de taille à affronter ses angoisses, son absurdité. Noble. Fort et triste. Désespéré. Détaché de tous les suintements. Rien de louche, je vous assure. (p. 89)

It is a temptation and a danger which Nathalie Sarraute had described years earlier in very similar terms:

Mais il sait bien, tandis que replié sur lui-même, macérant dans le liquide protecteur de son petit bocal bien clos, il se contemple et contemple ses semblables, qu'au dehors des choses très importantes (peut-être, et il se le dit avec angoisse, les seules vraies choses importantes) se passent: des hommes probablement très différents de lui-même et de ses parents et amis, des hommes qui ont d'autres chats à fouetter que de se pencher sur leurs frémissements intimes, et chez qui d'ailleurs de grosses souffrances, de grandes et simples joies, de puissants besoins très visibles devraient, semble-t-il, écraser ces très subtils frémissements, des hommes à qui va sa sympathie et souvent son admiration, agissent et luttent, et il sait que pour être en accord avec sa conscience et répondre aux exigences de son temps, c'est d'eux et non de lui-même ou de ceux qui lui ressemblent qu'il lui faudrait s'occuper.<sup>13</sup>

It is perhaps most of all in those central passages in the novel where we are concerned with the creative activity itself, that we feel that Nathalie Sarraute is drawing on her own experience. The description of 'les affres du style', the writer's struggle with his material, seems peculiarly appropriate to the author's own work. Nathalie Sarraute's starting point too is 'ce mouvement d'une parcelle de substance vivante' (p. 104); her aim and her methods are similar:

Il faut capter cela, ce mouvement, l'isoler, chercher ... n'est-il pas possible pour qu'il se reproduise avec plus de netteté et se développe de créer des conditions plus favorables? le faire passer ailleurs, dans d'autres images mieux assemblés, d'autres paroles ou intonations, comme on transplante une pousse sauvage, dans un terrain amélioré, enrichi de terreau, nourri d'engrais, dans un lieu bien clos, une serre où sera maintenue constamment une température appropriée? (pp. 103-4)<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> L'Ere du soupçon, pp. 86-7. The fact that Entre la vie et la mort was published in the Paris of 1968 underlines ironically the dilemma that Nathalie Sarraute describes.

<sup>14</sup> One of a number of passages, where Nathalie Sarraute describes her own work in similar terms, is the following:  
Des difficultés de toutes sortes surgissent à tous les stades de ce travail. D'abord quand se forme, souvent très difficilement, la sensation initiale. Elle est d'abord très confuse, et il faut la rendre plus intense, plus précise, la faire passer dans l'écriture où elle se décante, se décompose, se recompose, se ramifie, s'amplifie. (Pivot, p. 13)

As with his use of imagery, so the writer's characteristic sentence structure is clearly reminiscent of Nathalie Sarraute's own:

Les mots qu'une même vibration traverse se soudent les uns aux autres ... les phrases se brisent pour que cette parcelle vivante qu'elles portent ne soit pas comprimée, déformée ... elles s'ouvrent pour la laisser passer librement, jaillir, ou bien elles sinuent, se retournent sur elles-mêmes. (pp. 245-6)

It is possible, then, to see Entre la vie et la mort as a very personal account of Nathalie Sarraute's experience as a creative writer. It is, of course, more than this. The aim of the novel is to explore the situation of the writer, any writer: personal experience is a means rather than an end: 'J'ai essayé de la montrer [i.e. l'expérience de la création littéraire] le plus sincèrement possible, telle que je la vis moi-même ou telle que peuvent, je crois, la vivre d'autres écrivains.'<sup>15</sup> So, far from being simply a self-portrait, Entre la vie et la mort, it can be argued, has no one central character. In the prière d'insérer Nathalie Sarraute warns us against attempting to create a hero:

Le lecteur qui se laisserait aller à son habitude de chercher partout des personnages, qui perdrait son temps à vouloir caser à toute force les mouvements, les tropismes qui constituent la substance de ce livre, s'apercevrait que ses efforts pour les loger convenablement l'ont amené à construire un héros fait de pièces disjointes, qui peut difficilement tenir debout.

This is not to suggest that we must see each section as dealing with a different figure. It is perfectly possible to argue that we follow the same figure through the novel from section to section but only if this figure is properly understood as representative rather than individual. As Micheline Tison Braun says, 'ses comportements sont virtuels, non réels'.<sup>16</sup> He is the writer, any writer, and the experiences described are likely to be his.

Nathalie Sarraute's talent for creating a strong sense of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute et les secrets de la création', p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Tison Braun, op. cit., p. 194.

particular, while at the same time suggesting general implications, has been a major characteristic of her work since Tropismes. In this novel it finds peculiarly strong expression. One might cite particular examples. There is the figure of the mother who clearly does not represent a single identifiable 'character' but a number of reactions typical of a mother or mother-type figure. A similar example is the interview accorded to journalists by the writer when he is at last hovering on the brink of success. One particular episode is being explored and rendered in considerable detail but its effects on the public are then seen as possibly arising out of a number of different interviews, either printed in a newspaper or appearing on the television screen. A characteristic process is being explored not an individual case, even if it is the individual example which brings the process alive for the reader. What is particularly interesting about Entre la vie et la mort is that, for the first time in a novel, Nathalie Sarraute has embodied this delicate balance between the particular and the general in her central character. We saw how Les Fruits d'or differed from the previous novels in its treatment of character. There, in Nathalie Sarraute's words, 'characters are dispensed with even as appearances'. But there the concentration on tropisms was achieved by the multiplicity of characters; the unifying factor became the novel 'Les Fruits d'Or', an empty cipher which the on-lookers filled with meaning. Here Nathalie Sarraute returns to a central character while retaining within that character the idea of multiplicity. She has arguably at last wholly succeeded in presenting us with a 'character' whom we cannot treat in the same way as 'characters' in the traditional novel. It is impossible to make the kind of character sketch of the writer in Entre la vie et la mort, which one might have made of Alain Guimiez for example.

The careful balance which Nathalie Sarraute seeks to achieve between

general and particular is one of the raisons d'être of the first chapter of the novel. Here we have a successful writer being questioned by an admiring audience about the secrets of his trade. A 'je' figure is brought briefly into the limelight and hastens back, as quickly as he is allowed, into the anonymity of the crowd. It is possible to see the rest of the novel as being concerned with the career of this 'je'. We meet him at the point when he is just beginning to embark on his literary career, when he is still full of hesitation and self-doubt, lacking the confidence which enables the other to play his role of writer in the harsh light of public scrutiny. In the second section, we are told of 'tant d'années de solitude', 'un si long effacement' (p. 19). Towards the end of the novel, this figure achieves the same measure of success as the writer in the first section. He is seen playing an identical role before an encouraging audience. The terms used underline the similarity:

J'ai beaucoup de mal ... Sans cesse je recommence ... Il replie le bras ... Il serre le poing ... J'arrache ... Il étend le bras ... Je prends une autre feuille ... Il hoche la tête de côté et d'autre ... il plisse les lèvres ... (p. 203)

'Je' and 'il' merge into one character.

It would however be equally possible to see these two figures as identical throughout. This novel, unlike the previous ones, not only deals explicitly and unambiguously with a writer figure but also with a successful writer, a writer who has achieved a public reputation and who equally, in all likelihood, has written something worthwhile (though the two achievements may not always coincide). Thus the novel starts out from a statement of the writer's success and goes on to explore what lies behind this success, starts from the image and goes on to explore the reality beneath. There are certainly links from section to section, which might support the argument that we are dealing throughout with the same figure. Both the successful writer in the first section and the struggling writer in the second instance their reactions to people's use of 'faire' as an



example of their sensitivity to words. Again the figure in the second section recalls playing with words as a young child and the words he cites are those which form the subject matter of the third section. What is to be emphasized, however, is that these links are links of typical experience rather than of individual character: the different sections of the novel could be dealing with the same writer or with different writers as far as individual character is concerned, but they are dealing with the same experience - that of being a writer - all the way through.

The novel's title, Entre la vie et la mort, sums up its central statement. Critics have tended to concentrate over-exclusively on the creative activity in which the writer is engaged. This is understandable. It is this activity which is at the centre of any novel: two of the lengthiest and most important sections (one being the final one) are devoted exclusively to an exploration of this activity, and others involve it in a more indirect fashion. But, though this is clearly the central secret of the writer, it does not represent the sum of his experience and it is his total experience that the novel sets out to explore. The title refers, we would contend, both to the actual activity of writing and to the writer's experience as a whole. At the end of Les Fruits d'or, after all the efforts of critics and readers to analyse, define, evaluate the novel which is the subject of attention, it emerges that all that can be usefully said about it is that it comes alive for one particular reader. This is the only genuine mark of value. This is what the writer in Entre la vie et la mort reiterates when he calls his alter ego into operation, when he stands back from what he has written and lets his critical self stand in judgment upon it. The only words he considers useful are 'alive' and 'dead':

Vous savez, moi, je suis tout simple. Très primitif. Je ne me sers que de deux mots ... A quoi bon les autres ... plat, creux, déclamatoire, figolé, léché ... soyez tranquille, on vous les dira. Mais entre nous deux mots suffisent. Aussi grossiers que ceux-là: c'est mort. C'est vivant. (pp. 98-9)

The writer face to face in solitude with his work hovers between life and death. His initial experience qua writer, according to Nathalie Sarraute, is not a linguistic one as many people would have him believe. It is rather the perception of some living substance, a perception which cannot at that moment be put into words precisely because the writer is the first to discover it: 'Elle qui ne se laisse pas nommer ... ce que je sens ... moi seul ... cette chose intacte, vivante ... Je ne sais pas ce qu'elle est' (p. 252). It is then the writer's task to express this perception in words and here the dangers enter in. Once he has done so, he may find that his insights are stifled, that the words have killed them. This may happen at an early stage, should he allow himself to adopt some label that the crowd uses, thus implying that what he has perceived is familiar, banal, already explored and catalogued. Or it may happen later if his interest in words for their own sake takes over and he finds himself polishing, prettifying, until his original objective has disappeared from view. The novel's conclusion stresses the strength and the fragility of the writer's insight. It still persists, surviving all the dangers that beset it, but its state of health is far from robust: 'Vous, mon double, mon témoin ... là, penchez-vous avec moi ... ensemble regardons ... est-ce que cela se dégage, se dépose ... comme sur les miroirs qu'on approche de la bouche des mourants ... une fine buée?' (p. 254). The significance of the title extends beyond the creative act itself to encompass the whole being of the writer. If his distinguishing characteristics qua writer are an initial insight, followed by a determination to preserve and express that insight in a living form, then he must keep his powers of vision unclouded. There are, however, all kinds of pressures upon him which endanger these powers, which vary with the different stages in his career but which persist from childhood onwards through the years of struggle and obscurity into the period of success. Contacts with the

outside world bring with them danger, yet they are inevitable. The writer can cling to his protective obscurity or look back upon it nostalgically once it is lost but he wants to publish, to be read, to hear words of praise about his work, to communicate what he has perceived. He cannot escape this contradiction:

I had wanted to show the terrible kind of ambiguity in which he works. He is constantly tossed back and forth between the need for total solitude and the need for a certain amount of understanding on the part of others, of approbation, because in order to live a book needs a reader,<sup>17</sup>  
 t of others; or ap

Thus he can never escape the awareness of a public outside his study or the potential threat to his integrity which it represents. Moreover it is this very sensitivity towards the outside world which makes of him a writer. It is true that the creative struggle is essentially a solitary one. That the writer when writing must preserve himself from outside influences if he is to be true to his vision and express it satisfactorily on the page. Nonetheless it is in the world outside his study, in his perceptions of other people, or his own reaction to them, that the writer finds his original material. If he successfully isolates himself, by whatever means, against the world, he will lose touch with the source of his inspiration. Again he is faced with contradiction: 'Il a besoin des autres, mais ils l'écrasent, l'étouffent.'<sup>18</sup>

Thus it appears, in view of these two principal considerations, that the writer is doomed to engage for ever in a kind of tightrope act; he is in an ambivalent position 'entre la vie et la mort' and it is moreover his natural medium from which he cannot escape without ceasing to be a writer. At the very end of the novel when temporarily at least he has found himself again as a writer, found his way back into his own particular

---

<sup>17</sup> Brée, p. 144.

<sup>18</sup> In conversation with the present writer in 1974.

250  
vision which as a successful writer he had lost, his awareness of the outside world is once more seen as a potential threat to his integrity and his confidence:

Quand par moments je m'arrête, quand je cherche à m'orienter ... où suis-je? Où m'a-t-elle amené? ... il m'arrive de percevoir venant de loin des chuchotements ... Je reconnais des mots de là-bas ... leurs mots ... ils sifflent doucement à mes oreilles ... Hermétisme ... Il s'est égaré ... seul, Sans contact possible avec personne. A se contempler ... (pp. 252-3)

Yet at the point when, as a successful writer, he has, apparently at least, achieved complete mastery over the crowd, so that he can say what he likes without being called to account: "'Debout les morts!" parce que c'est mon bon droit. Mon bon plaisir', at the same time it seems that he has lost his vitality as a writer. He has a sudden intimation of this fact when he sees his position, surrounded by the admiring crowd, as that of the corpse at a funeral reception where everyone, apart from himself, knows that he is dead. He suddenly sees his work in a new light:

Il n'y a rien, depuis les énormes et imposantes machineries de la mort et de l'amour, jusqu'à ces petites choses modestes, une herbe, une touffe de primevères, un bourgeon duveteux, un pétale parsemé de gouttes de rosée ... rien, aucun bijou ancien pieusement conservé, aucun objet usé, mis au rebut, qui, avec lui, ne coure à nouveau sa chance. (pp. 211-2)

In other words, he has become, like Germaine Lemaire, an academic writer.

The tools have become more important than the subject-matter:

Il a osé forcer, asservir ce dont autrefois il ne s'approchait qu'avec tant de précautions, tant de respect, ce qu'il acceptait d'attendre aussi longtemps qu'il le faudrait - ce qui ne se laisse pas nommer, cette petite chose impalpable, timide, tremblante, qui chemine, progresse doucement, propulsant les mots, les faisant vibrer ... qu'elle daigne juste se montrer ... tout sera mis en œuvre pour la servir ... et il a essayé de la dresser, de lui apprendre les bonnes façons, il l'a obligée à surveiller sa ligne, à se faire toute mince pour bien porter ces modèles de grand couturier, ces phrases qu'avec tant de soins, d'efforts il a dessinées, sobrement élégantes ou savamment désordonnées, ou brochées et chamarrées de mots somptueux ... il lui a appris, lui aussi, comme tant d'autres, à s'effacer pour mieux les présenter, les mettre en valeur, et elle doit maintenant ... il préfère ne pas aller regarder, il ne veut pas s'en assurer ... d'ailleurs lui-même probablement ne verrait rien ... elle doit avoir fini par acquérir la grâce anonyme et grêle, la désinvolture appliquée des mannequins ... (pp. 224-5)

The result is a lifeless imitation of life: 'des mannequins'. However one understands the sources of the writer's isolation at this point, whether it should be described as a mastery over the crowd or rather as a total submission to it in the sense that the writer has approximated as closely as he can to the public image of the writer, the outcome is nonetheless an isolation which prevents genuine contacts with the outside world and thus with the source of the writer's material. Here a renewed awareness of criticism, fresh uncertainty and self-doubt, are productive. He finds his way back again to his old preoccupations and insights, to the material which is properly his:

Les voici, les lentes reptations, les mous déroulements, les flageolements, des particules minuscules s'agitent, tournent, s'assemblent, des formes compliquées apparaissent et se défont ... la voici, la vieille fascination ... dans des gouttelettes de gélatine grise des mondes en miniature gravitent ... il s'abandonne à tous les attouchements, aux contacts gluants, toute répulsion disparaît, tout instinct de conservation ... qu'il sente ramper sur son corps pour mieux en suivre tous les méandres leurs processions de fourmis, que les bactéries circulent en lui détruisant les globules de son sang, il veut sentir encore ... plus loin ... jusqu'au bout ... il se colle à eux, il les réchauffe ... (p. 239)

At the centre of the novel, then, is a description of the creative activity of writing, but the writer is an isolated figure, in a limited sense, and the novel as a whole charts his relationships from childhood onwards with the world that surrounds him, concentrating on the dangers which at every stage appear to impede his progress. There is a watershed in the writer's career as it is described in Entre la vie et la mort: publication. The dangers before and after are basically the same but take on a different shape. This is how the difference is formulated by Nathalie Sarraute:

Après Les Fruits d'or, j'ai voulu repartir de plus loin, à la racine de l'œuvre littéraire, au niveau de la source première où elle naît et sur laquelle pèse à chaque instant une menace - à chaque instant et depuis toujours, depuis l'enfance. Elle peut se troubler cette source, se tarir, se perdre. On risque la mort.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute et les secrets de la création', p. 3.

Et puis, une fois que le livre est accepté, l'écrivain prend rang parmi les autres, on lui donne un numéro, on le compare, on le mesure, en fait il est 'pris'. Et il lui devient difficile de retourner à la solitude d'où il sort. Et pourtant il faut qu'il y retourne, si la source n'est pas encore tarie.<sup>20</sup>

The problem, before and after, is to preserve the writer's private and therefore authentic vision against erosion by outside influences. The shape these influences take is largely the pressure to fit a norm, a temptation all the more insidious in that the writer wants to be accepted by his public, is highly sensitive to criticism and anxious to please. As a child, the writer is already open to the pressures of 'idées reçues' concerning his future role in life. When his mother asks him what he is muttering and he replies 'Juste des mots' (p. 30), whatever the value of the images he plays with, he is at least preserving his solitude. He is, however, encouraged by his mother's attitude, and that of the world at large, to think that his interest in words is a sign of talent, a mark distinguishing him as one of the chosen few: 'S'il y a quelque chose qui distingue un écrivain, c'est vraiment ça' (p. 42). His mother may play different roles but which equally threaten his privacy, hamper his independent development and potentially force roles on him. She may adopt an attitude of disapproval, and attempt to bring him down to earth, to shift his interest from the imaginative to the practical, or she may seek fulfilment through the child, adopting an over-protective interest in what she interprets as his budding genius, and claiming to have foreseen his future development from the cradle onwards.<sup>21</sup> The

---

<sup>20</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>21</sup> It is possible that the mother's influence may be positive but only in the sense that it has an effect other than that which she intends: Seule la mère de cet enfant, qui se fait une idée très convenue de ce qu'est 'un écrivain', y voit un signe de ce qui à ses yeux est une 'prédestination'. Elle l'encourage, se mêle à ses jeux, arrive à faire surgir d'autres images du même ordre, de jolies images d'Epinal, à peine plus chargées d'une même poésie de pacotille. Elle parvient alors, sans le vouloir - et c'est peut-être là que pourrait se nicher son espoir naïf d'avoir un fils 'poète' - elle parvient ainsi à le dégoûter de ces jeux, à les lui faire abandonner, comme elle l'a fait s'écarter de tous les objets 'poétiques' vers lesquels elle cherchait à l'attirer, des bourgeons, des chatons, des feuilles d'automne, etc. (Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II, p. 32).

writer who is not yet established as such, who has a manuscript in his drawer but no book in print, is particularly vulnerable. His claims are based on behaviour patterns, on promise, on signs of talent and can readily be made to appear spurious by some familiar and dismissive label: 'enfant prédestiné', 'inadapté'. The writer will be discouraged without any exterior recognition or support and may indeed conclude that his claims are spurious, that he is playing a role for which he has no inner justification. After publication, his situation becomes even more complex. It is an achievement which he may feel justifies his earlier pretensions, but the tables can readily be turned against him by the suggestions that he is thereby failing to live up to the image of the writer, that bourgeois considerations of money and status influence him as much as anyone else. Publication admits him to the society of other writers and it is comforting to discover that others engage in similar pursuits and meet with similar problems. On the other hand, this very similarity seems to devalue the writer's experience by suggesting that it is by no means as unique as he had imagined. If so many are engaged on similar activities, what chances are there of artistic survival? Above all, once he has begun to publish, the writer is increasingly vulnerable to the opinions of others. What was his most private possession is now on public view and, however much he may protest to himself and to others his indifference, he is in fact tremendously sensitive to comment and criticism: he is disarmed and grateful immediately a favourable word is uttered. He may not understand what the critics say but he is humbly grateful that they should say anything. When one critic makes a blunder and refers to an episode in his book which does not exist, he is ready to help him cover it up. He is an easy victim; his defences are down. People can make of him what they will:

Regardez-le. Il est, cela est bien vrai, fait à notre image. Tout pareil à nous. Rien, je vous assure, de miraculeux. Rien qu'une réaction de défense contre de vieux traumatismes, rien que le rachat de très anciennes souffrances, d'échecs anciens ou plus récents ... un besoin inconscient de vengeance ... (p. 155)

To become a success the writer must not appear to need approval, he must demand it as his right; he must project himself, create an image of himself which he holds up for public admiration:

Eh bien pour commencer, il faut entrer ici en conquérant. Forcer les gens à vous obéir ... qu'ils se soumettent, qu'ils se prosternent ... il n'y a rien qu'ils aient autant ... Et pour cela leur donner l'exemple. Se placer à distance de soi-même. Et de là se contempler. Avec adoration, avec émerveillement ... Que tous vos mouvements acquièrent à vos propres yeux l'aspect des gestes hiératiques ... qu'ils se déploient, se projettent violemment, qu'ils aient cette sûreté, cette netteté, cette rigueur, cette lourdeur ... comme s'ils portaient une charge de significations mystérieuses et à la fois précises ... Il faut que vous vous sentiez dans chacun de vos gestes pareil à un souverain pendant les cérémonies du couronnement. Et eux se sentiront honorés, comblés, de pouvoir accomplir avec vous les rites du sacre ... (pp. 200-1)

We see the process at work with the writer at first unwilling, then co-operating, then leading the dance. It begins with early interviews when the writer's reputation hangs in the balance. The interviewers expect him to be more interesting than the average man; that he should like to travel 'comme tant de gens en ce moment', that he should keep a photograph of his wife and child on his desk is disappointing:

C'est à se demander devant tant de conformisme, une telle banalité jusque dans le comportement, dans la coupe des cheveux, les vêtements, s'ils n'ont pas commis une erreur, s'ils seront vraiment les premiers à avoir pénétré là où pour être admis plus tard on fera la queue ... Ou bien s'ils sont les premiers à se laisser tromper, des nigauds en train de se galvauder ... (p. 189)

The interviewers finally retire satisfied but only because they have created a mysterious ritual out of what was in fact a perfectly simple episode. The writer makes some tea in an earthenware teapot and puts it down on the upturned lid of the kettle, upturned so that the steam does not leave a mark on the surface of the furniture; in the version of the interviewers:



241

C'était exquis, ce thé préparé par vous, paraît-il un mélange savant de qualités rares ... infusé dans une théière d'une forme étrange posée sur une sorte de récipient ... (...) ils ont dit que c'était un samovar ... (p. 187)<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the novel, what is at issue is the question of authenticity. Which reactions, characteristics, behaviour-patterns, on the part of the author are genuine, and which spurious? Which does he invent to impress, which are imposed on him from outside? At what point do reactions at first genuine, become spurious? These are the questions the novel is constantly asking. The writer's preoccupations with the word 'faire' is significant: is he a writer or can he only 'faire l'écrivain'? That the latter is true of him is his constant fear. Hence the crushing nature of the blow administered by the apparently sympathetic listener in the second section: 'vous faisiez vraiment enfant prédestiné' (p. 23). The nature of the accusation is made explicit at the end of the section:

Il voudrait trôner, comme ça, sans autres preuves, sans plus d'efforts, parmi ceux qui sont admis sans réserve. 'Faisiez' lui déplait. Il 'était', figurez-vous ... L'insensé essayait de nous faire croire ça. Il veut être parmi ceux qui arrachent, qui froissent et jettent ... (p. 27)

'Ceux qui arrachent, qui froissent et jettent ...' are the real writers. It might seem, then, that the successful writer of the first section who has managed to impose himself on the crowd is successful in every sense. As the novel progresses, however, it emerges that it is rather the crowd which has imposed itself on the writer; he has substituted their image of the writer for his own reality; he is dead and he is the only one

---

22 This fictional incident is not without its real equivalent. One interviewer observes the following in Nathalie Sarraute's study: 'Dans un coin est posé près de quelques tasses, un petit attirail pour faire le thé soi-même.' On her visit to Robbe-Grillet, the same interviewer is provided with more exotic material; she is asked: Voulez-vous du thé de Ceylan, du Yunnan ou du Souchong, de l'Earl Grey ou du Queen Mary, du thé de Chine? Le préférez-vous fumé, ou sentant le jasmin, l'orange ou bien la bergamote? (Bourdet, op. cit., p. 58 and p. 18)

who does not realise the fact. Entre la vie et la mort is in a sense another Martereau, it begins with the conventional figure of the writer and proceeds to explode it. Yet it goes beyond Martereau, in that it moves towards the image as well as away from it: it explores the sources of the images and the writer's struggles against it. On the one side we have the 'real' writer, on the other the image of the writer to which he is encouraged to conform. For Nathalie Sarraute as for Gide, the picture would not be complete without the presence within the novel of both elements in the conflict in which each writer is interested.

'Entre la vie et la mort' is a phrase, we have argued, which applies to the writer's sense of himself and his relations with his public as well as to the activity of writing. The two applications are closely linked. Micheline Tison Braun makes their linking the backbone of her argument where Entre la vie et la mort is concerned:

Dans Entre la vie et la mort, la création de l'œuvre alterne avec la recherche de la personnalité, dont elle est à la fois l'aboutissement et le symbole. Et cela est naturel, car si l'œuvre, création d'une personnalité, en est aussi l'expression sublimé, réciproquement la conquête d'une personnalité est, pour chacun de nous, le poème, le roman qu'il crée à travers toute sa vie, avec plus ou moins de sincérité et de talent.

L'authenticité de l'œuvre et celle de la vie sont présentées alternativement comme condition et conséquence l'une de l'autre, prenant toutes deux leur source en ce point où vie, conscience et création émergent ensemble du néant.<sup>23</sup>

What Micheline Tison Braun perhaps does not emphasise clearly enough is that it is the struggle itself that is fruitful where the artist is concerned. Without the threat, there would be no resistance; without the problems of the writer, no Entre la vie et la mort. In 1960, writing of the situation of the modern writer, Nathalie Sarraute argued as follows:

---

<sup>23</sup> Tison Braun, op. cit., p. 193.

To seize upon the finest bit of reality under the layer of clichés that covers it, we must mobilize considerable inner strength, develop great offensive power and a real spirit of independence. This offensive power, this spirit of independence are the principal, the most indispensable gifts that a writer needs to possess. And the greater the force that allows him to break through appearance, the further his impetus will carry him, the more genuine and new will be the works he creates. One might even go as far as to say that if, one fine day, a miracle were to rid us of the platitudes that surround us on every side - but thank heaven, this will never happen - then the writer's fate might really present cause for anxiety.<sup>24</sup>

The interdependence of life and work in Entre la vie et la mort is emphasized by a deliberate blurring of the distinction between the two. On the one hand, we see the writer trying to put onto paper an experience he has lived through; on the other, we find an episode which appeared to us first in the guise of lived experience being discussed as a piece of his writing. The fifth section of the novel explores the writer's extreme sensitivity to accents; he registers certain deformations of pronunciation as an act of violence against language and against himself personally. In the eighth section - the first of the two sections describing the writer actually at work - the starting point is this experience; it is the sensations provoked in him by such accents that, despite lack of encouragement, even disapproval, he is attempting to pursue and recreate on the page. Thus we might argue that the writer is engaged in writing the section, or something approximating to the section, which we have already read. This sudden metamorphosis of life into art is even less ambiguous where the fourth section of the novel is concerned. Here the writer finds himself using words less easily than other people; he feels at a disadvantage and would like to be one of the crowd. An image which appears in this section, 'le bout pointu de leurs doigts grassouilleux aux ongles peints se redresse comme la queue d'un scorpion' (p. 50), is

---

<sup>24</sup> 'Rebels in a World of Platitudes', p. 371.

commented upon in a later section: 'Moi, j'ai trouvé très bien cette comparaison ... ces doigts aux bouts redressés comme la queue d'un scorpion. C'est très juste. C'est joli, c'est amusant. J'ai aimé ça' (p. 150). Lived experience and art merge into one another. By elements of its structure Entre la vie et la mort demonstrates the way in which art and life are closely linked and art develops out of life.

Entre la vie et la mort is an interesting novel from the structural point of view. It is, in a sense, episodic; it does not pursue a continuous narrative but concentrates rather on expressing those moments in the writer's career which are potentially productive or destructive, the innumerable dangerous corners he has to negotiate. The writer describes his momentary perceptions of truth in the following terms:

Comme à travers une fêlure dans une paroi lisse, une fine craquelure, quelque chose se glisse doucement ... subrepticement cela s'insinue en lui, quelque chose d'informe, de gluant avec une obstination sournoise cherche en lui son chemin.  
(p. 86)

Nathalie Sarraute uses the same terms in talking of her work:

C'est que je ne m'attache qu'aux moments de conflit, à ces instants privilégiés où tout se détraque, puis refait surface pour se détraquer à nouveau. C'est le conflit qui me sert de catalyseur, de révélateur - chaque fois qu'il y a une craquelure dans la paroi lisse.<sup>25</sup>

The episodic quality of the novel arises, then, out of the fact that its material reveals itself in evanescent moments of drama. Another contributory factor is the elusive nature of the material: if it is by nature perceptible only in fragmentary fashion, an authentic re-creation of it will be similarly fragmented:

J'ai essayé de la [i.e. l'expérience de la création littéraire] montrer le plus sincèrement possible, telle que je la vis moi-même ou telle que peuvent, je crois, la vivre d'autres écrivains. C'est quelque chose de très difficile à recréer. Je n'ai pu en arracher que quelques fragments.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute et les secrets de la création', p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

Other principles of structure are however equally at work in the novel, imposing further significance on its material. The simplest of these is the chronological development; the novel follows - more or less - the career of the writer from childhood onwards. We see his early uncertainties, his first efforts to write, his contacts with publishers, the reaction of others to his work, his gradually increasing reputation, his temporary defeat by the dangers of success and his return to the solitary struggle. There is, then, progression through time. There are, however, other factors which modify the straightforward chronological backbone of the novel. We have already underlined the importance of the first section. It ensures that the reader is not deceived into thinking that here we have the biography or autobiography of one particular individual and that his attention is from the outset focused on the central issues of the novel. This first section presents us with a successful writer posing as such before an admiring crowd who are anxious to have him explain to them the secrets of his art. 'Sur la page blanche des mots, les phrases se forment. Miracle. Comment peut-on? C'est un grand mystère' (p. 8). It is this mystery which the audience - and the novel - seeks to penetrate. The writer here is seen from the outside and the unreal, unsatisfactory nature of the image he projects is constantly stressed: 'obligingly and doubtless not for the first time, he "acts out" the process of creation.'<sup>27</sup> His gestures are mechanical rather than life-like: 'son bras est comme une tige métallique articulée qui se déploie et se replie' (p. 8). He forms a conventional couple with his female companion, 'sa compagne effacée', who fills in further details for the audience encouraging them to adopt the same stance of admiring, uncomprehending outsiders: 'Il les jette par terre. Il sort en titubant.

---

<sup>27</sup> Mary McCarthy, 'Hanging by a thread', New York Review of Books, 31 July 1969, p. 4.

Parfois il est tout en nage. Quand on lui parle, il n'entend pas'

(p. 8). The picture he offers of himself is in other respects a classic one. His account of his origins is ironically reminiscent of the opening chapter of many literary biographies or autobiographies:

En moi deux sangs très différents sont mêlés ... Ma mère était savoyarde. J'ai par elle du sang italien. Mon grand-père maternel était berger. (...) Mon père était breton. Mâtiné de normand. (p. 12)

He has the proper traces of imaginative behaviour and of craftsmanship in his ancestry. His paternal grandfather was a marble mason in his youth:

On raconte que parfois il lui arrivait de modifier les formules que son patron lui faisait graver sur les monuments, sur les stèles funéraires. Il était très gai, il aimait les facéties. Il croyait aux revenants, il racontait des histoires de fantômes. (p. 13)

The description of his temperament again fits the classic picture of the writer, 'un tâcheron triste', eternally discontented with what he is doing but unable to abandon it, artist despite himself, a proper object of pity. The image is complete down to the last detail of his private manias: his detestation of fountain-pens and his preference for ball-points.<sup>28</sup>

The audience listen 'dans un silence perplexe' (p. 13), impressed but not enlightened. What has been paraded before them is the image, the mask similar to those of miser and down-trodden spinster worn by the father and daughter in Portrait d'un inconnu. The reality that lies beneath the mask remains unexplored. There is perhaps one moment of sincerity out of which the rest of the novel will develop. The writer speaks of his sensitivity towards words: 'Des mots comme celui-là

---

<sup>28</sup> Where her own writing is concerned, Nathalie Sarraute seeks to avoid such manias: 'J'aime que les choses dont je me sers pour travailler ne soient rien, qu'elle ne représentent aucune manie' (Rambures, p. 16).

s'enfoncaient en moi. Ils me faisaient mal' (p. 14). The next section takes up the point and develops it further. But here the writer retires rapidly into commonplaces: 'Mais je pense que beaucoup d'enfants ... ou même beaucoup d'adultes ... ce qui compte, voyez-vous, je crois, c'est ce tempérament de tâcheron ...' (p. 14). The central mystery remains a mystery; it too is formulated in a classic fashion and from outside: 'Sur la page blanche les mots, les phrases se forment' (p. 8).

The last section of the novel forms an impressive pendant to the first, emphasising the direction in which the novel has moved. The first shows us the writer from outside, as he appears to the crowd,<sup>29</sup> and poses without answering their questions concerning the mysterious nature of literary creation. The last shows us the writer from within engaged in the activity of writing. Thus a pattern of question and answer, a pattern of significance, dominates the chronological sequence of the novel. There is moreover a cyclical development in the novel which equally modifies the chronology. In the eighteenth section of the novel, we arrive back at the image of the first: either the writer who was an envious onlooker in the earlier scene has now joined the ranks of the successful, or the writer who was already seen as successful then has now traced his odyssey as far as this point. If we are to understand that the writer of the first section finds his way back in the second section to a more genuine contact with others, then we may see him embarking on a process which repeats itself with each new success. A further important element in the novel's cyclical development is the repeated description of the creative process. Micheline Tison Braun's contention that there is a considerable development between these two

---

<sup>29</sup> It is arguable that the writer in this first section is as much a victim as the crowd, one of the penalties of fame being that one can the more easily be made to look a fool.

descriptions is not, in our view, accurate. The basic experience in each case is the same; it is simply that the hazards are different on account of the changed position of the writer. The main image of the novel, that of the writer eternally and inevitably suspended between life and death and oscillating between the two terms of his experience, is thus echoed in a cyclical structure, which is integrated into the chronological structure. As in Waiting for Godot, where the second act is sufficient to introduce the notion of an infinite number of possible repetitions, or in The Trial where K's search for the Law could go on indefinitely through ever-widening circles, Nathalie Sarraute suggests by means of limited repetition a process which is continuous.

For Nathalie Sarraute, the experience of the writer in Entre la vie et la mort reflects in acute form the predicament of any human being. At first she feared that the subject-matter of her novel might be too restricted: 'Je me disais; Les Fruits d'or met en scène des lecteurs, Entre la vie et la mort montre des écrivains. En principe il y a tout de même plus de lecteurs que d'écrivains, donc l'audience de ce dernier livre sera peut-être plus limitée.'<sup>30</sup> But she concludes that the writer's experience, though it may take different forms for other men, will be basically a familiar one: 'Il est vrai que chacun peut éprouver en soi ce double mouvement: désir de s'intégrer à la société, besoin de se réaliser par soi-même en dehors d'elle.'<sup>31</sup>

As she did with miserliness in Portrait, Nathalie Sarraute here looks beneath the public image to the very much more complex human experience which hides behind it. She takes a number of myths which attach to the figure of the artist - he is an 'enfant prédestiné', an 'inadapté' -

---

<sup>30</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute et les secrets de la création', p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> loc. cit.



and shows how these may affect the living writer. Nathalie Sarraute's writer is rendered uneasy, potentially destroyed by the existence of such labels against which he feels he has to measure himself. He is not Plato's poet, to be thrown out of the city, nor Vigny's helmsman directing the ship of society where best it may sail. Hers is a much more modest picture of the artist: his works have no end beyond themselves and he himself is much more like other men in his psychological make-up.

Given that the writer is endowed with ordinary human weaknesses, it is appropriate that he should not escape the humour that pervades Entre la vie et la mort. The humour here is more extensive, more open than in any of the other novels, and where it is, as is often the case, satirical, the satire is gentler than it was in Les Fruits d'or. For example, the scene of the journalists' interview, which we discussed earlier, makes a serious point in an amusing fashion. Equally the interview with the publisher: here a lighter tone is deliberately introduced after the seriousness of the previous section. The state of mind of the writer in the initial stages is ironically revealed by the description of the man by the door: 'Le colosse à la large mâchoire debout près de la porte fait un mouvement' (p. 110), clearly threatening all kinds of nameless tortures should the writer fail to agree with what is being said. In the course of the interview, the writer is gradually reduced to a Charles Bovary figure, 'tortillant sa casquette': 'le "nouveau" assis au bord de sa chaise dans le bureau du proviseur' (p. 111). His pretensions are satirised; he thinks himself another Rimbaud and is waiting in vain for the summons to Paris. Also satirised is the writer's relationship with his critics. He is very ready to be delighted by the critic's approval but he does not really understand a word of what is said:

De temps à autre il parvient à attraper quelques-uns au passage: Symbolisme. Surréalisme. Impressionisme. Gros plans. Pans coupés. Structure spirale. Mouvement de rotation ... (p. 141)

The critic is then compared to a whale:

On dirait une baleine qui plonge dans l'océan, absorbe de l'eau et la rejette très haut en colonnes de vapeur énormes, des gouttelettes brillent dans un halo irisé, retombent ...  
(p. 141)

The effect of the humour in Entre la vie et la mort is frequently deflatory, supporting the central themes of the novel. The writer is not allowed to forget his ambiguous position. In answer to the question 'Quel rôle joue l'humour dans vos livres?', Nathalie Sarraute replied 'L'humour a un pouvoir de contestation ... tout reste discontinu, indécis, tremblant, à mi-chemin, comme me paraît être la réalité'.<sup>32</sup>

Chapter 8 Vous les entendez?

Life is movement. Everything transforms itself, everything modifies itself ceaselessly, and to try and stop it, to try to check life in mid-flight and recapture it in the form of a work of art, a sculpture or a painting, seems to me a mockery of the intensity of life.

JEAN TINGUELY

C'est une sorte de père Goriot moderne.

NATHALIE SARRAUTE

The prière d'insérer describes this novel as 'une nouvelle étape sur le long et lent parcours que Nathalie Sarraute a entrepris depuis son premier ouvrage, Tropismes'. It is once again closely connected to previous works; family-relationships, so important in the first three novels and less central in Les Fruits d'or and Entre la vie et la mort come once again to the fore; the question of taste, of aesthetic values and judgments, so important in the novels from Le Planétarium onwards, here occupies the centre of the work. The subject of this novel is particularly closely linked to Les Fruits d'or and to Entre la vie et la mort. At the end of Les Fruits d'or, the novel has found and kept one genuinely appreciative reader, a man for whom it is a living thing; the problem remains as to whether this appreciation can be transferred by him to someone else. Will the book survive him? 'Je me demande par moments ce que vous deviendrez plus tard, sans moi ... où vous allez aborder? où échouer?' (p. 225). Entre la vie et la mort is more concerned with the writer's than with the reader's reactions and the writer it depicts lives more in the present than in the future; he is concerned with the present effort of creation and with the present rather than the future fate of his works. The problem is touched upon: 'Pour quoi tant de lutttes, tant de souffrances ... quand on se demande souvent, quand on se dit, n'est-ce pas? que personne probablement ne se souviendra encore de nous dans cinquante ans' (p. 121). Yet it is a concern which the writer resists. When he is engaged in the struggle to create, it seems to him a consideration which is both improper and irrelevant:

C'est une idée qui ne me vient pas. Une idée ignoble ... de petit. Une idée de moyen, résigné à son sort comme vous, humble, contrit. Mais moi jamais. Jamais. Jamais je n'ai daigné supputer, calculer ... cinquante ans, cinq cents ans ... Je n'ai jamais compté. Quand se produit un de ces miracles le temps respectueusement se retire, le moment s'étire à l'infini ... (pp. 121-2)

The contradiction lightly touched on here is at the centre of Vous les entendez? According to the central character, the aesthetic experience approximates most closely to an experience of timelessness. Like the writer of Entre la vie et la mort, he rejects the words that are commonly used to describe the experience; they only obscure its true nature. But when he does try to convey a sense of what a work of art means to him, it is words evoking a sense of timelessness that he uses:

Un instant fixé pour l'éternité. Un seul instant infini, infiniment paisible, que cela emplit. Quoi cela? Mais il n'y a plus rien ici, plus de mots mesquins, précis, coquets, beaux, laids, enjôleurs, trompeurs, tyranniques, salissants, réducteurs, amplificateurs, papoteurs, dégradants ... vers lesquels, perdant toute dignité, tout instinct de conservation il faut se tendre, qu'il faut solliciter, qu'il faut chasser, traquer, auxquels il faut poser des pièges, qu'il faut apprivoiser, mater, torturer. Non. Aucun mot ici. Dans l'instant épandu, sans rivages, sans horizons même lointains, calme, sans aucun terme, immobile, rien ne bouge ... tout à fait immobile ... serein, si calme... cela ... (pp. 130-1)

Yet the work of art is dependent for its survival on the appreciation of individuals and these individuals are subject to time. One generation succeeds another, tastes change, and more seriously still, the new generation's attitude to aesthetic matters may differ radically from that of the old. The father's understanding of the nature of aesthetic experience is challenged by his children and it seems to him at moments that they are right and he is wrong:

J'ai l'impression par moments ... vous allez rire, vous aussi ... que ... que la vie ... pardonnez-moi, c'est ridicule ... enfin ce que faute de mieux il faut bien appeler ainsi ... elle est chez eux maintenant ... pas ici, plus là-dedans ... il donne une chiquenaude au flanc de la bête ... C'est passé tout ça. Fini. Bientôt plus rien ne restera, tout ce qui apparaîtra disparaîtra aussitôt ... aussitôt détruit que construit ... un perpétuel écoulement ... plus rien ne pourra être retenu, conservé, préservé, plus de trésors, celui-ci, ils n'en veulent plus ... (pp. 181-2)

It is the complexities of this situation that Vous les entendez? explores.

Some aspects of the situation are universal ones but it is not simply some kind of aesthetic generation gap that Nathalie Sarraute is concerned with in Vous les entendez?. She is exploring a particular historical

phenomenon: the radical challenge to the work of art, as understood since the Renaissance, which characterizes the twentieth century. The young people represent that movement which Professor Kermode has called neo-modernism,<sup>1</sup> which begins with Duchamp and Apollinaire, continues through Dada and, in more recent times, finds varying expression in destructive art, random music, happenings and living theatre experiments. Calvin Tompkins, in his study of four representative figures (Duchamp, Cage, Tinguely and Rauschenberg), sums up what seems to him their basic similarity:

The most striking of these shared attitudes is a belief that art is not half so interesting or important a business as daily life. The religion of art, with its agonies and ecstasies so dear to popular fiction, strikes these men as an absurd pretense. Their attention is turned outward on the world around them, not inward upon their own reactions to it. And because they find the external world such a fascinating and incredible place they are not satisfied to tear off little pieces of it and isolate them in the context of fixed, unchanging works of museum art. What they have tried to do is to break down the barriers that exist between art and life, and not for art's sake either. As Rauschenberg has put it, art for him is not an end in itself but simply a 'means to function thoroughly and passionately in a world that has a lot more to it than paint'.<sup>2</sup>

It is of course a phenomenon which has its roots in the early years of the century. In 1925 we find Ortega y Gasset commenting on the way in which the modern artist has challenged the traditional view of art:

To the young generation art is a thing of no consequence. - The sentence is no sooner written that it frightens me since I am well aware of all the different connotations it implies. It is not that to any random person of our day art seems less important than it seemed to previous generations, but that the artist himself regards his art as a thing of no consequence. But then again this does not accurately describe the situation. I do not mean to say that the artist makes light of his work and his profession; but they interest him precisely because they are of no transcendent importance. For a real understanding

---

<sup>1</sup> In his essay on 'The Modern' dated 1965-6, Modern Essays, London, Fontana, 1971, pp. 39-70.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin Tompkins, The Bride and the Bachelors, London, 1965, p. 2.

of what is happening let us compare the role art is playing today with the role it used to play thirty years ago and in general throughout the last century. Poetry and music then were activities of an enormous caliber. In view of the downfall of religion and the inevitable relativism of science, art was expected to take upon itself nothing less than the salvation of mankind (...)

A present-day artist would be thunderstruck, I suspect, if he were trusted with so enormous a mission and, in consequence, compelled to deal in his work with matters of such scope. To his mind, the kingdom of art commences where the air feels lighter and things, free from formal fetters, begin to cut whimsical capers.<sup>3</sup>

Vous les entendez?, then, explores a conflict which is a basic characteristic of the twentieth century. It is the conflict between an earlier, but still persisting, conviction that prizes art above life, as something which transcends time and death, as superior form individually created, and the more recent attitude which seeks to reinstate life and to be faithful to its chaos and impermanence, which seeks also to counter traditional notions about the artist and his activities by eliminating the personal element, by using commonplace materials, and by being light-hearted rather than serious.

Vous les entendez?, then, is a novel which concerns itself with large issues. The validity of traditional attitudes towards art is questioned. Having been educated in a certain tradition and having contributed herself to that tradition, Nathalie Sarraute now looks at the challenges which it has faced in the last fifty or sixty years and which it appears to face increasingly. She does so, however, by exploring the complexities of a relationship between a 'father' and his children, and the relationship itself is conjured up through the medium of a tiny, apparently insignificant, incident. Nathalie Sarraute's ability to perceive the world in a grain of sand is demonstrated more strikingly than ever

---

<sup>3</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays, Princeton, 1968, pp. 49-50.

before. The gulf between the point of departure and the achievement is reminiscent of the feats of involuntary memory in Proust: 'Tout Combray et ses environs, tout cela qui prend forme et solidité, est sorti, ville et jardin, de ma tasse de thé.'<sup>4</sup> Alain Guimiez's hopes are abundantly fulfilled: 'De hautes cités, de ciels allaient peut-être se refléter dans une mince flaque d'eau sale.'<sup>5</sup>

In Vous les entendez?, the plot element seems to be reduced further than ever before. Nathalie Sarraute's novels from Portrait to Le Planétarium all contain an element of plot (the narrator's encounters with the old man and his daughter, the family's suspicions of Martereau, the attempts of Alain and Gisèle to secure possession of the flat), even if we are clear that the plot exists only as support for the main substance of the novel and is in itself essentially trivial. These novels too contain identifiable individuals, even if we are discouraged from viewing them as 'characters' in a traditional sense. These statements are less true of Les Fruits d'or and Entre la vie et la mort but, though neither novel has a plot in the sense of containing a series of events involving individual characters, both are basically chronological structures tracing a pattern through a relatively lengthy period of time: the rise and fall of a novel or the career of the writer. In Vous les entendez?, the time-span is reduced to a very brief period and actual events are reduced to a minimum. Indeed, within the novel itself, they are almost non-existent, having taken place before the novel begins. What we have is a psychological situation already in existence before the novel begins and which the novel explores.

As the novel opens, we find ourselves in a country house: the owner of the house and a friend who has come to visit him are sitting together

---

<sup>4</sup> A la recherche du temps perdu, I, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Le Planétarium, p. 34.



in front of a low table on which is placed the stone statue of a mythological animal. The action of the novel revolves round this statue:

Pour mon dernier livre, Vous les entendez?, c'est un objet que je voyais au centre, une bête de pierre provoquant toutes sortes de perturbations à l'intérieur d'un groupe de consciences unies par des liens étroits.<sup>6</sup>

The young people of the house - several in number and of both sexes, though the precise number is never specified - have just retired to bed and their laughter upstairs can be heard by the two friends in the downstairs room. We learn that, just before the novel opened, the friend took the statue off the mantelpiece and put it on the table, in order better to admire it. Some remarks were exchanged on the subject of the statue and then the young people excused themselves and went off upstairs. The rest of the novel explores the ramifications of this scene. Further incident is minimal. There is laughter from above which stops and starts again on a number of occasions (it is not clear on how many or to what extent the chief protagonist, the father, simply comes back to the laughter in the course of his own thoughts) and there are a number of exchanges between the two friends on the subject of the statue they have in front of them, on a number of other works of art not present but with which they are both familiar, and on the implications of the laughter of the young people above. Physical movement centres on the staircase<sup>7</sup> which divides the two groups of people, and more particularly the father from his children. Nathalie Sarraute says:

I was interested in creating the constant motion, the actual physical motion, involved in the novel's action, since the father goes up and down the stairs to talk, to knock at the door of the children, who are laughing on the floor above him.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Rambures, p. 16

<sup>7</sup> Françoise Calin points to the staircase as a recurrent theme in Nathalie Sarraute's work, symbolizing the gulf between human beings (op. cit., pp. 140-1).

<sup>8</sup> Brée, p. 139.

Equally there are points at which it seems that the young people come back downstairs briefly. There is, then, physical action of this kind taking place within the novel and in some instances one feels clear that this is so. When, for example, the father goes upstairs to remonstrate with them about the noise they are making, when they had claimed to be tired and ready for bed. On other occasions, however, it seems more probable that all the father does is to imagine these exchanges taking place, that they are simply a means of charting the psychological activity which takes place within him during the brief period he spends with his friend to the accompaniment of the young people's laughter. The same is true of dialogue in the novel. There are some exchanges between the characters which are clearly actual, i.e. the dialogue is spoken, and others where the exchanges are imaginary or the dialogue unspoken, but one category shades off into the other in a way which makes it impossible to draw a clear dividing-line. This is on the whole a new departure for Nathalie Sarraute. It is true that imaginary scenes have always been a feature of her novels but it has usually been fairly clear what is imaginary and what is not. Equally where dialogue is concerned, Nathalie Sarraute has previously distinguished between 'conversation' and 'sous-conversation' by using inverted commas for the former. She became aware that she was no longer doing so while working on the novel:

I noticed in my last book - and realized it only a long time after I had begun the book - that I was no longer separating dialogue from 'sub-conversation'. That came about quite naturally. I even thought that maybe I ought to have put in quotation marks, all the same, so as to show that the conversation starts right there. Then I thought it didn't really matter.<sup>9</sup>

In any case the real and the imaginary movements are both images for the mental exchanges taking place between father and children so clear-cut distinctions are unimportant. Similarly the dialogue is here so thoroughly

---

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 145.

239

absorbed into the consciousness of the characters, as a fragment within their mental activity, that it seems appropriate that no clear dividing-line be drawn.

What we are concerned with is the interaction between the father and his children. The trips up and down the staircase provide an image of it. To a large extent we identify with the viewpoint of the father. We remain downstairs with him, listen to the laughter with him and follow his psychological activity throughout the novel. But it is not in the father alone that Nathalie Sarraute is interested: 'I wanted to show a kind of interaction between consciousnesses which are extremely close to one another to the extent that they almost fuse and communicate by a kind of continuous osmosis.'<sup>10</sup> This is of course no new theme in Nathalie Sarraute's work. The action of tropisms between people has always involved a kind of osmosis:

On dirait qu'une onde invisible émane de l'autre et vous parcourt, une vibration chez l'autre, que vous enregistrez comme un appareil très sensible, se transmet à vous, vous vibrez à l'unisson, parfois même plus fort ...<sup>11</sup>

Equally the relationship between novel and reader:

Ce qui passe là des Fruits d'Or à moi, cette ondulation, cette modulation ... un tintement léger ... qui d'eux à moi et de moi à eux comme à travers une même substance se propage, rien ne peut arrêter cela. Les gens peuvent dire ce que bon leur semble. Personne n'a le pouvoir d'interrompre entre nous cette osmose. Aucune parole venue du dehors ne peut détruire une si naturelle et parfaite fusion.<sup>12</sup>

Never before, however, has Nathalie Sarraute concentrated so exclusively on one relationship or pursued so closely the moments of fusion.

It is of course the young people's laughter that acts as catalyst in the novel provoking the father into awareness of his children (continually present despite their absence), provoking him into reacting,

---

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 138-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Martereau*, p. 178.

<sup>12</sup> *Les Fruits d'or*, p. 196.

either towards or away from them. It is the laughter which delimits the time-span of the novel. It is with the first sounds of laughter that the novel begins: 'Soudain il s'interrompt, il lève la main, l'index dressé, il tend l'oreille ... Vous les entendez?', and with the final sounds that it ends: 'On dirait qu'une porte, là-haut, se referme ... Et puis plus rien.' There is still a chronological sequence, albeit of a very rudimentary kind in that the novel begins with the laughter and ends with it a certain time later (half an hour? an hour? it is not clear). The laughter is identified with the children in the way that the stone statue is with the father. It appears to challenge the statue and what it stands for, and through it the father. The laughter provokes or stirs back into life in the father the psychological reactions which are the subject-matter of the novel, leading him to examine and re-examine the implications of the scene in which he has just played a part. He reads all sorts of meanings into it, 'which it may or may not imply'.<sup>13</sup>

In its concentration on the manifold implications of one particular scene, Vous les entendez? is perhaps more reminiscent of Portrait than of any of Nathalie Sarraute's other novels. There the narrator was concerned to explore in a single scene all the implications of the relationship between father and daughter. An embryo novelist, he gathered together all the information he could, then tried to recreate the scene. Both novels thus have a central pivot to which all their material relates, in a way that the others do not (this is a question not of theme but of structure). Of course the narrator of Portrait is a novelist exploring characters outside himself; his scene is an imagined one. The father is involved in the situation: his is a 'real' scene in a way the narrator's is not. Yet the limits of the real and the fictional are

---

<sup>13</sup> Brée, p. 139.

difficult to establish precisely: in Portrait, there is a basic real scene which the narrator is attempting to explore through his imagined one; in Vous les entendez?, the father, in the attempt to understand the real scene of which he is a part, draws on a series of imaginary constructions.

It is in their relative degrees of concentration that the two novels differ. We quoted, in connection with Portrait, Nathalie Sarraute's reasons for abandoning the form of Tropismes and switching to the full-length novel:

The tropism as such was the centre and driving-power of my books. (...) I wanted to follow the tropisms while they developed slowly in different scenes and then expanded in all their richness and complexity in one final scene.<sup>14</sup>

The difference between Portrait and Vous les entendez? is here made clear. In Vous les entendez? little material (from the father's point of view) comes to light in the course of the novel. It is possible that he does not always see the young people but only imagines some of the confrontations we witness. Whether he does or not, the tropisms already exist in 'all their richness and complexity' before the novel opens. It is as if the whole of Portrait has been devoted to the confrontation between father and daughter. One is reminded of what Claude Mauriac did in L'Agrandissement when he took a short scene from La Marquise sortit à cinq heures and expanded it to the length of a novel. There is, of course, no previous version of Vous les entendez? in miniature form in an earlier work, but it is as if Nathalie Sarraute had taken one of the sketches from Tropismes - the original incident could easily have provided the material for one of these - and magnified the tiny incident (already magnified there) even more, so that the most microscopic reactions of the characters could be taken into account. Here one might say the iceberg is wholly uncovered: the relation of 'conversation' and 'sous-conversation' in

---

<sup>14</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

this novel is altogether to the advantage of the latter.

At the centre of Vous les entendez? is, as we have seen, the relationship of father and children. In Portrait the ambivalent relationship of father and daughter was explored, its picture of intimacy and hostility. The father felt challenged by the daughter, felt her to be guilty of 'désinvolture'. These themes reappear in Vous les entendez?. In Le Planétarium a further element was introduced to that situation, that of changing standards of taste between the generations. Here it is that element, in more radical form, which is central. How, if at all, are the artistic values of one generation to be passed on to the next? Will art, as we have understood it, survive at all? Are we opting for the past rather than the future in trying to preserve it? These are the questions the father - and the novel - asks. It is a peculiarly modern phenomenon which is being explored, a twentieth-century development. To the father the situation seems unique: hitherto traditions have been successfully passed on from generation to generation. In his family, there is a tradition of each father having passed on the torch by means of a particular work or group of works: the Mona Lisa, the Vénus de Milo or the painting of Fragonard and Watteau. The statue itself has been passed down to him by his grandfather and is, significantly, a work of considerable antiquity. Only his children, it seems to him, have proved resistant. Despite all his efforts to expose them to great art they display a polite lack of interest. Is it his fault? Has he tried too hard? Has he provoked a resistance where otherwise there might have been none or produced a lack of confidence on their part? Or is their lack of interest a philistinism inherited from their mother, a proof of mediocrity about which he can do nothing? Or are they not simply uninterested but actively hostile? Do they seek to challenge his values, his whole way of life? And are they perhaps right to do so? They are

young, he is old; life is perhaps on their side now. Perhaps he should resign himself to change. All these are possibilities evoked by the father as he responds to the laughter from upstairs.

Nathalie Sarraute's talent for conveying a sense of particular feelings and emotions - these have all the acuteness of personal reactions - and at the same time generalising is here supremely present. The effect is operative where all the characters are concerned. The friend, the guest, has a dual role. Vis-à-vis the protagonist, he is his 'semblable', his 'frère'. A member of the same generation, sharing the same interests, appreciating sometimes at least (the fusion of taste even here is a fragile one) the same works, holding the same values, he and the father together represent a group outlook. But as well as friend, he is also the 'invité', the outsider, the man who stands apart from the father's situation. He is installed securely in his generation's values in a way the father is not. He has never married and has no children. His ties with the next generation are therefore slight. He is not involved in the struggle: 'Il y a sur son visage une expression de douce indulgence, de détachement' (p. 61). He is a representative of the outside world (which extends into a number of other figures, magistrate, social worker, marriage counsellor, who try to administer or to codify the relations between people), an outside world of sanity and normality; as such he is enlisted for support on one side or the other and he oversimplifies - in one direction or the other - and does not perceive the subtleties in the relationship between father and children. He is the link between the father and the outside world where these subtleties, 'tous ces mouvements de flux et de reflux' (p. 118), are not understood. The same is true of the children: they stand in a close relationship to their particular father, a relationship which excludes the outside world, yet they too are representative. They are of both sexes and their number is unspecified. Occasionally, one or the other acts as spokesman or emerges briefly as an individual in the father's consciousness, but

mostly they are seen as a group, speak and act as a group. They are the next generation, they are youth.

It is, of course, primarily through the father's consciousness that we are aware of the other characters in the novel. He it is, who asks us the question of the title: 'Vous les entendez?'. What we know of them we know through him. Our knowledge like his is deliberately unfactual; it consists of a series of hypotheses, a series of fictions which are mutually contradictory. Our knowledge of him, like his of himself, is scarcely more reliable. We know how he reacts at a given moment whereas the reactions of others are rather more a matter for interpretation, but when it comes to judging these reactions, finding them appropriate or inappropriate, justifiable or unjustifiable, he and we are again on shifting ground.

Youth and age are two facts about the relationship, facts which apparently make the achievement of a united attitude difficult, if not impossible. If it is not the facts in themselves which hinder, the father's consciousness of them does. However hard the father tries to join in the activity of the young people, it is suggested that he will not manage to do so: his 'gros corps lourd' (p. 180), is a factor in his situation which he can only momentarily overcome. When he tries to join in their gaiety, his very effort emphasises his age and the gulf between them: 'Il pousse de petits cris séniles d'excitation, de satisfaction, il ouvre toute grande sa bouche édentée' (p. 86). They stand for vigour, energy, freedom, they are carefree; he is seen by the outsider as 'ce petit vieux là-bas' (p. 220). The future is theirs; for him, death is not far away:

Il faut que nous gardions nos distances. Je ne peux que vous gêner, que peser sur vous ... Un poids lourd. Un poids mort ... Et de toute façon, la nature fait bien les choses, un jour viendra, il n'est pas si loin ... (p. 207)

When they enter into his feelings, he has the sense that it is out of politeness, an awareness of what is due to age, or perhaps from affectionate indulgence: 'Il est très bon qu'ils conservent leurs dadas' (p. 126).



This opposition of youth and age is the background against which the main conflict of the novel is played out: the contrasting attitude to art of one generation and the next. In a sense, however, the generation theme is metaphorical; we are concerned with two opposing attitudes which have little to do with generations but which rather, if one considers Duchamp and Dada, coexist as parallel strands throughout the century. One of these attitudes reveres the past and is therefore identified with age; the other prizes life and the present moment and is therefore identified with youth. A further factor may be of course that Nathalie Sarraute herself now belongs to an older generation with grown-up children and grandchildren, and she, up till now at least, has belonged to the cultural tradition represented by the father.

For the father, aesthetic values are sacred. Works of art give him a genuine happiness, an experience of eternity. The sincerity of the experience is not in doubt however his views may be criticised or he himself may question them. His most pleasurable moments are spent in museums and art galleries where great works of art are treated with respect or with a friend who shares his appreciation of particular items. He is aware of the difficulties of his position, aware that the aesthetic experience can only be described imperfectly, that a great deal of nonsense is talked about art; he is ready to accept modestly that taste is a subjective thing, that agreement is difficult, that appreciation is fragile and can be impaired by a hostile presence. Despite his modest stance and the various concessions he makes to the young people's position, their outlook is ultimately radically different from his and he can never quite abandon his own convictions and adopt theirs, near though he comes to it at various points.

For the young people, the father is a traditionalist, a conservative, one of the 'bien-pensants' (pp. 155-6):

Ils sont si sûrs d'être du bon côté, soutenus par tous ceux, les plus respectés, qui continuent à pratiquer le culte officiel, par tous les fidèles qui ne manquent jamais les jours de fête d'aller accompagnés de leur famille faire leurs dévotions dans les galeries d'art, dans les musées ... (p. 151)

His attitude to art is an aspect of his social situation. Nathalie Sarraute cites in this context a saying of Mao Tse-tung which she came across after finishing the novel:

After I had finished writing the book, I ran across an article in L'Express, I believe, or in L'Observateur which stated that Mao Tse-tung had said, 'Art is the consolation of the gentleman', and I said to myself, 'My two old men are like that', and that is how the young people see them ...<sup>15</sup>

On every point their position differs from his. Creation for them is something easy and joyful. The old myths of struggle are finished:

Facile, et pourquoi pas? Et tant mieux, c'est délicieux, il n'est plus nécessaire de subir les épreuves, les échecs, les désespoirs, les renoncements, les recommencements tremblants, les sueurs mortelles, les flagellations, les prosternations, les longues heures passées dans l'attente d'un signe, si faible soit-il, prouvant l'élection. (pp. 178-9)

The old divisions into genre are no longer applicable: 'Ça ne porte pas de nom, comprends-tu ... Plus de noms ... plus d'étiquettes, de définitions ...' (p. 179). Artistic creation is not necessarily a solitary activity; it can be communal; there is the example of the ruff the young people add to the statue: 'Cette fraise est le produit d'un travail collectif. Un travail collectif. Parfaitement' (p. 173). Nor is it limited to certain privileged materials, materials which will withstand the passage of time. Something eminently frivolous and destructible like the paper wrapping from a packet of biscuits will serve their purpose just as well: 'On a fait ça, comme ça, dans un moment d'inspiration ... avec n'importe quoi, tous les matériaux sont bons ...' (p. 174). Inventiveness is everything. They do not take themselves seriously; they are willing to destroy what they have created. It is the momentary joy of creation

---

<sup>15</sup> Brée, p. 139.

that counts; the father's instinct to preserve, to aim at future generations, his concept of the work of art as resistant to time, leaves them indifferent:

Seulement nous on ne cherche jamais à le changer en or pur, on s'amuse un peu, c'est tout ... Arrache ça si tu veux, tiens, je l'enlève, ne t'inquiète pas ... (p. 174)

Nous, messieurs, vous savez, on n'a pas d'amour-propre d'auteur, on ne cherche pas à fabriquer l'objet rare, la pièce de collection ... aucune visée de richesse, de gloire proche ou lointaine ... Nous sommes détachés, très purs. (p. 176)

Genius is no longer the preserve of a few; everyone is a genius if they use their creative abilities, if they let themselves go: 'Tous sont élus. Tous sont appelés. Il n'y aura plus jamais d'élimination, d'exclusions ... lève-toi, étire tes membres ankylosés, n'aie donc pas peur ...' (p. 179). All the ideas expressed by the children are of course characteristic of neo-modernism and all can be traced back to the basic reaffirmation of life against art. The opposition is symbolised in the contrast between the heavy motionless statue of stone and the laughter which constantly reasserts itself. Equally, as we shall see later, in the contrast between the two dogs, the stone statue of the father and the children's real dog.

One of the leitmotifs of the novel is the museum or art gallery. It belongs to the ethos of the father, it symbolizes his attitude to art. For him, it is a suitable resting-place for the great works of the past. It preserves what for him is precious, and ratifies the pleasure that he takes in works of art. He likes to spend time in art galleries. So does his friend. He has tried to introduce the young people to the same pleasures but without success. They prefer exhibitions of strip-cartoons, or any other form of art which lacks what is for him art's most important quality: its timelessness. In art galleries, they trail around after him unwillingly; they can only be interested in paintings through aspects which are secondary; they are clearly sympathetic to the philistine comments other young people make. Thus it is that the phrase

pronounced by the friend about the statue, 'Mais elle serait digne de figurer dans un musée ...' (p. 38), provokes all kinds of reactions in them and in the father, relating to past and present stresses.

The symbolic status of the museum is one which extends beyond the novel and in this respect Vous les entendez? inevitably conjures up memories of 1968.<sup>16</sup> One of the areas of government challenged in 1968 was Malraux's highbrow cultural policy; demands were made for more socially relevant art and for more public participation in artistic matters. The institution of the museum came in for criticism; it stood for preservation of the old rather than encouragement of the new and for contemplation rather than participation. In May 1968 a self-constituted committee of artists marched on the Musée de l'art moderne with the intention of closing it down. It was already locked and the committee put a notice on the doors which said 'Closed because useless'.<sup>17</sup> Such attitudes were however in existence long before May 1968. Nathalie Sarraute herself says: 'Le musée était déjà contesté avant Mai 68. Ce qui s'est produit alors a catalysé mes sensations sans que je le veuille.'<sup>18</sup> As with many of those attitudes which characterise modernism in art, they can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp. They are perhaps most strikingly expressed, however, in the destructive machines of Jean Tinguely, in the famous Homage to New York of 1960 which was designed to destroy itself and, what was very important, to end up in the garbage cans of the Museum of Modern Art, or in the machine he installed in Krefeld which was specifically intended to destroy museums: 'It stood in the garden outside,

<sup>16</sup> Nathalie Sarraute played a role in the events of 1968 in that she was one of a number of writers who invaded the headquarters of the Société des gens de lettres and accused that body of being unrepresentative and out-of-date.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, French Revolution 1968, London, 1968, p. 134.

<sup>18</sup> Le Clec'h, p. 4.

tearing up grass with its feet and beating furiously but in vain against the museum wall with its upper assembly.<sup>19</sup>

The statue does - metaphorically at least - finish up in a museum, the Louvre. The father, in one of his expansive moments, offers it simply and without conditions, as it were, to the children. No expression of appreciation is required, no proof of informed familiarity with the period from which it dates; it is simply an offering, made impulsively out of affection: 'Et tout à coup, tant pis, il ne peut l'arrêter, un élan joyeux le fait se pencher au-dessus de la table, saisir la bête dans ses mains, la leur tendre ... Tenez, prenez ça' (p. 208). But he has not lost his desire that they should share his outlook towards it. Perhaps the gesture, apparently disinterested, is another, more subtle, form of pressure. When he goes upstairs (in a mood of irritation with them because they have taken away his journal before he has read it) and finds that the statue is being treated casually - an ashtray is balanced on its back - he is angry. The young people make amends by suggesting that it should be donated to a museum:

Tu vois que tu n'aurais jamais dû nous la donner ... Tu sais bien comment on est ... Tu nous connais ... Tu ferais mieux de la reprendre ... (...) Tu sais ce que tu devrais faire pour être vraiment tranquille? ... tu devrais en faire don à un musée ... Pourquoi pas au Louvre? Tu ne nous as pas dit qu'on allait y ouvrir une salle d'art précolombien? Le Louvre, ce serait parfait. (pp. 215-6)

This is a solution that signifies defeat for the father. He tries to persuade himself of the young people's kindness: 'Il n'y a pas à dire, ce sont de bons enfants ... Vous voyez, cette chose-là ... qui vous plaît tant, je voulais la leur laisser, eh bien ils m'ont eux-mêmes insisté pour que j'en fasse don à un musée ...' (p. 218). But secretly he knows that he has been abandoned; he imagines looking for them in the museum

---

<sup>19</sup> Tompkins, op. cit., p. 183.

270

and seeing only strangers: 'Et toute sa solitude, son abandon, toute sa détresse s'étaient sur ces visages inconnus, refluent sur lui de ces rires glacés ...' (p. 219). If the young people ever see the statue again, it will only be because they have been landed with the unwelcome duty of showing visiting friends the sights of Paris.

The museum is as much a means of protecting the past against the present generation as of preserving it for them. Under the young people's influence, the father is tempted to destroy the statue:

Retenez-moi pour que je ne saisisse pas cette vilaine vieille bête de pierre posée là devant nous et que je ne la lance pas de toutes mes forces contre ce mur ... (p. 39)

Ils m'aspirent ... sauvez-moi, protégez-moi, répétez encore ça: Digne de figurer dans un musée. Oui. Parfaitement. Dans un musée ... Vite ... la prendre, l'envelopper, l'emporter, la mettre à l'abri. Bien gardée. Protégée. Derrière une vitrine. Aux parois incassables. Parmi d'autres - aussi bien défendues. (p. 40)

The museum is a way of excluding young people from access to art. Once the statue is relegated to the museum, it is probably lost to them for ever. There is a chance while it is still in the house available to them, though even there it is too protected by the screen of the father's respect for it, by the weight of commentary, the weight of past generations' appreciation which surrounds it:

Ces mots dont elle est entourée sont comme des fils de fer barbelés, comme le courant qui les traverse ... S'ils se permettaient, ceux qui rient là-haut, d'étendre la main pour la tapoter avec condescendance, ils sentiraient s'enfoncer en eux les piquants, passer à travers eux la décharge. (p. 132)

Ultimately perhaps one must be prepared to gamble the heritage of the past; one must allow the young people to put their ruff on the statue or earlier young people their moustache on the Mona Lisa.<sup>20</sup> Is not this the only way to preserve the creative tradition as a living thing? The message of Vous les entendez? is again reminiscent of Portrait. Is it

---

<sup>20</sup> The reference is to Duchamp's ready-made of 1919, a photograph of the Mona Lisa with moustache and beard added.

not the extreme veneration in which Tolstoy is held which leads in part to the narrator's discouragement and defeat? Nathalie Sarraute raises questions more than she offers solutions; she describes a conflict, she does not resolve it. She is certainly critical of the father's pretensions, his traditionalist views but she is also sympathetic to his anxiety as his values are radically challenged, sympathetic to his nostalgia for past certainties. Each side in the conflict is seen to be lacking in some respect: one group's failure to appreciate pop art is measured against the other's to see the merits of Flemish Madonnas. Nathalie Sarraute has expressed surprise at the idea that her characters are cruel to one another:

J'ai toujours pensé que chez mes personnages il y avait beaucoup plus de tendresse qu'on n'en trouve généralement, autour de soi, dans la vie courante. Ce sont plutôt des tendres, mes personnages, des tendres déçus ...<sup>21</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute had not yet begun Vous les entendez? at the time of this interview but the final phrase seems admirably to fit its central character. Speaking later of Vous les entendez? itself, she describes the father as torn between two passions, the love of art and the love of his children. He wants to share the former with his children precisely because they are so dear to him: 'C'est une sorte de père Goriot moderne.'<sup>22</sup> The children equally feel tenderness for their father:

Les enfants se révoltent, veulent se libérer, s'affirmer mais ils éprouvent à certain moments pour leur père une grande tendresse. Ils voudraient le délivrer à son tour et le rendre semblable à eux.<sup>23</sup>

Such then is the novel's main theme: the conflict between the father's view of art and that of his children. Its overall structure is determined

<sup>21</sup> Knapp, pp. 292-3.

<sup>22</sup> Pivot, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Le Clec'h, p. 5.

by this theme: out of a tiny incident there emerges, in the father's consciousness, a conflict between his views and the views of the young people. The novel explores all the complexities of this conflict and finally, rather than resolving it, allows it temporarily to die away. If resolution there is, it consists in the statement of the impossibility of resolution. We have, of course, as we have said before, not so much a description of the conflict but an experience of it in the mind of the father. The relationship between father and children, as the father experiences it, is essentially complex, mysterious and fluid, and the novel traces his constantly changing view of it. The nature of the relationship is constantly put into question by the absent presence of the young people, through their laughter which the father constantly seeks to interpret. Should his psychological activity ever momentarily achieve stasis, the laughter from above prods it into mobility once more. If at the end of the book his mind achieves some sort of rest, this is because the laughter ceases. Or he ceases to hear it - and in so far as the laughter represents life - he is therefore dead. The relationship is described on a number of occasions and its mysteriousness (to the outsider) and above all its fluidity are invariably stressed: 'tous ces mouvements de flux et de reflux' (p. 118), 'organisme vivant' (p. 36), 'mécanisme d'horlogerie minutieusement réglé' (p. 29), 'langage chiffré, mis au point depuis tant d'années' (p. 134), 'ce qui sans cesse entre nous circule, si fluide, fluctuant' (p. 206). The detailed structure of the book is designed to express this constant fluctuation. Unlike all Nathalie Sarraute's previous novels, Vous les entendez? is not divided up into separate sections. There are a series of developments crystallizing around one particular phrase or idea but these are only indicated by a gap in the type-setting greater than usual and their intimate connection with one another thus stressed. Within each development there is constant movement. In the course of a paragraph, one view of things



may seem firmly established; by the end of it, hesitations creep in and by the next, the view is being rejected for another or modified in some radical way.

The novel starts out from the little scene which took place in the immediate past; the placing of the statue on the table by the friend, the comments of the young people, the reactions of the father, the departure of the young people. 'Dès ce moment tout était là, ramassé dans cet instant ...' (p. 15). The father explores in retrospect the implications of the scene but not with detachment or in an emotional vacuum, for the influence of the young people is still with him through their laughter. One by one, new details of the scene are revealed to us, as the father concentrates on first one, then another key phrase or exchange, and registers the reactions which underlie them or which they provoke: 'Je ne suis pas un collectionneur' (p. 14), 'digne de figurer dans un musée' (p. 38), 'ça fait penser à la sculpture crétoise ... (...) La quoi?' (p. 105). Gradually, as we proceed through the ever-widening circles of the novel, and as the implications of the scene are revealed in increasing complexity, we leave the surface details of the original scene behind. When we return to them at the end of the novel, the crisis is over and they are emptied of some of their emotional tension. The incident fades into the past: 'Tu te souviens quand l'un d'entre nous avait dit étourdiment que c'était une sculpture crétoise? Quel crime! Mon père avait envie de le tuer ... hochant la tête ... Ah, ce pauvre papa ...' (p. 222).

Throughout the exploration of the original scene what we are dealing with is interpretation on the father's part. Vous les entendez? is a series of hypotheses, a series of fictions, all of which approximate to the truth in a greater or lesser degree, but none of which exhaust it. We follow the activity of the father's mind as he moves towards, briefly entertains, moves away from, first one hypothesis, then another. Though

it is the totality of the novel rather than any part of it which makes the completest statement about the relationship, we are nonetheless aware of a kind of progress in the course of the novel towards a clearer awareness of the terms of the antithesis.

The movement of the father's mind is not random; it follows certain patterns and these impose further elements of structure on the novel. The father is torn between two opposing poles of thought, two worlds, that of the friend and that of the young people. To neither does he feel he belongs completely; both are a part of him and yet both work towards a negation of the other. He moves first in the direction of one, then of the other. The world of the friend is a stable, long-established world, where accepted statements still have validity: children are a comfort, they keep you young. Their laughter is innocent, typical of their age. When the father and his friend were young, they used to laugh like that too. They too would go off into fits of giggles at the slightest provocation. The familiar security of such a world is expressed metaphorically through details of its cadre:

De ces rires enfantins et charmants qui passent à travers les portes des salons où les dames se sont retirées après le dîner ... Amples housses de chintz aux teintes passées. Pois de senteur dans les vieux vases. Des charbons rougeoient, des bûches flambent dans les cheminées ... Leurs rires innocents, mutins, juste un peu malicieux, fusent ... Fossettes, roseurs, blondeurs, rondeurs, longues robes de tulle, de dentelle blanche, de broderie anglaise, ceintures de moire, fleurs piquées dans les cheveux, dans les corsages ... les notes pures de leurs rires cristallins s'égrènent ... Elles s'amuseant ... (p. 8)

The details of the picture varies from passage to passage:

Nous poussés parmi les pois de senteur, les pots de géraniums et d'impatiences, les percales fleuries, les cretonnes blanches, les vieilles servantes dévouées, les cuisinières aux faces luisantes de bonté, les grand-mères aux coiffes de dentelle, faisant boire une gorgée de vin aux poussins nouveau-nés ... (p. 13)

But the image as a whole and in particular the vases of sweet-peas and the muslin curtains remain a leitmotif throughout the novel:

Vous n'avez jamais bougé d'ici, vous n'avez jamais quitté cette pièce si calme ... les pois de senteur, les percales à fleurs ... (p. 61)

Voyez cette pièce paisible, ce vieil ami assis en face de moi, ces rideaux de percale, ces pois de senteur. (p. 108)

Voyez-vous ça, lui aussi, tout comme l'autre, en sécurité parmi les percales glacées, les pois de senteur, les prairies, les poneys ... (p. 139)

A mention of them is enough to evoke a whole way of life. Seen from this vantage-point, the world of the young people seems totally alien, disruptive, shocking, and very different images are used to convey the father's sense of it:

Un chemin parcouru dans une galopade effrénée, dans un bruit de casse, d'explosions, vroum, boum, plouf, patapoum, tout bondit, vrombit, vole, s'écrase, brûle ... les motos foncent vers les falaises à pic, les avions se catapultent dans le ciel, on est emportés, haletants, pris de vertige, pris de fou rire, vers la catastrophe, vers l'anéantissement, plus vite, plus loin, encore ... nous les casse-cou, les casse-tout, les têtes brûlées ... (pp. 71-2)

Ils sont comme les anneaux d'un serpent qui se dresse, oscille, rampe, grimpe sur les meubles, sur l'escalier, se roule en boule, se laisse tomber, se déroule, s'étire, s'élance d'un côté et de l'autre ... l'eau coule des vases renversés ... (pp. 180-1)

But these images, like others in the novel, are only hypotheses not certainties. The father may not be the inmate of a calm and gracious way of life, but rather an oppressor, curbing the least sign of individuality on the part of his children, calling in the police on his side at the least sign of rebellion. Perhaps it is he himself rather than the young people who threatens to destroy the family:

Eh bien, cet individu camouflé sous l'apparence du brave père de famille ... en secret ... par des procédés connus de lui seul, réussissait à fabriquer à partir de ces rires des miasmes, des gaz asphyziants, des microbes mortels, un fleuve de pourriture, une mer de boue qui se serait répandue sur toute la terre ... (p. 194)

Or perhaps the father is right and the image is a fake, a dated, sentimental vision of the past which has little to do with its reality. Perhaps the very terms of the image suggest that life has moved on elsewhere. The opposition between the world of the father and that of the children,

and the father's position torn between the two, is reflected in the opposition of the two animals which participate in the original scene: the young people's live dog and the stone statue of the mythological beast. For the father the stone statue is a living thing:

Dans le silence, dans le vide, maintenant, cela se déploie, tend les contours de ce dos, de ce ventre, de ce mufle, de cette oreille pareille à une roue de pierre. Ils vibrent doucement ... des ondes s'épandent ... (p. 65)

But when he sees it through his children's eyes, it becomes 'une bête grossièrement taillée dans une matière grumeleuse, d'un gris sale ...' (p. 33). By contrast their dog stands for energy, life, 'la bonne grosse vie qu'on saisit à pleines mains' (p. 32), even at the risk of being bitten (p. 33).

The father is also torn between the desire for a ready-made neat solution to his situation, a formula which will bring it under his control, and relieve him of his tensions, and the knowledge, which he always returns to, that none of them will fit. Several of the developments in the novel concern his attempt to seize and cling to one or other such formula: 'des goûts et des couleurs', 'vivre et laisser vivre'. One of the points the novel emphasises is the inadequacy of outsiders, of normal terminology, in coping with the kind of intimate relationship the novel explores. A number of official spokesmen for the surface world, the world of the group, appear in the novel. These are men and women whose job it is to codify people or to judge their relationships: a marriage counsellor, a social worker, a headmaster, a magistrate. Their formulae are all too crude to describe adequately the father's relationships with his family. They leave the problems unsolved, simply attempting to conceal them under a label or a ready-made solution. This emerges particularly clearly from the father's interview with the marriage counsellor on the problems he has in his married life. What he complains of in his wife is her effect on him when he is looking at paintings he likes:

Mais quand je suis devant quelque chose d'où cela émane,  
s'épand en moi ... quelque chose pour quoi je donnerais ...  
eh bien, il suffit qu'elle soit là, près de moi, pour que  
je sente, sortant d'elle, comme un contre-courant ... plus  
rien ne passe, tout se tarit, s'éteint ... (p. 80)

As a pis-aller they offer him 'Des goûts et des couleurs' but really they have nothing to fit his case: 'Vous avez raison, rien ici n'est prévu pour votre cas. Heureusement, d'ailleurs. Où irait-on? Qui pourrait répondre à tant d'exigences?' (p. 80). The outside world will supply labels which place the blame on either party, give either the upper hand in the relationship: 'des rires innocents' can be countered with 'des rires sournois'. But any such label, while it may appear at first to protect, will then be registered as wounding. The father is potentially supplied with an alibi by the friend's judgment on the children: 'des natures médiocres', but through his closeness to his children he finds himself attacked by the judgment and launches on a desperate campaign to prove the phrase inappropriate. Such labels are ridiculous; they resemble 'poissons d'avril'. However the father may cling to one or other of them, renewed contact with his children will convince him of their inefficacy:

C'est vrai, ils ont raison, comment ces vieux mots sclérosés pourraient-ils retenir, enserrer ce qui sans cesse entre nous circule, si fluide, fluctuant, ce qui à chaque instant se transforme, s'épand, dans tous les sens, ne se laisse arrêter par aucune borne ... ce qui est à nous, à nous seuls ... Quel mot venu du dehors peut-il mettre de l'ordre entre nous, nous séparer ou nous rapprocher? ... Tu sais bien qu'ici, entre nous, tous ces mots ... On s'en servait pour rire. Pour jouer ... (pp. 206-7)

The father is also torn between his precious image of himself as an art-lover and his closeness to his children, a closeness which puts this image at risk. The laughter seems to him a deliberate act of aggression:

Ces rires comme les gouttes d'eau qu'on fait tomber sur le crâne des suppliciés ... c'est sur nous, c'est pour nous faire souffrir, c'est pour nous détruire ... (p. 100)

Under the children's influence, he no longer believes in what he is saying:

Mais les mots qu'il s'efforce de prononcer doivent être lancés de plus en plus fort pour traverser cette épaisseur qui s'accumule lentement ... les mots en ressortent déformés, amollis, tremblants, ils flottent déportés, ils ont perdu leur éclat, ils sont ternes, gris, de pauvres mots salis, empoussiérés, comme recouverts de plâtre, de ciment ... (p. 140)

They constantly put him on the defensive, force him to question his own statements and attitudes out of self-defence, before they are attacked. It may be therefore that the father's attempt to make the children appreciate great art is simply a means of bolstering up his image of himself. Perhaps the same process was at work in his relations with his wife. A momentary hesitation on her part, a sense of incomplete fusion, is a challenge to his values. The father is intermittently aware of this, or entertains it as a possibility. It is in part this awareness which expresses itself in his sense that the children's hostility is his own invention, a product of his own tortuous mind, his own insecurity:

Où a-t-il été chercher tout ça? Mais en lui-même évidemment.  
(p. 28)

C'est lui, lui seul qui a déposé en eux ... Il trouve en eux ce qu'il y apporte. (p. 99)

But again he hesitates: it may be that his sense of guilt is being imposed upon him, that he has allowed himself once more to be out-manoeuvred by the children.

There is then no final account of the original incident. Any one aspect of it can be interpreted in a number of ways. The children's expression of interest may be simple politeness, or an attempt to keep the father at a distance, or it may be intended as mockery, or again an effort to do something that will please an oppressive parent. Their departure may indicate boredom, rejection or simply fatigue. It may arise out of a fear of getting into trouble or simply be an expression of behaviour that is natural, an expression of freedom and independence. The possibilities are endless and it is the novel's chief aim to convey this sense of infinite possibility. For everything, be it label, lengthy

development, adjective, metaphor, there is an alternative and frequently more than one: 'Le texte progresse par groupes de circonlocutions, par grappes de qualifications diverses, par essaims de métaphores, par troupes de saynètes.'<sup>24</sup> Equally there can be no final account of the opposition between tradition and the extremes of modernism, between art and life. It may be that, just as the relationship of father and children is fundamentally close, so equally here there is more in common between the two sides than might at first appear. It is certainly evident that Nathalie Sarraute finds herself able to enter imaginatively into the state of mind of both. She does not take sides. The novel accords greater sympathy and understanding to the father, yet the children are perhaps given the upper hand in the argument. The title seems to address itself accusingly to the reader, challenging him to listen to what the young people have to say.

Nathalie Sarraute has never been so confident a master of her material as she is in this novel. Of all her novels it is the one which most triumphantly justifies her own conception of the novel. We are given a clear and convincing portrayal of the psychological situation it explores and it is impossible to imagine the same ends being achieved by any other fictional technique. It is also a very moving book, partly because, as Nathalie Sarraute herself says, 'il y a là beaucoup d'amour',<sup>25</sup> but also because it queries its own status and its future.

---

<sup>24</sup> Jean Ricardou, Le Nouveau Roman, Paris, 1973, p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> Le Glec'h, p. 5.

Chapter 9 Nathalie Sarraute: twentieth-century novelist



Geneviève Serreau's final question in her interview with Nathalie Sarraute on Entre la vie et la mort was the ritual one: 'Comment vous situez-vous par rapport au "nouveau roman"?' Nathalie Sarraute's reply was brief: 'Ça c'est un autre et un peu longue et déjà vieille histoire ...'<sup>1</sup> Nathalie Sarraute had been writing for more than twenty years before she established her reputation as a novelist. She herself has given us a succinct account of those years:

Mon premier livre, Tropismes, terminé en 1937, a été refusé partout pendant deux ans. Il a fini par paraître en 1939 et n'a obtenu pour toute réponse que deux lettres et quelques lignes dans un journal de Liège. Portrait d'un inconnu, achevé en 1946, après avoir traîné d'éditeur en éditeur, n'a été publié qu'en 1948 et a été très vite - plus vite que ne l'autorisait le contrat - mis au pilon. Quand il a été réédité en 1956, il a été accueilli exactement comme en 1948, par un grand silence. Les articles de L'Ère du soupçon, publiés entre 1947 et 1955, n'ont eu à peu près aucun écho. Ce n'est que leur publication en volume en 1956 qui a attiré sur eux l'attention, a éveillé de l'intérêt pour mes romans et m'a fait connaître. J'ai donc travaillé pendant vingt ans dans un silence à peu près total.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the interest of Sartre<sup>3</sup> and the substantial and enthusiastic preface he wrote for her first novel, her first two works passed to all intents and purposes unnoticed. This was doubtless due in part to the experimental nature of her work, to the extent of its difference both from the traditional realist novel, with its emphasis on character study and plot, and from the committed literature which dominated the forties. With the reaction against commitment in the fifties, the third,

---

<sup>1</sup> Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute et les secrets de la création', p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Pivot, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir recalls the circumstances:  
Avant la guerre une inconnue avait envoyé à Sartre un petit livre, Tropismes, qui avait passé inaperçu et dont la qualité nous frappa; c'était Nathalie Sarraute; il lui avait écrit, il l'avait rencontrée. (La Force des choses, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 30)

Martereau, received more critical attention than the two earlier works had done. But it was in the second half of the decade in the context of the phenomenon which came to be known as the nouveau roman that Nathalie Sarraute finally made her name. 1956 saw the publication of L'Ere du soupçon and the reediting of Portrait by Gallimard, and 1957 the reediting of Tropismes by the Editions de Minuit. All the nouveaux romanciers had previously published works independently of one another, so they in no sense constituted a 'school' setting out to write novels according to a common programme. They did, however, recognise in one another's work a similar approach to the novel, one which, it seemed, distinguished them from previous novelists. As a group they were able to impinge on the public in a way they had not done as individual writers. It was Robbe-Grillet who provided the original organising force and Nathalie Sarraute whose work first struck him as presenting interesting similarities with his own: his review of L'Ere du soupçon for the journal Critique in 1956, marked the beginning of a deliberate partnership.<sup>4</sup> Nathalie Sarraute thus occupied a special position among the nouveaux romanciers. Senior in age and in publication, she was the first to produce a volume of essays on the novel which amounted to an art poétique and which did much to crystallize the ideas and attitudes of the group in general. Robbe-Grillet clearly responded to it and felt in sympathy with what she had to say. It was in connection with her work that the first piece of criticism on the new novel appeared - Sartre's preface - and the term anti-roman was first used of a novel by one of the group.

The phenomenon of the nouveau roman was both artificial and genuine:

---

<sup>4</sup> In the course of a discussion held at the University of Glasgow in 1965, Nathalie Sarraute described how, during the summer of 1956, Robbe-Grillet, who had published Le Voyeur and was then working on La Jalousie, contacted her 'pour voir si ensemble ils pouvaient percer'.

artificial in that it was to some extent engineered as a publicity operation by the writers themselves and was then exaggerated and distorted by subsequent journalism, but genuine in that these writers did have certain aesthetic preoccupations in common. Their similarity depends first of all on certain negative characteristics; in Nathalie Sarraute's words:

Ce qui nous lie c'est une attitude commune à l'égard de la littérature traditionnelle. C'est la conviction de la nécessité de cette transformation constante des formes et de la liberté totale de leur choix; c'est la conscience qu'une véritable révolution s'est produite dans la littérature dans le premier quart de ce siècle, et que ces grands révolutionnaires qu'ont été Proust, Joyce et Kafka ont ouvert la voie du roman moderne, et que ce mouvement est irréversible.<sup>5</sup>

They are united in what they reject, namely the nineteenth-century realist conception of the novel, with its stress on character portrayal and plot, its omniscient author, its detailed recreation of an external social framework. They argue that man's vision of reality has changed since Balzac's time, that our understanding of the human personality, of man's perception of the world and his place in it, is radically different, and that the traditional forms are therefore no longer viable. They are all - whether consciously or not - influenced by phenomenological thinking,<sup>6</sup> therefore concerned with the subjective nature of perception. In their novels, events are always perceived from a focus within the work, and they tend more often than not to emphasize the ultimate unreliability of that focus. It is clear that, even when this is not made explicit, the problematic nature of the activity of writing will be implicated in what they have to say. Thus even where the source of their writing is profoundly personal, as is often the case, they are,

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Les deux réalités', Esprit, juillet 1964, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Two studies of the nouveau roman which pursue this line are Pierre A. G. Astier, La Crise du roman français et le nouveau réalisme, Paris, 1969, and John Sturrock, The French New Novel, London, 1969.

or have become, highly self-conscious writers who reflect on the nature of their novels and on the status of fiction in general, and frequently incorporate this reflection as an essential part of their work.

Many of the general statements one can make about the group apply equally to the work of Nathalie Sarraute. Many of her novelistic techniques are similar to theirs: playing down of the plot element, disregard for chronology, anonymity of characters, mise en abyme. She herself has been prepared to reaffirm her sense of a common endeavour. Yet it is a common endeavour within certain limits only. From early years, Nathalie Sarraute has been aware of the obvious differences between her work and that of the others, in particular Robbe-Grillet's: his interest in description, for example, or what seems to her his preference for forme at the expense of fond. It was natural that these writers should come closer together when faced with the hostility or incomprehension of critics who held traditionalist views on the novel. It was understandable too that they should have been seen by critics at that moment in time as sharing similar preoccupations. Immediately they are accorded a closer scrutiny, they are seen to have less in common than was thought then and perhaps, in the last analysis, very little. 'Each of us had his own style and we didn't work at all in the same area.'<sup>7</sup> In recent years the fundamental differences between the writers have become even more clear-cut and, in this respect perhaps, the story of Nathalie Sarraute's relations with the nouveau roman is not quite such an old and well-rehearsed tale. We have already outlined these recent developments in our introduction. As we saw there, Nathalie Sarraute continues to be regarded as a kind of senior statesman figure within the nouveau roman but, as the ideas of the other nouveaux romanciers have

---

<sup>7</sup> Brée, p. 142.

developed or been clarified, so her own reservations vis-à-vis the group have equally become more pronounced.

\* \* \*

In our discussion of Tropismes, we spoke of the dual nature of Nathalie Sarraute's inspiration, literary as well as personal: 'I have been able to feel certain things and to try and separate them from a mass of other things, because my sensibility had been trained and my curiosity aroused by certain books.'<sup>8</sup> Nathalie Sarraute has always had the sense of writing within as well as against a past tradition. The first generation of nouveaux romanciers can, of course, all be seen as belonging to a novel tradition which, by the mid-twentieth century, was already well-established: Proust, Joyce, Gide, Virginia Woolf had already shifted the centre of gravity of the novel away from the realism of the nineteenth century. The notion of 'character' had long been challenged: in 1910, according to Virginia Woolf's famous remark, while Lawrence's letter to Edward Garnett rejecting 'the old stable ego of the character' was written in 1914. That element of self-consciousness, which is so central a characteristic of the nouveau roman, had begun to make its appearance in the novel by the end of the previous century. The nouveaux romanciers saw themselves as taking the experimentation of their predecessors further, not in the sense that they imitate their achievements, but that they continue to liberate the novel from the old expectations. They represent a radicalization of early modernism in the novel as in turn Tel Quel, in Jean Ricardou's phrase,<sup>9</sup> radicalizes the activity of the new novel. None is more aware of a debt than

---

<sup>8</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 428.

<sup>9</sup> 'Cette radicalisation par Tel Quel de l'activité du Nouveau Roman', Pour une théorie du nouveau roman, Paris, 1971, p. 265.

Nathalie Sarraute. The pages of L'Ere du soupçon bear witness to the range of her reading and to her enthusiastic admiration for those writers who pursued their explorations into the 'endroits obscurs de la psychologie' (p. 82). We saw earlier how, when an article published in the Times Literary Supplement failed to appreciate the ironic intention of passages referring to Joyce, Proust and Virginia Woolf in L'Ere du soupçon, she hastened to correct the misunderstanding in a letter to the editor:

Les passages de mon essai sur le roman, L'Ere du soupçon, cités dans l'article que vous avez fait paraître, décrivaient ironiquement l'attitude à l'égard de ces grands novateurs de ceux qui veulent continuer à écrire - et à lire - comme si leurs œuvres n'avaient pas existé ... Il s'agit donc pour moi non d'attaquer les auteurs que j'ai cités, mais de suivre leur voie et de m'efforcer de faire après eux ne serait-ce qu'un pas de plus dans la recherche.

After explaining the nature of her own endeavour, she concluded:

J'espère pouvoir ainsi réparer un malentendu qui m'a peinée d'autant plus qu'est grande et très sincère mon admiration pour les œuvres aussi neuves, audacieuses et exemplaires que celles de Joyce, de Proust ou de Virginia Woolf.<sup>10</sup>

Certain facts of her biography may well explain her sense of closeness to these writers. As a student of English at the outset of the twenties, she was favourably situated when it came to appreciating the significance of the work of Joyce and Virginia Woolf published in the course of that decade. She was reading Proust about the year 1924, while A la recherche du temps perdu was still in the process of being published and at a point when the first wave of enthusiasm for its author was at its ..

---

<sup>10</sup> Times Literary Supplement, 13 March 1959, p. 145. The misunderstanding has been a curiously persistent one. In 1970 an article by Roger Noël sets out to prove Nathalie Sarraute's criticism of Virginia Woolf 'harsh, hasty and undeserved' ('Nathalie Sarraute's Criticism of Virginia Woolf', Revue des langues vivantes, 36, 3, 1970, p. 270). The same error is perpetuated by Stephen Fox in his comparative study of the two writers, to which we return shortly.

height.<sup>11</sup> It must also be remembered that her linguistic capabilities have enabled her to read Proust, Virginia Woolf, Kafka and Dostoevsky in the original.

There are writers, then, whose work has encouraged her: Joyce, Virginia Woolf, the Flaubert of Madame Bovary

où il a par un bond en avant dont la puissance chaque fois me confond, quand je pense à l'époque à laquelle ce livre a été écrit, fait de ce qu'on nomme aujourd'hui 'l'inauthentique', la substance même, le sujet unique de son roman.<sup>12</sup>

None of these are however intimately linked to her own work. Michel Butor has far more in common with Joyce than she has. 'L'influence de Joyce sur Nathalie Sarraute a (...) été surtout théorique.'<sup>13</sup> It is surely correct to maintain that he is important to her simply as one of the great innovators, as a writer who represents a massive challenge to previous fictional forms. Her interest in Flaubert has led her to write an article on him. Yet the line she adopts there, limiting her enthusiasm to Madame Bovary, suggests that his impact upon her has not been profound. What she says of Madame Bovary is surely also appropriate to L'Education sentimentale and, moreover, highly relevant to Bouvard et Pécuchet.

---

11 Her historical situation may be viewed as an advantage or as a disadvantage. The gulf between herself and Jean Ricardou is amusingly underlined by what he has to say on the subject. Discussing with Georges Raillard the figures whom he includes in his book, Le Nouveau Roman (Paris, 1973), he says:

Pour Nathalie Sarraute, c'est un peu, probablement, une question de génération: cet écrivain a commencé à écrire avant la guerre, ce qui n'est le cas d'aucun autre des écrivains considérés. C'est un handicap terrible, évidemment, du point de vue d'une certaine nouveauté, que d'avoir commencé à écrire plus tôt et d'avoir été formée dans un espace culturel différent de celui des autres écrivains plus jeunes.

(Ecrire ... Pour quoi? Pour qui? Dialogues de France - Culture No. 2, Grenoble, 1974)

12 'La Littérature, aujourd'hui', p. 50. See also 'Flaubert le précurseur', Preuves, février 1965.

13 Vernière-Plank, op. cit., p. 74.

There the two chief characters think to escape their jobs as copistes but proceed to engage in similarly second-hand activities; it is fitting that in the end they return to their former occupation.

More attention has been paid to the relationship between Nathalie Sarraute and Virginia Woolf perhaps because, as Nathalie Sarraute says with some irritation, there is a tendency to compare one woman writer with another: 'C'est une manie, chez nous, que de vouloir à tout prix qu'une femme soit influencée par une autre femme.'<sup>14</sup> Ruby Cohn's description of her as a 'brillante disciple de Virginia Woolf',<sup>15</sup> even if qualified in a number of ways, is misleading. Stephen Fox, in his unpublished thesis comparing the two novelists, is cautious about suggesting any influence. This caution, however, is partly due to his misinterpretation of those pages of L'Ere du soupçon which he takes as his point of departure. It is misleading to say that 'Madame Sarraute has (...) denied Mrs. Woolf any and all place in her literary family tree'.<sup>16</sup> It is certainly not true that her essays make 'frequent and often disparaging mention of Mrs. Woolf',<sup>17</sup> or that she speaks of Mrs Woolf 'almost condescendingly'.<sup>18</sup> Equally, to claim that 'Mrs. Woolf is granted only the charm of an old-fashioned and rather naïve talent',<sup>19</sup> is to fail to perceive Nathalie Sarraute's irony. Dr. Fox proceeds, however, to compare the two novelists as 'internalizers', both members of

---

<sup>14</sup> 'Virginia Woolf ou la visionnaire du maintenant', Lettres françaises, 29 juin 1961, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> 'Nathalie Sarraute et Virginia Woolf: "Sisters under the Skin", in Un nouveau roman?, ed. J. H. Matthews, Revue des lettres modernes, nos. 94-99, 1964, p. 178.

<sup>16</sup> Fox, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>18</sup> ibid., p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> loc. cit.



a twentieth-century tradition; Nathalie Sarraute is an 'alert child of her time'.<sup>20</sup> This is acceptable as far as it goes. Were it all, however, one might wonder whether Nathalie Sarraute's comment about woman writers was not once again appropriate. The conclusion suggests a further link:

Her [i.e. Nathalie Sarraute's] interest in tiny sub-emotional responses in contrast with spoken reactions certainly (though not necessarily consciously) derives from Virginia Woolf's concern with the ambivalence of public appearance and actual personality, of public speech and actual feeling.<sup>21</sup>

This is, it seems to us, to give Virginia Woolf a status greater than she deserves. It is certain that there were other sources of such ideas more potent than this one, where Nathalie Sarraute was concerned. Temperamentally - and this is important for a writer like Nathalie Sarraute whose source of inspiration is highly personal as well as literary - Nathalie Sarraute claims to be very different from Virginia Woolf:

Je crois que nos sensibilités sont vraiment à l'opposé l'une de l'autre. Chez Virginia Woolf, l'univers entier, brassé par le temps, coule à travers la conscience des personnages, qui sont passifs, comme portés de côté et d'autre par le courant ininterrompu des instants. Chez moi, les personnages sont toujours dans un état d'hyperactivité: une action dramatique se joue au niveau de leurs 'tropismes', ces mouvements très rapides aux frontières de la conscience. D'où un rythme tout différent du style.<sup>22</sup>

There are writers like Rilke and Mann whose works, as we saw earlier, made a great impression on her; in both cases it would seem that an element of self-recognition played an important part. There are others for whose work she has great sympathy, though she did not discover it

---

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 178-9.

<sup>22</sup> 'Virginia Woolf ou la visionnaire du maintenant', p. 3.

until after her own was well under way: among them, Kafka<sup>23</sup> and Ivy Compton-Burnett. The writers to whom she owes most, where the genesis and development of her works are concerned, are however Proust and Dostoevsky. Proust is for her an enormously important figure in the evolution of the novel: 'Proust m'a vite convaincu qu'il n'était plus possible d'écrire qu'à partir de lui.'<sup>24</sup> He went beyond the nineteenth-century conception of character to explore what lay beneath, the confusion of feelings, sensations, memories and images, which constitutes the substance of the human consciousness. But he did so by means of analysis, thus giving the impression of static material from which he and the reader stand aloof:

Mais ces mouvements innombrables et minuscules qui préparent le dialogue sont pour Proust, à la place d'où il les observe, ce que sont, pour le cartographe qui étudie une région en la survolant, les vagues et les remous des cours d'eau; il ne voit et ne reproduit que les grandes lignes immobiles que ces mouvements composent, les points où ces lignes se joignent, se croisent ou se séparent; il reconnaît parmi elles celles qui sont déjà explorées et les désigne par leurs noms connus: jalousie, snobisme, crainte, modestie, etc...; il décrit, classe et nomme celles qu'il a découvertes; il cherche à dégager de ses observations des principes généraux.<sup>25</sup>

This was Nathalie Sarraute's reservation where Proust was concerned, and this was the point at which she felt that she as a writer had something to say:

---

<sup>23</sup> Nathalie Sarraute's first encounter with Kafka is reminiscent of that of Gide with Proust:

Une seule erreur, pourtant, et celle-là de taille. En 1933, quand je venais de commencer à écrire Tropismes, une amie m'a passé Le Château de Kafka, en me disant que c'était là quelque chose de très intéressant. J'étais alors persuadée - je le suis encore - que le dialogue, tel qu'il était employé dans le roman traditionnel, n'était plus qu'une convention insupportable, j'ai ouvert le livre, j'ai vu: 's'écria K', 'répondit Barnabé', je n'ai pas poursuivi, j'ai rendu le livre à mon amie en lui disant que cela ne m'intéressait pas.

(Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II, p. 28)

<sup>24</sup> Demeron, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> L'Ère du soupçon, p. 115.

Seulement chez lui la matière psychologique analysée au microscope est étalée comme des souvenirs, elle est statique. C'est l'analyse du formé. J'ai eu l'idée qu'on pouvait continuer d'analyser le mouvement, d'étudier non plus le formé mais les états psychologiques en formation. C'est ce que j'ai tenté de faire avec Tropismes.<sup>26</sup>

More important even than Proust is Dostoevsky. Nathalie Sarraute judges his work to be seminal where the modern novel is concerned. Her essay, 'De Dostoïevski à Kafka', develops this opinion and contains a masterly analysis of characteristic pages from his work. It displays, she argues, precisely that feature which is missing in Proust: the treatment of psychology in action. On his relation to her own work, she says:

Dostoïevski m'a donné l'impression qu'il était permis de s'occuper de ces états dits morbides, jusqu'alors inexplorés. En le relisant aujourd'hui, j'y retrouve des tropismes qui sont chez ses personnages comme chez les êtres vivants sans qu'il ait eu le souci de les étudier.<sup>27</sup>

In her enthusiasm for Dostoevsky, we discover another link between Nathalie Sarraute and earlier modernist writers. One definite bond between herself and Virginia Woolf is their shared appreciation of his work. One of Gide's virtues in her eyes is his awareness of Dostoevsky's merits, an awareness which is, according to her, all the more laudable given his own lack of natural talent in that direction:

Mais le mérite qu'il a eu c'est tout de même d'essayer d'introduire Dostoïevski ici, et d'essayer de voir ce que très peu de gens voyaient à cette époque.<sup>28</sup>

Ortega y Gasset, in his 'Notes on the Novel', comments on Dostoevsky's

---

<sup>26</sup> Demeron, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> loc. cit. We have already voiced some criticism of Ruth Levinsky's comparative study of Sarraute and Dostoevsky (see Chapter 1, p. 53). Its major flaw might be said to lie in its failure to give full value to the word 'dits' in this quotation. The subject of Sarraute's debt to, and difference from, Dostoevsky has yet to be exhausted.

<sup>28</sup> Boulle, op. cit., p. 351.

escape from 'the general shipwreck of nineteenth-century novels'.<sup>29</sup> The escape is due, he suggests, to the 'turbulent, wayward character of his personages',<sup>30</sup> and also to his individual and revolutionary mode of presenting character:

To a perfunctory observation, he seems to define each of his personages. When he introduces a figure he nearly always begins by briefly giving a biography of that person and thus makes us believe that we know well enough with what kind of man we are dealing. But no sooner do his people begin to act - i.e., to talk and to do things - than we feel thrown off the track. They refuse to behave according to those alleged definitions. The first conceptual image we were given of them is followed by another in which we see their immediate life, independent of the author's definition: and the two do not tally.<sup>31</sup>

Gide's comments are similar, though he clearly finds Dostoevsky's characters even more alien:

Nous vivons sur des données admises, et prenons vite cette habitude de voir le monde, non point tant comme il est vraiment, mais comme on nous a dit, comme on nous a persuadés qu'il était. Combien de maladies semblaient n'exister point tant qu'on ne les avait pas dénoncées! Combien d'états bizarres, pathologiques, anormaux ne reconnaitrons-nous pas, autour de nous ou en nous-mêmes, avertis par la lecture des œuvres de Dostoïevsky? Oui, vraiment, je crois que Dostoïevsky nous ouvre les yeux sur certains phénomènes, qui peut-être ne sont même pas rares - mais que simplement nous n'avions pas su remarquer.<sup>32</sup>

Many twentieth-century writers, like Nathalie Sarraute, have responded with greater sympathy to Dostoevsky than to Tolstoy. Camus comments on the fact - with some disapproval - in his introduction to the works of Roger Martin du Gard. Martin du Gard, according to him, is one of the few modern novelists who owes more to Tolstoy than to Dostoevsky. He

---

<sup>29</sup> op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> ibid., p. 76.

<sup>31</sup> ibid., p. 77.

<sup>32</sup> André Gide, Dostoïevsky, Paris, 1923, p. 143.

seeks to identify what the outstanding feature of each novelist is, and it is again the notion of movement, of psychology in action, which he stresses where Dostoevsky is concerned:

Notre production pourrait en effet, lorsqu'elle est valable, se réclamer de Dostoïevski plutôt que de Tolstoï. Des ombres passionnées ou inspirées y tracent le commentaire gesticulant d'une réflexion sur la destinée. Sans doute, le relief et l'épaisseur se rencontrent aussi dans les figures de Dostoïevski, mais il n'en fait pas, comme Tolstoï, la règle de sa création. Dostoïevski cherche d'abord le mouvement, Tolstoï la forme. Entre les jeunes femmes des Possédés et Natacha Rostov, il y a la même différence qu'entre un personnage cinématographique et un héros de théâtre: plus d'animation et moins de chair.<sup>33</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute had undoubtedly to make less effort than Gide to admit to the validity of Dostoevsky's vision of people. Their shared nationality perhaps plays a part in Nathalie Sarraute's appreciation of Dostoevsky and her sense of closeness to his work. Nathalie Sarraute's first language was French; though Russian rapidly followed, she has always had, and always regretted, a slight accent.<sup>34</sup> The only lengthy period of time she has spent in Russia was between the ages of five and eight and even that was interrupted by visits to France and to Switzerland. That seems to have been enough, however, to establish Russia in her mind as a country of considerable importance to her:

La Russie représente pour moi beaucoup de souvenirs qui, bien que limités à trois années, entre cinq et huit ans, sont d'une très grande intensité. J'ai gardé des souvenirs d'hiver russe, de forêts russes, de rues, de maisons, de gens. On pourrait croire qu'on se souvient mal de ce qu'on a vu entre cinq et huit ans et pourtant ces souvenirs sont très nets et ils me sont très chers.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, although she became successfully and happily integrated into French life through the medium of school, her family had close links

---

<sup>33</sup> Roger Martin du Gard, Ouvres completes, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, 1955, p. ix.

<sup>34</sup> Pivot, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> loc. cit.

with other Russian expatriates and this tended to maintain her sense of Russia as a place with which she too had ties.

It is in Dostoevsky that Nathalie Sarraute finds 'about the best definition [of tropisms] which could be given':<sup>36</sup>

Two years ago I saw a play which was taken from a story by Dostoevsky and was called A Bad Anecdote. I read the story when I came back home and I discovered the following passage: 'We know that entire arguments pass sometimes through our heads instantaneously, in the form of sort of sensations which are not translated into human language and even less into literary language. And it is obvious that many of these sensations, if translated into ordinary language, would appear very improbable and hard to believe. This is why they never appear in broad daylight and nevertheless exist in everyone.'<sup>37</sup>

Dostoevsky's characters, according to Nathalie Sarraute, are governed by a need to establish contact with others; this explains their contradictory behaviour, their impulsiveness, the grotesque and ridiculous attitudes they adopt:

C'est ce besoin continu et presque maniaque de contact, d'une impossible et apaisante étreinte, qui tire tous ces personnages comme un vertige, les incite à tout moment à essayer par n'importe quel moyen de se frayer un chemin jusqu'à autrui, de pénétrer en lui le plus loin possible, de lui faire perdre son inquiétante, son insupportable opacité, et les pousse à s'ouvrir à lui à leur tour, à lui révéler leurs plus secrets replis.<sup>38</sup>

It is, as we said earlier, a description and explanation which might well be applied to the figures in Nathalie Sarraute's own novels and plays, and it is a trait which she herself believes to be fundamentally Russian: 'trait de caractère du peuple russe auquel l'œuvre de Dostoïevski tient si fortement par toutes ses racines'.<sup>39</sup> Nathalie Sarraute is right to dismiss with impatience Simone de Beauvoir's comment on her ancestry: 'Fille de Russes israélites que les persécutions

---

<sup>36</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 428-9.

<sup>38</sup> L'Ere du soupçon, p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

tzaristes avaient chassés de leur pays au début du siècle, elle devait, je suppose, à ces circonstances sa subtilité inquiète.<sup>40</sup> It is difficult, however, to resist the sense that her particular background contributed its part to the kind of novels she has written, just as Ireland seems in one way or another relevant to an understanding of Joyce, or Prague to an understanding of Kafka. One can at least say with confidence that her Russian origins, as well as her command of Russian, made access to Dostoevsky easier for her, though it may have been her personal family experiences which made of her such an appreciative and understanding reader of his work.

\* \* \*

We return, then, to the view expressed in our introduction, that, if we are to situate Nathalie Sarraute as a twentieth-century novelist, it is with Professor Kermode's palaeo-modernists that she belongs. Notions of 'realism' are not entirely irrelevant to her work, even if the term needs some kind of special treatment: we may feel impelled to protect it against immediate attack by inverted commas, to expand and modify it by speaking of 'subjective realism' or 'un réalisme plus poussé', to borrow Butor's phrase,<sup>41</sup> or to employ an apologetic aside such as Ortega y Gasset uses when discussing Dostoevsky: 'let us call it that not to complicate things'.<sup>42</sup> Nathalie Sarraute herself is fond of quoting Paul Klee on the subject of art and reality: 'L'art ne restitue pas le visible: il rend visible'. In her series of answers

---

<sup>40</sup> Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Butor, Essais sur le roman, Paris, 1972, p. 11. The essay in which the phrase appears, 'Le roman comme recherche', dates from 1955.

<sup>42</sup> Ortega y Gasset, op. cit., p. 78.

to questions posed her by Tel Quel in 1962, she elaborates on what this means for her:

Cet invisible que l'art rend visible, qui est à tout moment pour l'artiste ce qu'il appelle 'la réalité', de quoi est-il fait? D'éléments inconnus, épars, confus, amorphes, de virtualités, de sensations fugaces, indéfinissables, écrasées sous la gangue du visible, du déjà connu, du déjà exprimé, du conventionnel.

L'acte créateur, c'est, me semble-t-il, le mouvement par lequel l'artiste brise cette gangue, fait jaillir ces éléments intacts et neufs, les groupe, leur donne une cohésion, les construit en un modèle qui est l'œuvre d'art elle-même. La structure d'une œuvre, le style sont l'accomplissement de cet effort.

En l'absence d'une forme qui les crée, ces éléments resteront invisibles, inexistants. Sans la forme, ils ne sont rien. Mais la forme n'est rien sans eux.<sup>43</sup>

Like other modernists, Nathalie Sarraute is thus very much aware of the problematic aspects of 'realism', and of what Malcolm Bradbury calls 'the procedural paradox of novels'.<sup>44</sup> Like other twentieth-century novelists, she attempts to reflect in her work that more complex understanding of the nature of reality which characterizes the period in which she has lived; she too attempts to come to terms with what Erich Auerbach, writing of Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries, referred to as the 'lack of valid foundations',<sup>45</sup> for their work, such as underlie traditional realism:

As recently as the nineteenth century, and even at the beginning of the twentieth, so much clearly formulable and recognized community of thought and feeling remained in those countries that a writer engaged in representing reality had reliable criteria at hand by which to organize it.<sup>46</sup>

'I thought that what we know about reality has changed since Balzac's time':<sup>47</sup> it is this attitude which finds expression in Portrait d'un inconnu which Nathalie Sarraute began to write in 1941. She makes the same comparison between her own work and that of Balzac in relation to

---

<sup>43</sup> 'La littérature, aujourd'hui', pp. 48-9.

<sup>44</sup> Bradbury, op. cit., p. 285.

<sup>45</sup> Erich Auerbach, Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, Princeton, 1953, p. 551.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 550.

<sup>47</sup> 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', p. 429.



her latest novel, when she refers to the central figure in Vous les entendez? as 'une sorte de père Goriot moderne'.<sup>48</sup> The fact is revealing; it emphasizes the basic continuity of Nathalie Sarraute's fictional endeavour from first to latest novel; moreover, it suggests a development of, rather than a complete break with, previous fictional forms. Her view of human psychology may be different from Balzac's, and is arguably more complex;<sup>49</sup> her understanding of the relationship between novelist and reality is certainly different; yet her novels do not break with the real world, they stand in a relation to it which is important to them.

Professor Kermode, in his essay on 'The Modern', suggests that early and later modernism are closer than might appear:

In both periods there was a natural tendency (inescapable from the Modern at any period and easier to justify half a century back) to exaggerate the differences between what one was doing and what had been done by the old guard, and this has helped to conceal the truth that there has been only one Modernist Revolution, and that it happened a long time ago. So far as I can see there has been little radical change in modernist thinking since then. More muddle, certainly, and almost certainly more jokes, but no revolution, and much less talent.<sup>50</sup>

It is too soon to maintain with conviction that what has been happening in the French novel since 1960 will give the lie to Professor Kermode's argument, too soon to be clear what contribution the nouveau nouveau roman will have made to the history of the novel. Nathalie Sarraute's reputation, however, will not be affected thereby. Her talents and achievements are demonstrated afresh and further consolidated with each successive novel. François Erval's description of her seems even more appropriate now than it was in 1963: 'Elle est, si l'on peut dire, un classique de l'avant-garde.'

---

<sup>48</sup> Pivot, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> A case for the existence of greater psychological complexities in Balzac than the nouveau roman give him credit for, is persuasively put in C. A. Prendergast, 'Towards a Reassessment of Béatrix', Essays in French Literature, no. 9, 1972. Through Proust a connection is established between Balzac and the practice of Nathalie Sarraute.

<sup>50</sup> Modern Essays, p. 61.

## Bibliography

## I WORKS BY NATHALIE SARRAUTE

### Works in volume form

All the works listed below are published in Paris, except where otherwise indicated. Only the first edition is given except where another edition contains new material, creative or critical, or where its date is of some significance.

Tropismes, Denoël, 1939; Editions de Minuit, 1957; London, Methuen Educational, ed. Sheila M. Bell, 1972.

Portrait d'un inconnu, Préface de J.-P. Sartre, Robert Marin, 1948; Gallimard, 1956.

Martereau, Gallimard, 1953; Livre de poche université, ed. Jean Roudaut, 1967.

L'Ere du soupçon, Gallimard, 1956; Collection Idées, Gallimard, 1964 (with a preface by Nathalie Sarraute).

Le Planétarium, Gallimard, 1959.

Les Fruits d'or, Gallimard, 1963 (Prix international de littérature, 1964).

Le Silence suivi de Le Mensonge, Gallimard, 1967.

Entre la vie et la mort, Gallimard, 1968.

Isma suivi de Le Silence et Le Mensonge, Le Manteau d'Arlequin, Gallimard, 1970.

Vous les entendez?, Gallimard, 1972.

### Principal articles and interviews

These are listed in chronological order. Names are those of interviewers.

'Paul Valéry et l'enfant d'éléphant', Temps modernes, janvier 1947.

Bernard Pingaud, 'Dix romanciers face au roman', Pensée française, 15 décembre 1956.

Geneviève Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute nous parle du Planétarium', Lettres nouvelles, 29 avril 1959.

Pierre Demeron, 'Nathalie Sarraute ou Littérature sans cabotinage', Arts, 3 juin 1959.

André Bourin, 'Techniciens du roman: Nathalie Sarraute', Nouvelles littéraires, 25 juin 1959.

- 'Rebels in a World of Platitudes', Times Literary Supplement, 10 June 1960.
- 'Tolstoi', Lettres françaises, 22 septembre 1960.
- 'En 1960, selon vous, à quoi servez-vous?', Nouvelle Critique, novembre 1960.
- 'Nathalie Sarraute', in Denise Bourdet, Visages d'aujourd'hui, Paris, Plon, 1960.
- 'New Movements in French Literature: Nathalie Sarraute explains tropisms', The Listener, 9 March 1961.
- 'Virginia Woolf ou la visionnaire du maintenant', Lettres françaises, 29 juin 1961.
- Janine Parot, 'Entretien avec Nathalie Sarraute', Lettres françaises, 28 septembre 1961.
- Peter Lennon, 'Interview with Nathalie Sarraute', The Guardian, 8 March 1962.
- 'La Littérature, aujourd'hui', Tel Quel, no. 9, 1962.
- 'Nouveau roman et réalité', Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie, 2, 1963.
- François Bondy, 'Vom Nichts an schaffen', Der Monat, December 1963 (French translation in Mimica Cranaki and Yvon Belaval, Nathalie Sarraute, Bibliothèque Idéale, Paris, Gallimard, 1965).
- Pierre Schneider, 'Nathalie Sarraute talks about her art', New York Times Book Review, 9 February 1964.
- 'Les deux réalités', Esprit, juillet 1964.
- 'Flaubert le précurseur', Preuves, février 1965.
- Thérèse de Saint-Phalle, 'Nathalie Sarraute ne veut rien avoir de commun avec Simone de Beauvoir', Figaro littéraire, 5 janvier 1967.
- 'Entretien avec Nathalie Sarraute à propos du Mensonge et du Silence', Le Monde, 18 janvier 1967.
- Colette Godard, 'Le Laboratoire de Barrault', Nouvelles littéraires, 19 janvier 1967.
- Bettina L. Knapp, 'Interview avec Nathalie Sarraute', Kentucky Romance Quarterly, 14, 3, 1967.
- Geneviève Serreau, 'Nathalie Sarraute et les secrets de la création', Quinzaine littéraire, 1 mai 1968.
- 'Portrait de l'écrivain vu par lui-même', Le Monde, 11 mai 1968.
- Erwin Spatz, 'Nathalie Sarraute au kibboutz', Quinzaine littéraire, 16 octobre 1969.

'Interview de Nathalie Sarraute', in Margaret P. Boulle, La Remise en question du personnage, 'Les Faux-monnayeurs' et le nouveau roman, Paris, Thèse universitaire, 1969.

'Quatrième entretien' in Pierre Bourgeade, Violoncelle qui résiste, Paris, Eric Losfeld, 1971.

'Ce que je cherche à faire', in Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui, II Pratiques, 10.18, Paris, Union générale d'éditions, 1972.

J.-L. de Rambures, 'Comment travaillent les écrivains', Le Monde, 14 janvier 1972.

Bernard Pivot, 'Nathalie Sarraute a réponse à tous', Figaro littéraire, 4 février 1972.

Guy Le Clec'h, 'Drames microscopiques', Nouvelles littéraires, 28 février 1972.

Germaine Brée, 'Interviews with Two French Novelists', Contemporary Literature, 14, 2, 1972.

## II WORKS ON NATHALIE SARRAUTE

### Books

- Cranaki, Mimica and Yvon Belaval, Nathalie Sarraute, Bibliothèque Idéale, Paris, Gallimard, 1965.
- Eliez-Rüegg, Elisabeth, La Conscience d'autrui et la conscience des objets dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute, Berne, Herbert Lang, 1972.
- Jaccard, Jean-Luc, Nathalie Sarraute, Zurich, Juris, 1967.
- Micha, René, Nathalie Sarraute, Paris, Classiques du XXe siècle, Editions universitaires, 1966.
- Temple, Ruth Z., Nathalie Sarraute, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, New York, Columbia University Press, 1968.
- Tison Braun, Micheline, Nathalie Sarraute ou la Recherche de l'authenticité, Paris, Gallimard, 1971.
- Wunderli-Müller, Christine B., Le Thème du masque et les banalités dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute, Zurich, Juris, 1970.

### Theses

- Calin, Françoise, D. G., La Vie retrouvée. Etude de l'œuvre romanesque de Nathalie Sarraute, Stanford, 1972.
- Fleming, John A., The Imagery of Tropism, Harvard, 1966.
- Fox, Stephen D., The Novels of Virginia Woolf and Nathalie Sarraute, Emory, 1970.
- Johnson, Susanne E., Les Images dans les romans de Nathalie Sarraute, Western Australia, 1966.
- Le Gall, Jean, Nathalie Sarraute, l'espace littéraire des 'Tropismes', Brest, 1971.
- Levinsky, Ruth, Between Dream and Reality. A study of Nathalie Sarraute and Fedor Dostoevsky, Southern California, 1969.
- Oberst, Bethany S., Nathalie Sarraute: The Images of Tropism, Case Western Reserve, 1973.
- Newman, Anthony S., Les Articulations du discours romanesque chez Nathalie Sarraute, Besançon, 1971.
- Vernière-Plank, Marie-Laure, Nathalie Sarraute. Tradition et 'modernité' d'une œuvre contemporaine, Fordham, 1967-8.

## Selected articles

- 'A Pronoun too few', Times Literary Supplement, 1 January 1960.
- Arendt, Hannah, 'Nathalie Sarraute', Merkur, August 1964.
- Audry, Colette, 'Nathalie Sarraute: communication et reconnaissance', Critique, janvier 1954.
- Bernal, Olga, 'Des fiches et des fluides dans le roman de Nathalie Sarraute', Modern Language Notes, 88, 4, 1973.
- Bouraoui, H. A., 'Sarraute's Narrative Portraiture: the Artist in Search of a Voice', Critique. Studies in Modern Fiction, 14, 1, 1972.
- Bouraoui, H. A., 'Silence ou mensonge: dilemme du nouveau romancier dans le théâtre de Nathalie Sarraute', French Review, 45, Special Issue no 4, 1972.
- Butor, Michel, 'Le Planétarium: le jeu compliqué des paroles et des silences', Arts, 3 juin 1959.
- Cagnon, Maurice, 'Le Planétarium: quelque aspects stylistiques', French Review, 40, 5, 1967.
- Calin, Françoise, 'La "culture" de l'autre dans Vous les entendez? de Nathalie Sarraute', Symposium, 28, 4, 1974.
- Calin, Françoise, 'Le Planétarium de Nathalie Sarraute ou les tentations de l'apprenti-écrivain', Romance Notes, 15, 3, 1974.
- Cohn, Ruby, 'A Diminishing Difference', Yale French Studies, no. 27, 1961.
- Cohn, Ruby, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Sub-Consciousversations', Modern Language Notes, 78, 3, 1963.
- Contesse, André, 'L'Imagination chez Nathalie Sarraute', Etude de Lettres (Lausanne), 6, 3, 1963.
- Erval, François, 'La grande tradition', L'Express, 25 avril 1963.
- Finas, Lucette, 'Nathalie Sarraute ou les Métamorphoses du verbe', Tel Quel, no. 20, 1965.
- Goitein, Denise, 'Nathalie Sarraute as dramatist', Yale French Studies, no. 46, 1971.
- Grobe, Edwin P., 'Symbolic Sound Patterns in Nathalie Sarraute's Martereau', French Review, 40, 1, 1966.
- Lorent, Laure-Elizabeth, 'Nathalie Sarraute ou l'aboutissement d'un nouveau réalisme', Revue nouvelle, 42, 1965.
- McCarthy, Mary, 'Hanging by a Thread', New York Review of Books, 31 July 1969.
- de Magny, Olivier, 'Nathalie Sarraute ou l'Astronomie intérieure', Lettres nouvelles, décembre-janvier 1963-4.

- Minogue, Valerie, 'The Imagery of Childhood in Nathalie Sarraute's Portrait d'un inconnu', French Studies, 27, 2, 1973.
- Minogue, Valerie, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Le Planétarium: the Narrator Narrated', Forum for Modern Language Studies, 9, 3, 1973.
- Minor, Anne, 'Nathalie Sarraute: Tropismes, Portrait d'un inconnu, Martereau', French Review, 33, 2, 1959.
- Murch, Anne C., 'Eric Berne's Games and Nathalie Sarraute's Tropismes', Australian Journal of French Studies, 8, 1, 1971.
- Newman, A. S., 'La fonction déclarative chez Nathalie Sarraute', Poétique, no. 14, 1973.
- Noël, Roger, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Criticism of Virginia Woolf', Revue des langues vivantes, 36, 3, 1970.
- Pingaud, Bernard, 'Le Personnage dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute', Preuves, décembre 1963.
- Plard, Henri, 'Apologie de Nathalie Sarraute', Revue générale belge, novembre 1961.
- Raillard, Georges, 'Nathalie Sarraute et la violence du texte', Littérature, no. 2, 1971.
- Robbe-Grillet, Alain, 'Le Réalisme, la psychologie et l'avenir du roman', Critique, août-septembre 1956.
- Roudiez, Leon S., 'A Glance at the Vocabulary of Nathalie Sarraute', Yale French Studies, no. 27, 1961.
- St. Aubyn, F. C., 'Rilke, Sartre, and Sarraute: The Role of the Third', Revue de littérature comparée, 41, 2, 1967.
- Scherff, Ingrid, 'Ein Roman in statu nascendi: Portrait d'un inconnu von Nathalie Sarraute', Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur, 82, 4, 1972.
- Schlötke-Schröer, Charlotte, 'Wesen und Formen des Dialogs im Werk von Nathalie Sarraute', Neueren Sprachen, 67, nos. 1 and 2, 1968.
- Sontag, Susan, 'Is the Reader Necessary?', Partisan Review, 30, 3, 1963.
- Stewart, Jean, 'The Planetarium', London Magazine, 2, 1, 1962.
- Watson-Williams, Helen, 'Etude du Planétarium', Essays in French Literature, no. 1, 1964.
- Watson-Williams, Helen, 'Nathalie Sarraute's Golden Apples', Essays in French Literature, no. 3, 1966.
- Whiting, Charles G., 'Nathalie Sarraute: Moraliste', French Review, 43, Special Issue no. 1, 1970.
- Zeltner, Gerda, 'Nathalie Sarraute et l'impossible réalisme', Mercure de France, août 1962.



### III GENERAL

#### Books

- Albérès, René-Marill, Histoire du roman moderne, Paris, Albin Michel, 1962.
- Allott, Miriam, Novelists on the Novel, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959.
- Ardagh, John, The New France, second edition, London, Penguin Books, 1973.
- Arland, M. and J. Mouton (eds.), Entretiens sur André Gide, Paris, Mouton, 1967.
- Arnaudès, Annie, Le Nouveau Roman. I Les Matériaux and II Les Formes, Thema Anthologie, Paris, Hatier, 1974.
- Astier, Pierre, La Crise du roman français et le nouveau réalisme, Paris, Nouvelles éditions Debresse, 1969.
- Auerbach, Erich, Mimesis, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, Princeton University Press, 1953.
- Baqué, Françoise, Le Nouveau Roman, Paris, Bordas, 1972.
- Barrère, Jean-Bertrand, La Cure d'amaigrissement du roman, Paris, Albin Michel, 1964.
- Barthes, Roland, Le Degré zéro de l'écriture, Paris, Seuil, 1953.
- Barthes, Roland, Essais critiques, Paris, Seuil, 1964.
- de Beauvoir, Simone, La Force des choses, Paris, Gallimard, 1963.
- Beja, Morris, Epiphany in the Modern Novel, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1971.
- Berger, Peter L., Invitation to Sociology, London, Penguin Books, 1966.
- Bergonzi, Bernard, The Situation of the Novel, London, Macmillan, 1970.
- Bersani, Leo, Balzac to Beckett. Center and Circumference in French Fiction, New York, Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Bloch-Michel, Jean, Le Présent de l'indicatif, Paris, Gallimard, 1963.
- Booth, Wayne C., The Rhetoric of Fiction, Chicago University Press, 1961.
- Bonnefoy, Claude, Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco, Paris, Belfond, 1966.
- Bradbury, Malcolm, Possibilities. Essays on the State of the Novel, London, Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Brombert, Victor, The Intellectual Hero. Studies in the French Novel 1880-1955, London, Faber, 1962.

- Butor, Michel, Essais sur le roman, Collection Idées, Paris, Gallimard, 1972.
- Chapsal, Madeleine, Les Ecrivains en personne, Paris, Julliard, 1960.
- Cruikshank, John (ed.), French Literature and its Background. 6. The Twentieth Century, London, Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Cruikshank, John (ed.), The Novelist as Philosopher, London, Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Eorire ... Pour quoi? Pour qui? Dialogues de France - Culture No. 2, Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1974.
- Fletcher, John, New Directions in Literature, London, Calder and Boyars, 1968.
- Frank, Joseph, The Widenin<sup>g</sup> Gyre. Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1963.
- Frohock, W. M. (ed.), Image and Theme. Studies in Modern French Fiction, Harvard University Press, 1969.
- Frohock, W. M., Style and Temper. Studies in French Fiction 1925-1960, Oxford, Blackwell, 1967.
- Fromm, Erich, Fear of Freedom, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.
- Gide, André, Dostoïevsky, Paris, Plon, 1923.
- Goffman, Erving, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, London, Penguin Books, 1969.
- Goldmann, Lucien, Pour une sociologie du roman, Collection Idées, Paris, Gallimard, 1964.
- Gracq, Julien, Préférences, Paris, José Corti, 1961.
- Grossvogel, David I., Limits of the Novel. Evolutions of a Form from Chaucer to Robbe-Grillet, New York, Cornell University Press, 1968.
- Harvey, W. P., Character and the Novel, London, Chatto and Windus, 1965.
- Heath, Stephen, The Nouveau Roman. A Study in the Practice of Writing, London, Elek, 1972.
- Heppenstall, Rayner, The Fourfold Tradition, London, Barrie and Rockliff, 1961.
- Hoffmann, Frederick, J., The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination, Princeton University Press, 1964.
- Janvier, Ludovic, Une parole exigeante, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1964.
- Josipovici, Gabriel, The World and the Book, London, Macmillan, 1971.

- Kennedy, Alan, The Protean Self, London, Macmillan, 1974.
- Kermode, Frank, Modern Essays, London, Collins, 1971.
- Kermode, Frank, The Sense of an Ending, London, Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Laing, R. D., The Divided Self, London, Tavistock Publications, 1960.
- Laing, R. D. and A. Esterson, Sanity, Madness and the Family, London, Tavistock Publications, 1960.
- Laing, R. D., Self and others, London, Tavistock Publications, 1961.
- Lavers, Annette, L'Usurpateur et le prétendant, Paris, Minard, 1964.
- Lodge, David, Language of Fiction, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Lodge, David, The Novelist at the Crossroads, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
- Lukacs, Georg, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, London, Merlin Press, 1963.
- Mansuy, Michel (ed.), Positions et oppositions sur le roman contemporain, Paris, Klincksieck, 1971.
- Mauriac, Claude, L'Allittérature contemporaine, Paris, Albin Michel, 1958.
- Mercier, Vivian, The New Novel from Queneau to Pinget, New York, Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.
- Nadeau, Maurice, Le Roman français depuis la guerre, Collection Idées, Paris, Gallimard, 1963.
- Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui. I Problèmes généraux and II Pratiques, 10.18, Paris, Union générale d'éditions, 1972.
- O'Flaherty, Kathleen, The Novel in France 1945-1965, Cork University Press, 1973.
- Ortega y Gasset, José, The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays, Princeton University Press, 1968.
- Ouellet, René (ed.), Les Critiques de notre temps et le nouveau roman, Paris, Garnier, 1972.
- Pabst, Walter (ed.), Der moderne französische Roman, Berlin, Erich Schmidt, 1968.
- Peters, H. F., Rainer Maria Rilke: Masks and the Man, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1960.
- Picon, Gaëton, L'Usage de la lecture, Volume 2, Paris, Mercure de France, 1961.
- Pollmann, Leo, Der französische Roman in 20. Jahrhundert, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1970.

- 500
- Ricardou, Jean, Le Nouveau Roman, Ecrivains de toujours, Paris, Seuil, 1973.
- Ricardou, Jean, Pour une théorie du nouveau roman, Paris, Seuil, 1971.
- Ricardou, Jean, Problèmes du nouveau roman, Paris, Seuil, 1967.
- Riesman, David, The Lonely Crowd, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970.
- Robbe-Grillet, Alain, Pour un nouveau roman, Collection Idées, Paris, Gallimard, 1963.
- Roudiez, Leon S., French Fiction Today? A New Direction, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1972.
- Rousseaux, André, Littérature du XXe siècle, Volume 7, Paris, Albin Michel, 1961.
- Seale, Patrick and Maureen McConville, French Revolution 1968, London, Penguin Books, 1968.
- Sontag, Susan, Against Interpretation, and Other Essays, London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967.
- Steiner, George, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, London, Penguin Books, 1967.
- Sturrock, John, The French New Novel, London, Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Swinden, Patrick, Unofficial Selves. Character in the Novel from Dickens to the Present Day, London, Macmillan, 1973.
- Tompkins, Calvin, The Bride and the Bachelors, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965.
- Trilling, Lionel, The Liberal Imagination, London, Mercury Books, 1961.
- Trilling, Lionel, Sincerity and Authenticity, London, Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Ullmann, Stephen, Style in the French Novel, Cambridge University Press, 1957.
- Weightman, John, The Concept of the Avant-Garde. Explorations in Modernism, London, Alcove Press, 1973.
- Wilhelm, Kurt, Der Nouveau Roman. Ein Experiment der französischen Gegenwartsliteratur, Berlin, Erich Schmidt, 1969.
- Williams, Raymond, The Long Revolution, London, Penguin Books, 1965.
- Zants, Emily, The Aesthetics of the New Novel in France, Boulder, University of Colorado Press, 1968.
- Zeltner, Gerda, La Grande Aventure du roman français au XXe siècle, Paris, Gonthier, 1967.

Special numbers of periodicals

Le 'Nouveau Roman', Esprit, juillet-août 1958.

Midnight Novelists, Yale French Studies, no. 24, 1959.

Un nouveau roman? Recherches et traditions, ed. J. H. Matthews, Revue des lettres modernes, nos. 94-99, 1964.

Formalisme et signification, Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme, nos. 9-10, 1965-6.

New Directions in the French Novel, Esprit créateur, 7, 2, 1967.

Directions in the 'nouveau roman', 20th Century Studies, no. 6, 1971.

Selected articles

'The Anti-Novel in France', Times Literary Supplement, 13 February 1959.

Gadoffre, Gilbert, 'Avant-garde ou nouveau roman? Conclusions d'un colloque', Quinzaine littéraire, 16 septembre 1970.

Hardt, Manfred, 'Zur Sprache des französischen Romans der Gegenwart', Romanische Forschungen, 86, 1-2, 1974.

Macksey, Richard, 'The Artist in the Labyrinth: Design or Dasein', Modern Language Notes, 77, 1962.

Morrisette, Bruce, 'International Aspects of the Nouveau Roman', Contemporary Literature, 11, 2, 1970.

Morrisette, Bruce, 'Un héritage d'André Gide: la duplication intérieure', Comparative Literature Studies, 8, 2, 1971.

Mouillaud, M., 'Le nouveau roman: tentative de roman et roman de la tentative', Revue d'esthétique, août-décembre 1964.

Opitz, Kurt, 'The New Reality of the Continental Novel', Modern Language Journal, 50, 2, 1966.

Oxenhandler, Neal, 'Toward the New Aesthetic', Contemporary Literature, 11, 2, 1970.

'The Philosophy of the New Novel', Times Literary Supplement, 4 May 1962.

Piper, D. G. B., 'Russian Formalism and the Nouveau Roman', Forum for Modern Language Studies, 3, 1, 1967.

Porter, Dennis, 'Sartre, Robbe-Grillet and the Psychotic Hero', Modern Fiction Studies, 16, 1, 1970.

Prendergast, C. A., 'Towards a re-assessment of Béatrix', Essays in French Literature, no. 9, 1972.

Shroder, Maurice Z., 'The Nouveau Roman and the Tradition of the Novel',  
Romanic Review, 57, 4, 1966.

Theis, Raimund, 'Die aufgehobene Welt - Zur Periodisierung des nouveau roman', Neueren Sprachen, 73, 1, 1974.

Zeltner, Gerda, 'Situation du roman', Preuves, août 1961.

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

In respect of my thesis [title to be inserted]

1. I understand that no access to it will be allowed without my prior permission until one year has elapsed from the date of its deposit in the University Library.
2. Thereafter:-
  - \* a. I give permission for it to be made available to readers in the University Library or within another library.
  - \* b. I do not wish it to be made available to readers for a further two years without my written consent or (failing a reply from me within 3 months to a request from the University Library) the consent of the Library Committee in consultation with the Higher Degrees Committee of the Faculty.
3. Once any restrictions on access have expired:-
  - a. I give permission for a photocopy to be made by the British Library for lending to other libraries.
  - b. I \* give/do not give permission for the University Library to make photocopies for other libraries or individuals without my specific authorisation. Note : Any prohibition on photocopying will lapse after five years from the date of deposit.

Signed .... *Shirley D. Bell* .....  
Date .... *26th December 1975* .....

\* Strike out the sentence or phrase which does not apply.

# THE FICTION OF NATHALIE SARRAUTE

by

Sheila Margaret Bell

## Summary

This thesis is a critical study of the fiction of Nathalie Sarraute. We concentrate on her fiction, as representing the backbone of her creative endeavour, while making reference to her critical essays and her plays where these contribute to a better understanding of the novels. We give particular credit to, and draw extensively upon, those comments on her own work which Nathalie Sarraute has made at various moments and in various contexts, some of them to us personally. We emphasize the personal elements in Nathalie Sarraute's work: her sensitive awareness of tropisms and her view of human psychology have their sources in childhood experience, and her odyssey as a writer, from early hesitations and self-doubt to the later experience of success, finds expression through the preoccupations of each successive novel. Equally, however, we seek to emphasize Nathalie Sarraute's position within an established tradition and her debt to early modernism. Past utterances, as well as her present sense of alienation from the nouveau nouveau roman, whose ranks several of her colleagues from the 1950s have now joined, make her real allegiances clear.

Our introduction situates this study in relation to previous Sarraute criticism and states its particular intentions. Nathalie Sarraute's subject-matter in all her novels is seen to be two-fold, to relate on the one hand to human psychology, on the other to art. A first chapter expresses this subject-matter in greater detail, underlining thereby the extraordinary



coherence of Nathalie Sarraute's fictional world. Attention here is concentrated on her vision of the human psyche, which changes little from work to work but which finds increasingly polished and confident expression. Some similarities to contemporary psychological theory are explored. The coherence of Nathalie Sarraute's work is also to be understood in terms of a continuing development and it is in such a context that the aesthetic themes are best explored. We aim, moreover, to examine each work as an independent artefact as well as one facet of a unified vision or as a link in a chain of development. In the main body of our thesis, therefore, we proceed in chronological fashion, work by work.

Tropismes is seen as a remarkable first work, in which characteristic content and mode of expression are already well-developed. In the works which follow Tropismes, Nathalie Sarraute is primarily concerned with the novel tradition and particularly with the concept of character. Her self-doubt reflects the characteristic uncertainties of the twentieth-century writer. Portrait d'un inconnu is a highly self-conscious work which explicitly contrasts itself with the greatest of its nineteenth-century predecessors; its narrator is a would-be novelist and his efforts to grapple with character provide the novel with its structure. Martereau takes up where Portrait leaves off and completes the demolition of the traditional 'character' of the realist novel. It is close to Portrait in its use of a narrator-figure as mediator between the novel's subject-matter and its readers yet it moves towards Le Planétarium by integrating this figure far more thoroughly into the action of the novel. With Le Planétarium, Nathalie Sarraute no longer needs a defence against the world, an alibi in the shape of a neurotic narrator: here the central theme is the similarity of all the characters at this level of mental activity and all of them are observed from within. Le Planétarium is, then, the culmination of themes with which the earlier novels were

concerned; it is also the point of departure for new developments. The concern with the novel widens to include other art objects and the relation of the writer to his environment is seen in a new light. Les Fruits d'or centres on a novel's relation with its public and explores the true nature of aesthetic experience, while revealing as spurious much of what passes for it. Entre la vie et la mort enters the consciousness of the writer once more, describes his experience of the creative process and examines his relationships with the outside world; external image and private reality are juxtaposed and their interrelation explored. Vous les entendez? questions, by means of a tiny incident and the picture of a family relationship which emerges from it, the validity of traditional views of art. The challenge represented by radical forms of modernism is recognized.

We refer throughout to other writers whose work presents links, or interesting similarities, with that of Nathalie Sarraute. We end our study with a chapter which outlines Nathalie Sarraute's debt to a number of novelists and redefines her position within a tradition of twentieth-century fiction. Her work represents, we conclude, a development of, rather than a complete break with, previous fictional form. The theory of fiction which could best account for her work would be one which occupied a middle position between the extremes of mimesis and autonomy.