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NATHALIE SARRAUTE: LE LEVER DU RIDEAU

By

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B.A., The College of St. Catherine, 1965

Presented in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

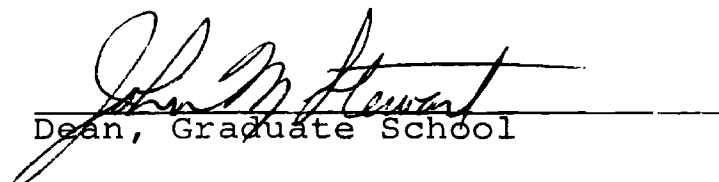
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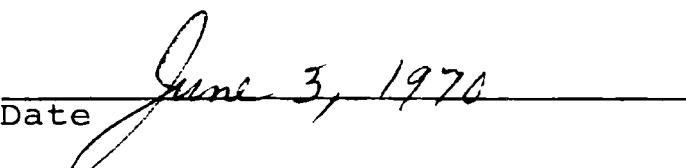
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INTRODUCTION

Tropismes was published in 1939. Since that time, it and subsequent works of Nathalie Sarraute have been categorized as experimental writings, anti-novels, and laboratory exercises. The gamut of genres has been run, but no classification has yet proved satisfactory to her critics and readers. Not until 1964 did she release a play, Le Silence, which was later followed by a sequel, Le Mensonge. Originally intended for radio presentation, these two dramatic¹ efforts seemed to reflect the author's long-harbored reservations concerning the gratuitousness and the superficiality of contemporary artistic expression. The producer Jean-Louis Barrault later coupled the dialogue of these playlets with the elements of the theatre, and the epithet "dramatic" was finally linked with Mme Sarraute's literary accomplishments.

Nathalie Sarraute was not a member of a theatrical family nor would it seem likely that her disciplined life included time for watching a great number of plays. Born in 1902 in the Russian city of Ivanovo-Voznessensk, she

¹Use of "drama" and its forms is in accordance with the definition given in Le Petit Larousse, 1965, XX, p. 337: "Drame n.m. (gr. drama). Action théâtrale, en général; particul., pièce de théâtre de caractère grave qui cherche à donner une image réelle de la vie et qui peut s'accompagner d'éléments comiques."

was only two when her parents were divorced. Her young life became a continuous journey between Russia and France, the countries in which her mother pursued a career in writing while her scientist father devoted himself to professional and political activities. Thus, her growth in the knowledge of language and of life was rapid. She later acquired proficiency in German; her formal education included studies in English, history, philology, and law.²

Nathalie Sarraute displayed not only diligence in study but also an indomitable will in her pursuit of a career as an author. When her early literary efforts were ignored, she continued, undaunted, in her writing. Her sixth book, Les Fruits d'or, won the Prix international de littérature in 1964. Mme Sarraute has never forsaken the idea which she sought to convey--the notion of untranslatable microscopic movement which is the subconscious meeting ground of humans. She has never ceased her efforts to fathom the intricacy of these tropisms³ and to bring them to the light and the level of consciousness.

²Yvon Belaval and Mimica Cranaki, Nathalie Sarraute (Paris: Gallimard, 1965, pp. 113-16.

³Biologically speaking, tropisms are an organism's involuntary movements or alterations which cause a positive or negative response to a source of stimulation. Nathalie Sarraute's artistic conception of tropisms is referred to in the footnote which follows.

In L'Ère du soupçon, a collection of essays on the contemporary novel, Mme Sarraute speaks definitively of the subject of her first book and of all her literary offerings--of the tropisms which are a dramatic and inescapable part of our relations with others:

... 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.⁴

It will be my purpose to show that all of Nathalie Sarraute's works belong to the dramatic genre. This pertinency to the theatre will be treated not only in terms of stage, actors, and dialogue but also in the consideration of an audience's critical gaze. Tropisms are neither tangible nor purely subjective; they are the communion of a surface reality with that of the subconscious. This communion can be appreciated and momentarily apprehended only through the full and unbelabored play of the senses which the theatre affords the creations of Nathalie Sarraute.

⁴Nathalie Sarraute, L'Ère du soupçon (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), pp. 17-18.

CHAPTER I

LES PRÉPARATIFS DRAMATIQUES

What is a play; what is meant by the dramatic genre? Nathalie Sarraute wrote professionally for twenty-five years before she seemed ready to answer this question. Like Kafka, the man included in the title of one of her essays, Mme Sarraute was reticent to expose her characters in the revealing lights of the theatre. Even after the appearance of her plays, Le Silence and Le Mensonge, she has not attempted to speak of the drama in definitive terms. However, her statement, "Au théâtre, la substance est la même, une substance anonyme qui existe chez tous,"¹ gives evidence of the bond which exists between her works and dialogues classified as dramatic literature. This bond is man's assertion of his living presence in the anonymity of the human race.

There exists an abundance of methodically written books about "man in literature." These works usually assign specific treatment of human beings to certain periods of literature with the result that no general framework for discussing characters, authors, and genres is ever established. However, let it not be forgotten

¹Gabriel Marcel, Review of Le Silence and Le Mensonge, Nouvelles Littéraires (January 26, 1967), p. 13.

that centuries ago, the Poetics of Aristotle became a kind of textbook setting forth the elements of literary expression. In it, the Greek philosopher proposed that there were six aspects of what he called Tragedy; they were Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, and Song.² Obviously, Aristotle's mortality made him incapable of fully realizing the breadth, as well as the limitations which drama was to acquire. Yet, his work did provide a foundation for all future literary creation.

Medieval society propagated the belief that the eyes were the most important part of human and dramatic communication. Both objective and subjective impressions had to be somehow visually seized before they could spread their message to other parts of the body. Thus, much of the artistic expression of the time was recited, sung, or acted; medieval expression became sensual not only in content but also in manner of interpretation.

The Elizabethan dramatist, William Shakespeare, regarded the Poetics as an anachronism. His plays, such as Hamlet and The Tempest, introduced man to more liberal modes of thought, to a partial emancipation of the character which Aristotle had considered absolutely subordinate

²S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and the Arts (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1907), p. 25.

to plot.³ Never lost, however, was the Aristotelian idea of the imitative aspect of drama. This dramatic factor was uppermost in the minds of all the famous playwrights, although "imitative" had several connotations. Some interpretations, like Aristotle's, were analytical; others, like that of Victor Hugo, manipulated imitation in a fashion analogous to focusing a mirror. The glass likened to the drama, was to collect and condense colored rays, making of a gleam of light and of a light a flame.⁴

Great numbers of men proposed theories of the drama. Many of the notions were valid; all of them proved that drama was not the unique possession of one age, one people. Henry Bataille, a French dramatist of the early twentieth century, made use of a banal dialogue which would have been ineffective in the creations of Hugo and Aristotle. Bataille explained that a banal line, such as "Voulez-vous du café?" from his play Le Masque, could have a gamut of meanings from "Are you thirsty?" to "How comfortable do you plan to make yourself?"⁵ It is believed that his theory of indirect language had several

³Ibid., p. 343.

⁴Victor Marie Hugo, Cromwell (Paris: J. Hetzel, [n.d.]), p. 33.

⁵May Daniels, The French Drama of the Unspoken (Edinburgh: University Press, 1953), p. 13.

sources, one coming from Balzac's nineteenth century

La Cousine Bette:

En ce moment Valérie apportait elle-même à Steinbock une tasse de thé. C'était plus qu'une distinction, c'était une faveur. Il y a dans la manière dont une femme s'acquitte de cette fonction, tout un langage, mais les femmes savent bien, aussi est-ce une étude curieuse à faire de celle de leurs mouvements, de leurs gestes, de leurs regards, de leur ton, leur accent, quand elles accomplissent cet acte de politesse en apparence si simple.⁶

Perhaps the often over-worded paragraphs of Balzac really contained significant fragments of the dialogue and communication so important to twentieth century dramatic art. Of course, modern literature too boasts of dialogue, but the language of conversation cannot consistently rely on a passive book's supply of necessary dynamics.

Throughout the centuries, drama has carefully nurtured its oral and aural qualities. Other dramatic elements similarly retained include live characters acting out an experience, the performance of which is done in a controlled setting in front of an audience and has a definite form.

Although not considered a basic element of the drama, dramatic purpose must also be considered here

⁶Daniels, as quoted from J. B. Besançon, L'Essai sur le théâtre d'Henry Bataille, (1928), p. 57.

because the degree to which the playwright is concerned with it often determines the success or failure of his work. Dramatists tend to agree that the general goal of the drama is to imitate life. Pierre-Aimé Touchard, writing about the essence of drama in his book Dionysos, gives a detailed description of a play's purpose. According to him, the drama should:

... montrer à l'homme jusqu'à quel point extrême peuvent aller son amour, sa haine, sa colère ... sa crainte, lui faire prendre conscience de ses virtualités, de ce qu'il serait en un monde sans entraves où n'interféreraient la générosité et ⁷ l'économie domestique, la colère, et la morale.

Dramatic purpose is thus sensuous and sensitive; it is concerned with projecting the human experience at its most intense point. So is Nathalie Sarraute who speaks animatedly of her artistic purpose:

When I started writing in 1933, it was not to apply theories but to express a certain strong emotion caused by certain things which had aroused my curiosity and my desire to communicate them to others. Here I must be frank. I do not pretend that I wrote this particular text [Tropismes] and no other as, on some lovely morning, a young bird starts singing. My attention was roused and my curiosity attracted by this particular thing and no other; first, of course, because it was in my

⁷Pierre-Henri Simon, Théâtre et destin (Paris: A. Colin, 1959), p. 218.

nature to be sensitive to a certain kind of inner movement, to certain human behaviour and relationships.⁸

Imagination is indispensable for Mme Sarraute just as it was once all-important for the whole of the artistic world; it was important not simply for the creator of a work but for the performer and the spectator as well. However, this importance has been gradually lessened by rules and formulas. Imagination, which was the essence of art, has become the prisoner of scientific, calculated expression. In her works, Mme Sarraute takes her public back farther than the humble beginnings of a sophistication in art to a primordial realm. She and her "reader" visit a world where language is simple, where life depends solely upon man's imagination and the involuntary nature of his interior movements. Her characters may be unsophisticated, but they use to advantage these two characteristics which modern, civilized society has so often discounted as unnecessary.

The theatrical elements of drama already mentioned will be discussed in relation to Mme Sarraute's separate works. Dramatic form, however, must first be generally

⁸"Nathalie Sarraute Explains Tropisms," Listener, LXV (March 9, 1961), p. 428.

defined. According to James Joyce, it is " . . . the form wherein he [the dramatist] presents his image in immediate relation to others."⁹ Dramatic form then, is not limited to the theatre; it can take shape in other aspects of art in which the creator is not, a priori, a slave to himself or an agent of mediation. If the artist can project the vital force of his personality directly to an actor-character, this actor can, in return, project that force to the spectator. Joyce's definition of form has always been applicable to what is called the drama and, most recently, to Nathalie Sarraute's "novel."

⁹James Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York: The Modern Library, 1916), p. 251.

CHAPTER II

UN COMMENCEMENT

It has never been asserted, either by Nathalie Sarraute or by her critics, that Tropismes is a novel. The book's twenty-four chapters contain neither whole plots nor clearly defined characters, and thus are not readily justifiable as fitting the slot of the novel. Further, it is difficult to affirm that the book's divisions are indeed chapters. They are more like dramatic sketches in that pauses between such scenes exist for purely mechanical reasons. While characters and public rejuvenate their forces, there is always a looking-ahead. A novel's pauses too often serve as periods for a re-sorting of names, dates, and places as well as for a review of action. Tropismes' scenes involve a sensitive probing of man's innermost being. Mme Sarraute's affinity to dramatic form and purpose complements the vital character of man's undictated actions and reactions.

Parts II and IX of Tropismes were the first to be completed.¹ In these two brief scenes which center

¹Belaval and Cranaki, Nathalie Sarraute, p. 16.

around man's basic aggressiveness and instinctive unsureness, Mme Sarraute gives her public an inside view of man's agitations, of the beginnings of human emotions which grow inevitably and often inexpressibly stronger as the innumerable facets of man's internal movements become apparent. A reader of these proposed dramas is able to see the thoughts of the nameless protagonists:

Il fallait leur répondre et les encourager avec douceur, et surtout, surtout ne pas leur faire sentir, ne pas leur faire sentir un seul instant qu'on se croyait différent. Se plier, ... et les regarder avec sympathie, avec tendresse, ... ²

Yet, what real meaning do these words have? The longer a reader savors them, the more like their unidentified source this reader becomes. The author's desire to determine the visible world by an invisible one is thwarted before she has barely begun to write.

Since Tropismes as novel cannot satisfy the basic goal which Nathalie Sarraute had spent six years in refining, it must fundamentally belong to another genre. However, tropisms in themselves elude absolute classification. An awareness of their existence cannot be accomplished through printed words, but, rather, through the accentuation of language as springing from human

²Nathalie Sarraute, Tropismes (2nd ed. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957), p. 17.

beings who evoke their contact or their lack of contact with one another. Where can such criteria be met?--in the elements, form, and purpose of the dramatic universe.

As I envisage Tropismes, this series of récits could draw almost entirely upon actors for dramatic effect. The stage would be literally invisible except for parts of a revolving set enclosed on three sides by mirrors. The stage's only illumination would be furnished by spotlights, some of which would be trained on actors playing their scene; similar lights would play irregularly upon the mirrors of the set as well as upon random sections of the audience. Thus, the actors in view are always subject to what they fear most: " ... ce regard appuyé sur son dos ... "³ even the spectators must become actors in the sense that each member of the audience is vulnerable to scrutiny. Actors whose set is not in the foreground would not be permitted to look anywhere but at the blackened downstage--toward the backs of the performers living their scene. As their own part of the set comes slowly into view, the new characters in the spotlight turn to the audience. It is a reluctant and painful turn, for the on-stage bearer of tropisms is fearful of forsaking

³Sarraute, Tropismes, p. 121.

his dark solitude. He is afraid of realizing that even though obscured, he was never really alone. The spectator, the world, was always there awaiting his first positive movement. Each actor bears a loosely fitted shroud; the only visible key to identity is given by two rents in the shroud which reveal the actor's protruding eyes.

The visual element of the theatre is satisfied; there remain action and dialogue. Nathalie Sarraute has given criteria for the realization of all three elements in Tropismes' ninth scene:

Elle était accroupie sur un coin du fauteuil, se tortillait, le cou tendu, les yeux protubérants: 'oui, oui, oui, oui, disait-elle. Elle était effrayante, douce et plate, toute lisse, ... Elle avait quelque chose d'angoissant, d'inquiétant et sa douceur était menaçante. Il sentait qu'à tout prix il fallait la redresser, l'apaiser, ...⁴

Action is important for Mme Sarraute only insofar as it is generated from human nature rather than from the individual man and, in like manner, is reciprocated. Whereas a novel usually depends for its interest upon a plot-filled, adventurous movement, a play and its human cast can leave such action to the imagination. Dramas are composed chiefly of dialogues, of conversations which are easily and dynamically loosened from traditional

⁴Sarraute, Tropismes, p. 57.

patterns. These dialogues can therefore lend themselves to the gesture-filled technique of pantomime, a device which Mme Sarraute would seem to employ in many of Tropismes' scenes.

According to Mme Sarraute's producer, Jean-Louis Barrault, the art of pantomime is as ill-defined as the drama. It is the action of gestures which takes place in the present; it is silent action, not mimed language.⁵ In regard to the passages of Tropismes already mentioned, pantomime would be most suitable in giving an exterior view of the characters' internal agitations. Further, pantomime, as opposed to language, would heighten the anonymity already provided by staging and costuming; pantomime would belie the feminine or masculine nature of the shrouded actors. Gestures, revolving set, living characters--all these dramatic devices would intensify each of Tropismes' scenes. Only through the use of dramatic technique can the author's purpose of bringing tropisms to the level of consciousness be truly visualized and thus satisfied.

The incessant turning of the set, the eyes and the

⁵Jean-Louis Barrault, The Theatre of Jean-Louis Barrault, trans. by Joseph Chiari (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), pp. 29-30.

futile gropings of the characters--these elements could sustain the action of Tropismes as play besides fulfilling Sarraute's dramatic purpose of showing, in slow motion, a series of living portraits of human behavior and relationships. However, an audience is as human as the actors on stage although it has not been as disciplined in exterior movement. For the sake, then, of a potentially restless audience, I feel that Mme Sarraute and her producer would intersperse dialogue with the already predicated scenes of straight pantomime. The content of this author's work as well as its form has continually been termed a game without end,⁶ a series of human checks and balances without conclusions. Thus, the obsession with visible and invisible movement would finally result in speech.

For example, parts of Tropismes such as I, VI, and XXII would be most effectively presented through the use of pantomime:

Ils regardaient longtemps, sans bouger, ils restaient là, offerts, devant les vitrines, ... Et les petits enfants tranquilles qui leur donnaient la main, fatigués de regarder,⁷ distraits, patiemment auprès d'eux, attendaient. (I)

⁶Gerda Zelner, La grande aventure du roman du XX^e siècle, trans. from German to the French by Christine Kubler (Paris: Éditions Gonthier, 1967), p. 163.

⁷Sarraute, Tropismes, p. 12.

Elle allait de chambre en chambre, furetait dans la cuisine, heurtait avec fureur la porte de la salle de bains que quelqu'un occupait, et elle avait envie d'intervenir, de diriger, de les secouer, ... (VI)⁸

In both scenes there is a silence--the one unconscious, the other compulsive, both oppressive. In the final scenes, the silence becomes more peopled and more anguished:

S'il sentait derrière lui leur regard l'observant, comme le malfaiteur, dans les films drôles, qui sentant dans son dos le regard de l'agent, achève son geste, nonchalamment, lui donne une apparence désinvolte et naive, il tapotait, pour bien les rassurer, ... (XXII)⁹

These scenes have no oral message; nothing, then, is said. Nevertheless, scenes in direct sequence to those just mentioned would seem to profit from a use of dialogue. The tropisms of one of the characters in Part II are in such a state of agitation that they must become audible:

Elle parlait à la cuisinière pendant des heures, s'agitant autour de la table, s'agitant toujours, elle parlait, critiquant les gens qui venaient à la maison, les amis: 'et les cheveux d'une telle qui vont foncer, ils seront comme ceux de sa mère, ... ' (II)¹⁰

⁹Sarraute, Tropismes, p. 127.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 15.

The unconscious nature of the spoken banalities contrasts with the avaricious silence of Part I. However, pantomime and speech merge as each silence is followed by an expression of pent-up feeling:

Quelqu'un se tournant vers elle, demandait si elle avait été voir les Van Gogh.

'Oui, oui, évidemment, elle était allée voir l'exposition (ce n'était rien, il ne devait pas faire attention, ce n'était rien, elle écarterait tout cela du revers de la main), elle y était allée un de ces dimanches après-midi où l'on ne sait jamais que faire. Évidemment, c'était très bien.' (VII)¹¹

In the two earlier quotes and in the one which will follow, the actors use their prerogative of speech not simply for exchanging banalities but also for pretending an aesthetic appreciation which is incongruous in relation to their pantomimed behavior. No other conversation could be so shallow, none so appallingly egotistical:

Ils l'entouraient, tendaient vers elle leurs mains, 'Michael Simon... Jouvét... Ah, il avait fallu, n'est-ce pas, s'y prendre bien à l'avance pour retenir ses places.' ... Ils resserraient le lien un peu plus fort, bien doucement, discrètement, sans faire mal, ils rajustaient le fil tenu, tiraient. (XXIII)¹²

¹¹Sarraute, Tropismes, p. 46

¹²Ibid., pp. 134-35.

The twenty-fourth and last scene of Tropismes would be pantomimed like the first. It would be a wordless affirmation of the infinity of the intricate human contacts which had taken place in each of the tiny dramas. Nameless characters would find identity in the oneness of anonymity. The spotlights would remain undimmed at the play's end; no barrier would fall between the audience and the actors.

I have shown that Tropismes can be dramatized; that even in this no-exit merry-go-round without music, Nathalie Sarraute has not striven to assert her own personality but, rather, to place it in the flux of human existence. Her actor-characters must suppress individual identity and take on the seemingly inscrutable facade of pretense. Although early in sketch XXIII, the elle mocks this extrinsic and intrinsic depersonalization which has resulted in pseudo-intellectuality and use of clichés in the spoken scenes, just a little later her body is registering surrender: "Peu à peu, une faiblesse, une mollesse, un besoin de se rapprocher d'eux, d'être approuvée par eux, la faisait entrer avec eux dans la ronde."¹³ This degeneration is horribly evident in the words and actions of the victim on stage; in fact, the spectator views

¹³Sarraute, Tropismes, p. 135.

twenty-four times the thread of contradiction which makes of lives a refusal and an acceptance.

Tropismes, then, possesses dramatic form, as defined by Joyce, as well as a dramatic purpose. Its stark indications of the complexity of human nature are softened by the common effort of its characters towards communication and thus simplification of difficulties. However, the reality of a drama is clinched only by the presence of an audience--people who want to witness gestures, images, action, and most of all, life. Tropisms are composed of these elements; Tropismes is a complete dramatic reality.

CHAPTER III

LA RÉPÉTITION SANS RELÂCHE

In his preface to Nathalie Sarraute's second work, Portrait d'un inconnu, Jean-Paul Sartre called the book an "anti-novel" and spoke of its author as an amateur detective engrossed in penetrating the inauthenticity of the world's curtain of surface realities.¹ It is my belief that parts of his terminology were simply euphemisms for "drama" and "dramatist."

Three "anti-novels" followed Tropismes, three works which were regarded with mistrust and incomprehension by their readers. The critic J. G. Weightman echoed many feelings when he wrote: "I am being told the obvious, plainly and minutely, and what I would really like to know about the author's mind is being, almost perversely, withheld."² Had he and others read Nathalie Sarraute's collection of essays on the novel, there would have been no mystery about her mode of dramatic progression. The essays, under the title L'Ère du soupçon (1956), reveal Mme Sarraute's interest in art as a whole--in its definition,

¹Nathalie Sarraute, Portrait d'un inconnu (2nd ed. Paris: Gallimard, 1956), pp. 30-33, passim.

²J. G. Weightman, "Nathalie Sarraute," Encounter, XXII (June, 1964), p. 41.

its evolution, and the subsequent suspicion it attracts:

Elle [l'évolution] 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'élaner vers les recherches et les découvertes nouvelles. Il est devenu de leur méfiance réciproque le terrain dévasté où ils s'affrontent.³

In L'Ère du soupçon, Mme Sarraute makes an apology, not for the distortion of traditional artistic elements, but for the author's prerogative to manipulate these conventions in order to disclose the vitally dramatic reality which lies beyond contrived facades. After discussing varied aspects of twentieth century literature in relation to her own works, she concludes with a consideration of what contemporary writers owe their public: " ... une connaissance plus approfondie, plus complexe, plus juste que celle qu'ils peuvent avoir par eux-mêmes de ce qu'ils sont, de ce qu'est leur condition et leur vie."⁴ This goal, which coincides with that of the drama, gave impulse to sequels to the scenes of Tropismes which had laid the dramatic foundations for Nathalie Sarraute's

³Sarraute, L'Ère du soupçon, pp. 73-74.

⁴Ibid., p. 181.

artistic creations. The existence of her dramatic form, already manifested in Tropismes, was later reinforced by her essays, particularly in the parts cited here. The source of Mme Sarraute's never-ending struggle to reveal tropisms lies in the confrontation of writer and public, a meeting at which each party must necessarily be sensitive and genuine. Whereas Tropismes is the dramatic germ of Mme Sarraute's expression, L'Ère du soupçon is a catalyst in the dramatic interpretation of her art.

Bases for Nathalie Sarraute's dramatic intentions are thus verifiable not only in this thesis but also in her own published works. Besides revealing the nature of her purpose and form in L'Ère du soupçon, she also discusses individual elements of the theatre, placing heavy emphasis on the dramatic essence of her characters:

Leur humanité n'est qu'un appel timide, détourné, une manière de se montrer tout proche, accessible, désarmé, ouvert, offert, ... à la compréhension, à la générosité d'autrui: toutes les barrières que dressent la dignité, la vanité, sont abatues, chacun peut s'approcher, entrer sans crainte, l'accès est libre.⁵

In regard to theatrical conventions of staging and dialogue, Mme Sarraute indicates that the very nature of her

⁵Sarraute, L'Ère du soupçon, pp. 43-44.

characters necessitates their being viewed with panoramic vision, with a scrutiny that is perceptive yet not analytic.⁶ She advocates the use of dialogue or even apparently one-sided conversations because of the capacity of words to continue outwardly what began as an interior, authentic movement. Seemingly fresh from a reading of Victor Hugo's dramatic theories, Mme Sarraute states:

Rien ne devrait donc rompre la continuité de ces mouvements, et la transformation qu'ils subissent devrait être du même ordre que celle que subit un rayon lumineux, quand, passant d'un milieu dans un autre, il est réfracté et s'infléchit.⁷

Although no special mention of Tropismes is made in these essays, Mme Sarraute used L'Ère du soupçon to establish and to justify the dramatic character not only of her first work but of all those which follow.

Portrait d'un inconnu (1948) and Martereau (1953) were Mme Sarraute's second and third literary efforts appearing before her collection of essays. Each exemplified several of the tropisms outlined in her first work; each, like the earlier work, profited from frequent lapses in dialogue, from an interspersion of words and silences designed to enhance the tensions of human identity. In

⁷Sarraute, L'Ère du soupçon, p. 124.

my opinion, as reinforced by Nathalie Sarraute's statements in L'Ère du soupçon, both "novels" would be effective dramatic presentations.

As I imagine them, the characters of Portrait d'un inconnu and Martereau would function on a revolving set. However, the middle of this set would be slightly raised and immobile. This seemingly immovable part would serve as the pedestal for an object lighted at all times by a spotlight. These beams would vary in intensity and color; only the character directly in line with the beam lighting the center of the set would be revealed. The actors, wearing garish make-up and clad in long, white robes, would generally be stationed at regular intervals on the circular, moving platform. Two actors would share the spotlight only during dialogued scenes.

The central figure of Portrait is an elderly father whom the spectator was able to see in the opening scene of Tropismes. During a dramatic presentation of Portrait, he and his daughter would stand at angles perpendicular to the audience and to the object at center stage. At the play's beginning, father and daughter would be seen separately and only intermittently. The set, turning to the rhythm of a narrator's voice, would always be in motion--a sharp contrast to its stolid center. Other characters, standing alone and in groups, would

occasionally enter the spotlight. Some would be gesturing, others talking; all would be standing at right angles to the object of central interest--the unsigned portrait of a person bearing no distinct features, no specific identity. The narrator's monologue, frequently broken by snatches of conversation, would be filled with passages penetrating the clothing, the words, and the gestures of characters on the set:

Personne ne les reconnaît, quand elles passent, correctes, soigneusement chapeautées et gantées.

.....
 Autrefois, quand elles étaient encore toutes jeunes, beaucoup moins résistantes, moins fortes, un oeil très exercé aurait pu les déceler--avidés déjà et lourdes, toutes lestées de plomb--en train de guetter, d'attendre, sur les banquettes de peluche des cours de danse, ... assises à l'heure du thé autour des petites tables, près de leurs parents. Quelque chose d'épais et d'âcre filtrait d'elles comme une sueur, comme un suint.⁸

The narrator causes the spectator to get a glimpse of what is hidden behind the actors' carefully planned outward appearances. Just as in Tropismes, the actor-characters first conceal obsessions behind masks of snobbishness and deceit; then they gradually begin to shed this fake aloofness. The characters "make conversation" in such a deliberately banal way that they become

⁸Sarraute, Portrait d'un inconnu, p. 41

unavoidably aware of their own shortcomings. The human nature of the visible and the invisible actors finally becomes more important than staging or words, and the characters are gradually able to speak the author's piece:

'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. Et méfiez-vous surtout, ... méfiez-vous de ce goût de l'introversion, de la rêverie dans le vide qui n'est pas autre chose qu'une fuite devant l'effort.'⁹

The curtain did not fall at the end of Tropismes, nor will it fall at the closing of this play. However, Nathalie Sarraute has cleared away more than that thin-barrier. It is true that the infernal circling has continued; the total anonymity remains, but Mme Sarraute has now attempted a unity not to be confused with the web of a plot. In Portrait d'un inconnu, she has created a series of images--a bar of soap cut in half, a hyena with wild eyes, a wall stained by a dripping shower fixture. These metaphors, in a play, could be substantially projected against the stage's side curtains, directly in the characters' line of vision. The old father would be the

⁹Sarraute, Portrait d'un inconnu, p. 77.

first to avert his eyes from the images' starkness and to turn toward the enigmatic portrait. His daughter, her fiancé M. Dumontet, the narrator--everyone would turn to face the picture which bears the collective torment. Finally, it is the narrator who dares to detach himself from the web of insecurity and to read aloud the painting's inscription: "Portrait d'un Inconnu."

The characters of Martereau are equally cowardly but a trifle more obsequious in comparison to those of Nathalie Sarraute's earlier works. Since the narrator of my proposed presentation of Martereau thinks of words as " ... des minces capsules protectrices qu'enrobent des termes nocifs, ... "¹⁰ he would be careful to insure the efficacy of his own audible thought, as well as his comments on the dialogues of other characters, in bringing tropisms to the surface of consciousness. More strikingly than in Portrait, the petty manners of the bourgeoisie dominate the inward and outward movements of the characters although the stage setting of Martereau would be very similar to that of Portrait. However, the flowing robes of Portrait would be exchanged for appropriate street dress; the apparently chic and debonair characters of Martereau would complete their costumes with masks. The

¹⁰Sarraute, Martereau (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 113.

revolving platform of earlier dramas would be retained, but this play's immobile object of central interest would be a lifelike, mechanical doll.

Again, there is a narrator who awkwardly weaves a story of betrayal and mistrust. The atmosphere of pretense, both subtle and blatant, becomes almost opaque as members of an unidentified family direct flimsy innuendoes of friendship to their incredulous observers. In this play, the actors would face the spectators squarely; in this way, no illusions about the characters' capacity for expression would interfere with Martereau's play of actions and reactions between the observer and the observable. There are several notes of suspense in Martereau, rampant uncertainty about whether the combination martyr, taureau, marteau, will actually obtain the country house and the attractive aunt besides living happily ever after. A dramatic presentation of Martereau, with staging such as I have described, could provide three means (decor, live characters, dialogue) for communication and comprehension of the questions aroused by Martereau. A book's rendition could provoke only unfounded conjectures.

Nathalie Sarraute, then, wrote Martereau to be presented in the theatre since it was her goal to make evident the infinitesimal quiverings of humanity which constitute the protagonist in this work. Further,

Martereau is so complex that the theatre's facility in bringing a public's senses into play must be utilized. It is true that, in parts, the text of Martereau reads like a detective story, but Mme Sarraute and her narrator spin a sinuous thread which makes the web of a whodunit seem composed of heavy cords. In a conversation between the bourgeois aunt and her husband, even the form of Mme Sarraute's text takes on the appearance of a scenario as the quality of each speaker receives identification before his words are printed. At the end of the exchange of words between the actors who are still not permitted to look at one another, the narrator informs the public that a curtain has fallen.¹¹ If Nathalie Sarraute had meant these words to be taken literally, she would have begun a new chapter if it were a question of a novel. This is not the case in Martereau's printed text; there is not even an indication of a scene break since the pattern of the narrator's commentary, as well as the outward appearance of characters and set, remains unchanged. The curtain represents the characters' facades which a reader must skirt but which a spectator can gradually penetrate.

As play, Martereau would begin, as did Portrait, with

¹¹Sarraute, Martereau, p. 220.

many seemingly isolated incidents which would be spotlighted on the otherwise darkened set. Rooted in tropisms, in the germination of man's action, these scenes would be enacted before an audience who would not be given the time to work out a pattern of continuity. However, as in Tropismes and Portrait, the actors' actions and reactions would have in common a horrible unsureness, an uncompromising grasping at others' malleability: "C'était elle, le parasite, la molle excroissance fixée sur l'autre, puisant dans l'autre le suc nourricier."¹²

In order to accentuate the human tenacity which is being portrayed, specific images would be projected on all sides of the theatre. These images would supplement some of the work of the narrator as well as clarifying the actors' roles. Projections of waving, grasping tentacles,¹³ a tangle of writhing serpents,¹⁴ a group of faceless prisoners linked to one another by masses of chain¹⁵ would be among the vestiges of Nathalie Sarraute's imagination made visible for an audience. Finally, the projections would cease and the characters would abandon their pre-

¹²Sarraute, Martereau, p. 56.

¹³Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 230.

tenses, joining hands to acknowledge the bond of humanity which extends to the most sinister corner of being.

Martereau, as play, would not let the spectators forget the community formed by themselves and by fellow members of the audience. As this audience strains to dissect their nameless counterparts on stage, no facet of individual sensitivity or collective awareness is left untaxed in the drama's suspension of identities.

An alert spectator is able to perceive that factors of being masked and of being nameless are not absolute criteria for declaring the actor-characters "fakes." When the sole character who bears a name and who is privileged to discard his mask finally appears, the narrator remarks:

J'ai toujours cherché Martereau. Je l'ai toujours appelé, ... 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; ... ¹⁶

He imagines Martereau as an immovable rock, a steadying effect on the groping, tentative movements of this narrator. Nevertheless discouraged by conversation with an evasive Martereau, the narrator-turned-detective discovers his idol to be weak, to be little better than a dead man. However, unlike the narrator, a spectator is soon able to

¹⁶Sarraute, Martereau, pp. 73-74.

guess the ambiguity of Martereau's actions because of this character's unmasked vulnerability. During the course of the play, Martereau's unpinpointable behavior, in all its flaccidity, would be dramatically exposed. Mere bodily presence, however, would not qualify a spectator to penetrate Martereau's enigma; only an observer aware of the existence of tropisms would be able to exercise mankind's powers of perception which Martereau is trying to stifle.

At the closing of the dramatic production of Martereau, as I imagine it, the doll at center stage becomes animated; someone has turned a key and given it "life." The entire set becomes illuminated; the actors, retaining their masks, increase the liveliness of their conversations and gesticulations. The set propels Martereau to the fore and then stops. As the doll and the majority of characters continue their outward agitations, Martereau is unable to view their activity and becomes apparently immobile. At this point, members of the audience are able to make individual assessments of the culminating point of the game on stage. However, the communal assertion of Martereau's struggle not to reproduce life but to respond to its stimuli eludes such finality. Indeed, this two-dimensional affirmation of Martereau as drama eliminates the convention of the final curtain, of

a label of termination which is nothing more than a cop-out.

When a curtain rises on Le Planétarium (1959), an audience would be faced with familiar moving elements of set present in the productions of Nathalie Sarraute's earlier works. Again, it is evident that Mme Sarraute is indefatigably striving to reveal a general truth from particular pieces of evidence. At the outset of this proposed play, it is difficult to imagine that the interplanetary distances between the bodies viewed from Le Planétarium can be, in any sense, satisfactorily crossed. However, it must be remembered that whereas a mere novelistic account of man and his universe could not treat the proportions of such a subject in a reasonable number of pages, the play of the universe is the drama's basic interest. With the subject of Le Planétarium already well researched and armed with the doctrines stabilized in her essays, Mme Sarraute, I think, was ready to and did create a work resembling a sophisticated dramatic form.

The middle of the theatre would be the most effective place for a staging of this potentially vast production. The viewer would not be expected to survive this presentation completely unaided; thus, both telescopic and microscopic views of what Alain Guimiez called:

" ... un univers en petit, là, devant nous, ... "¹⁷ would be available.

A set director for this play might profit from spending some time observing the movements of the planets and stars. Even a one-time visitor of a planetarium can get the impression of the universe which Nathalie Sarraute tries to impart--that the world for all its vastness is infinitely small. With a planetarium in mind, it is easy to envision the ceiling of the theatre being utilized as a sky in which there would be four planets orbiting a force which is indicated only by aberrations of light. A revolving, inverted bowl shaped stage would allow microscopic inspection of the planets seen in the "sky" overhead. Since the set is raised, the untiered rounds of tiltable seats would allow the spectator much flexibility in the play of his senses--an activity necessary in appreciating a drama, particularly in the Sarrautian productions proposed in this thesis.

The viewers of Le Planétarium appear to have all the privileges of an observer stationed on the solar source of a real celestial system. At least physically, a dramatic audience's vantage point, as I have described it, permits a universal view from the outside in and a

¹⁷Nathalie Sarraute, Le Planétarium (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 26.

specified close-up from the inside out. From the latter view, the planets will be seen not as inhabited by the solitary dwellers of those of Saint-Exupéry but as containing a unique object adored by two or more human characters. The actors, dressed in translucent clown suits and wearing iridescent make-up, would reflect the colored lights cast from overhead spotlights. These rays would, in turn, accent the grotesque nature of the characters' outward appearance. Again, Mme Sarraute makes a family, the Guimiez family, the pivot of her attempt to reveal tropisms. Linked by bonds of blood relationship, which in Le Planétarium are reinforced by the familiarity¹⁸ of names, the gaudy characters nevertheless remain animated objects which are as anonymous as the blood uniting them.

Like the other proposed plays of Nathalie Sarraute, Le Planétarium encompasses both young and old characters; the accent, in the treatment of both, is on reflected glory. The older characters (Tante Berthe; Pierre, her brother and the father of Alain; Germaine Lemaire, an

¹⁸The form of this word originally occurred in my rough draft as a typing error. However, Professor Robert Brock felt that the expanded word was indicative of Nathalie Sarraute's thought regarding the quality of appreciation gained merely through conventional labels and easily recognized parallels.

authoress; the parents of Gisèle, Alain's wife) strive to impose their obsession with rotting bourgeois extravagances upon Alain and Gisèle. In an early scene in which Alain visits the planet inhabited by Tante Berthe, he is appalled by the solicitude with which she is effacing handle marks left on her prized oval door. Alain's thoughts cannot be suppressed:

Mais c'est trop, trop de liberté, trop d'insouciance... la poche auprès de lui se remet à enfler... il voit cette épaule qui se hausse, cet oeil qui regarde fixement devant lui; les pouces des deux mains croisées sur le ventre qui pointe en avant tournent l'un autour de l'autre curieusement, ... 'Eh bien, qu'est-ce que vous avez à vous exciter? C'est une maniaque, Voilà tout...'19

Since there is not a narrator in this play, Alain must often invent his own gestures besides searching for words to hide his particular obsession. In defending Gisèle's and his adored object--a Louis XV bergère--against the prejudices of his in-laws, Alain resorts to a sense imagery which betrays his human entanglements:

Ils sont sur lui. Ils l'encerclent. Aucun issue, Il est pris, enfermé; au plus léger mouvement, à la plus timide velléité, ils bondissent. Toujours aux aguets, épiant, ... Faces stupides aux yeux luisants de curiosité. Regards attendris... Le spectacle est si touchant... ces tourtereaux...

¹⁹Sarraute, Le Planétarium, p. 25.

si jeunes... leur petit nid... Brèves incursions, bonds furtifs, reculs prudents, ...²⁰

Alain and the other characters are trapped in a microscopic view of their reactions to one another. Still, the "sky's" uninflected appearance reveals no change in the clockwork of the movements which govern the planets and their inhabitants.

A spectator is basically back at the last scene of Tropismes. However, changes in staging and costuming plus increased dialogue account for the sharpened perspective of author, actor, and audience in regard to the origin, scope, and intensity of tropisms. These heightened dimensions of tropisms are projected by Nathalie Sarraute and a director to an immediately present audience by means of a re-introduction of the theme of art which had played a small part in earlier works.²¹

In Le Planétarium, particularly in a dramatic version, some art object is prominent on each planet being viewed: there is Tante Berthe's oval oaken door; the leather armchairs of Gisèle's parents; the bergère belonging to Alain and Gisèle; and a stack of meaningless books written by Germaine Lemaire. As the spectator regards

²⁰Sarraute, Le Planétarium, p. 71.

²¹Bernard Pingaud, "Le personnage dans l'oeuvre de Nathalie Sarraute," Preuves (December, 1963), p. 30.

first the serenity of the planets in their orbits, then the circling of set and characters; he becomes acutely aware of the nothingness of the particular character on stage. He is able to gaze intently at each character's face only one time in the set's revolution, but this short scrutiny makes an indelible impression of the actors huddled near the objects which they flaunt. These objects are beautiful in themselves but have been rendered butts of scorn because of the characters' maneuverings to be viewed only in the shadow of these prestige symbols. The chairs, the door, the books are only meaningful to their owners insofar as the material perfection of these objects can serve as exaggerated representations of the characters' aesthetic appreciation.

At this point, it seems that Mme Sarraute and the viewers of her dramatic efforts are doing all the work in these struggles for human as well as artistic levels of comprehension. It appears, then, that actors and setting do not merit the role given them in the spiraling of Mme Sarraute's art. These appearances are representative of the drama: actors and staging are seemingly present only as a springboard for dialogue; and this dialogue, in turn, is the starting point of empathy between dramatist and audience.

As already mentioned, Le Planétarium has no narrator

and possesses, instead, characters who are quite loquacious. These actors look and act like buffoons. Their passive and active attitudes towards the other animate as well as the inanimate occupants of the stage reveal a gross servility to physical surroundings. Their desire to establish contacts with others is oppressive; their habit of rejecting fellow characters in favor of unresponsive objects is painful. Yet, despite many inadequacies, these living characters are capable of making an assessment of their lives. Although shrouded in mystery and admiration as were Martereau and the portrait of an unknown man, Le Planétarium's Germaine Lemaire talks bluntly and detachedly about her own life:

C'était une illusion. C'était de l'autosuggestion. Tout est creux. Vide. Vide. Entièrement vide. Du néant. Un vide à l'intérieur d'un moule de cire peint. Tout est mort. Mort. Mort. Mort. Un astre mort. Elle est seule. ... Seule sur un astre éteint. La vie est ailleurs...²²

Portrait d'un inconnu, Martereau, and Le Planétarium--all three works skirt a void; all three end on positive notes of self-identification. Their contents are not sensational; there are no deathbed scenes, no passionate love affairs, no psychological miracles. Like

²²Sarraute, Le Planétarium, p. 158.

the dramatic components described in L'Ère du soupçon, these proposed plays contain one underlying obsession--human nature. Nathalie Sarraute has dramatically penetrated the outer barriers of this human stronghold. Only a public which has been dramatically stimulated both physically and mentally can follow her into the inner sanctum of man's existence.

CHAPTER IV

UNE RÉACTION CRITIQUE (I)

All of Nathalie Sarraute's works could essentially bear the name Tropismes. Still, all of the varied titles of her efforts have a significance which binds each myriad of tropisms into a specific act. Les Fruits d'or (1963) contains the same dramatic organization and the same immediacy of expression as Mme Sarraute's preceding works; but, unlike the final pauses of earlier dramas, the end of Les Fruits is one of questioning: "'Vous en êtes encore... aux Fruits d'Or?'"¹ The entire work, in its infernal circular reality, appears to skirt the fringes and to successfully circumvent the bluntness of the final question. Mme Sarraute is boldly soliciting response; it is not only her characters who are under fire but also any spectator-critic who encounters them. Again, her keynote is communication--a rapport in which the subtle increase of skepticism is sharpened through the devices of a dramatic production.

The dramatic appeal of Les Fruits for an audience, as well as the work's dramatic form and purpose, becomes evident through Mme Sarraute's allowance for frequent

¹Nathalie Sarraute, Les Fruits d'or (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 226.

breaks in the dialogue and gesturing, pauses which are followed by some form of the hesitant question: "'Qu'en pensez-vous?'"² Mme Sarraute has not used an apparently universal presence on which to rely; the characters' dialogue, even more full of banalities and clichés than that of the other plays, harks back to the artistic evolution treated in L'Ère du soupçon and to the dramatic nature assumed by characters, setting, and conversations in as well as about the work of art. Mme Sarraute has geared every part of Les Fruits to foil each dubious remark made about her work by a suspicious public and by ineffectual critics. She accomplishes such a task, impossible for a novelist, by molding the lifeless images of printed characters to form the vital reality of mankind struggling for a meaningful field of existence.

In Les Fruits, the upshot of Mme Sarraute's dramatic technique in handling tropisms is the verbal reaction of actor-critics to the actions of actor-characters who are playing roles in still another drama. The spectator not only views the enactment of two plays called Les Fruits d'or but also is a witness to movements which he himself will make or has already made in response to Nathalie Sarraute's creations. Through the world of the theatre, the techniques which Mme Sarraute has borrowed from other literary artists are accentuated; she demonstrates

unceasingly that the tropisms being brought to the level of consciousness in Les Fruits are only able to be perceived insofar as fellow bearers of tropisms have experienced similarly infinitesimal agitations. Although the writer, the professional critic, and the general public have the prerogative to lay bare these tropisms, only a spectator can fully appreciate the immediacy of Les Fruits' questions and participate in the self-criticism which the actor-critics on stage are actually pronouncing.

The setting of this drama within a drama would be very simple. Two crescent-shaped tables would constitute the stage's furnishings. The downstage table with its ornamental golden volume would be lighted all of the time; the people seated around it would wear contemporary dress while those clustered in back of the infrequently lighted upstage table would be dressed in outmoded costumes.

As I have thus far envisioned the staging, Les Fruits does not seem to merit an audience's attention. A closer scrutiny of the characters must be made since, in Mme Sarraute's treatment of man, it has already become evident that any props are strictly accessories enhancing the anonymity of the characters. The facial features of the actors in Les Fruits are blurred, and the size of their heads is incongruous in relation to their body proportions. A stage production would afford each actor-critic the prop

of a colored, inflated rubber head. The rubber surface's indentations and raised portions coupled with regulation of air present in the form would provide both actor and public with a sensation of man's changeability, of the capriciousness of the inner substance which Nathalie Sarraute is trying to project. Further, both clearly focused and fuzzy images of each character would be flashed on screens lining the sides of the theatre. Frequency of sharp or blurred views would depend upon the degree of communication achieved among the characters on stage, upon a commonly sensed unity either of pretense or of sincerity.

Like the actors' portrayal of characters in Le Planétarium, that of Les Fruits must take place without the transparent shield which has been the essence of the narrator. Since the actor-characters of Les Fruits must shoulder the dramatization not only of Mme Sarraute's artistic intentions but also of her reactions to another work of art, he is aided in this vicarious position by his seeming freedom to control the course of the dialogue. After tossing around the names of Courbet, Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Gide, the "critics" of Les Fruits begin to discover for themselves that the burden of sustaining the movement of the play is quite overwhelming. Each actor thus begins the struggle to free himself from

a circular dialogue which seems to have neither cause nor effect, to formulate expressions which will attract attention yet immunize him against involvement:

Pure oeuvre 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.³

The characters are identical to the transformation of their movements into speech--passive, empty, even laughable in the light of their naive assessments of artistic worth. The scene is fascinating, but this teetering between the heights of pretense and the depths of naivete needs some kind of relief. Just as critics of Mme Sarraute's work have done, the characters of Les Fruits verbally and comically side-step the artistic judgment which is their supposed raison d'être. Through the devices of a dramatic presentation, the insecurity of Mme Sarraute's characters, as transmitted to an audience, could obtain the relief necessary for effectiveness. The inner and outer movements of the heads, the panorama of images on the walls, the speakers' insistence upon cluttering their criticisms with a procession of great

³Sarraute, Les Fruits d'or, pp. 45-46.

names in "littérââture"--all these machinations serve to clarify Les Fruits as a tireless effort to penetrate the idiosyncrasies of human nature.

In the course of the snobbish name-dropping typical of Nathalie Sarraute's characters, Balzac's name had often been mentioned in the productions preceding Les Fruits. However, it is conspicuously absent from the early artistic allusions in Les Fruits. Suddenly, the dialogue is halted as the table and actors at the rear of the stage are revealed. These austere dressed characters do not utter a single word, but the shivering of one distinguishably feminine character causes a flurry of solicitousness among the other members of her semi-circle. As this scene fades out, there is much speculation among the actor-critics who have had a moment to adjust the deflated state of their artificial heads. Unlike their creator and their public, they are unable to link the enigma of the preceding scene to the language of gestures, to a form of expression important in the artistic development of Balzac and of dramatic creation in general. However, the reactions of the characters belie an awareness that the seemingly effortless and silent excellence of the preceding scene has concrete bases. The now restrained bodily movements of the actor-critics as well as the bloated quality of their heads

betrays an unconscious admiration which, finally recognized by each character, becomes an outward demonstration of affected indifference.

During the remainder of the play, the lists of literary figures cited becomes a conspicuous compensation for the characters' sense of inadequacy. The names of Mme de Lafayette, Constant, Stendhal, and Rimbaud enter the dialogue at frequent intervals. These particular artists, like Balzac, became famous because of a distaste for poor imitation, because of a desire to transmit the essence of a flesh-and-blood creature to their public. Snobism was an ornamentation for which they had no time. Through the equivocal reactions of the actor-critics to the unblocked actions of every person on stage, Nathalie Sarraute too achieves a representation not only of the spontaneity of life but also of the dramatic reality created by the actors as they, like their idols before them, struggle between the dynamics of tropisms and appearances.

As the spectator glances at the screens on the theatre's walls, he can see that the facades of the characters begin to take on normal proportions as soon as part of the dialogue has been exhausted. Although the "critic" on stage does not substantially admit it, he has surmised that life is not determined by either words

or actions. Rather, he has found that it is given impetus and kept in running order through contact with any and every other human being and thereby with self. Both the actor-critic and the spectator are able to discern that art and life are separate, but that the drama is a synthesis of the two factions as well as a medium for the unveiling of tropisms.

Nathalie Sarraute devoted a great amount of space in L'Ère du soupçon to language and dialogue. In the proposed plays of Mme Sarraute, conversation has served to appeal to the listeners for empathy; whereas individual words and expressions have sometimes caused the identity of the characters to seem suspiciously impenetrable. In Les Fruits, the words which Mme Sarraute has put into the actors' mouths form a familiar, platitude-ridden plea for response, for an alignment of appearances which only a spectator is capable of making. Each personage in the semicircle of people regarding the golden volume has become aware that what he wants to say is really ineffable; he is caught in the patterns of slang and evasive terms which he has cultivated in order to disguise the vulnerability of his facade. The actor does not restrict his game to the limits of the stage; his search for something genuine and solid extends to the rows of spectator-critics who are embarked on a

similar quest. As his gaze shifts from the physical work of art to fellow actors and finally to the audience, one character tries to express his dilemma:

... c'est comme une aiguille magnétique en lui, qui se met aussitôt, miraculeusement, à osciller--devant le cercle d'admirateurs qui attendait en silence que s'entrouvrent ses lèvres réticentes et que tombe la trêve sentence, ...⁴

Although the uncertainty inherent in this speech matches that present in earlier works, the tone of Les Fruits is bolder. No speaker in this play is afraid to ask a question. Each character is free to look at and to affix himself to what he will. Ad libbing, however, is impossible, since the actor-critic has now begun to sense a certain protection in the empty formulas which he is paid to utter.

After smugly commenting upon the inner drama of Les Fruits as obscure, pure, and real, the actor-critics turn to Bréhier, the author of the work which they are discussing. According to them, Bréhier had originally meant to use the title Pléonasmes for this specific artistic venture. However, such a name created no illusions and was rejected in favor of the more unpredictable caption, Les Fruits d'or. Perhaps this predicated behavior of

⁴Sarraute, Les Fruits d'or, p. 51.

Bréhier is a deliberately placed clue regarding Mme Sarraute's dislike for furnishing a public with conventional guide-lines. At any rate, the entire drama pivots on the same types of tentatively posed problems. It is the theatrical potential of the matter, form, and tone of Les Fruits' queries which makes necessary a dramatic juxtaposition of the spontaneity and artificiality which Nathalie Sarraute has fused in this work.

The dramatic substance of Les Fruits is thus verifiable; however, for Mme Sarraute, this substance must be communicable. Live characters, then, combined with the acoustics of a theatre filled with spectators are especially necessary to Les Fruits, a work which dares to magnify and to dissect the gropings of man.

Because the whole of this creation takes place in an atmosphere of pseudo-intellectuality and because the downstage scene is visible at all times, the tensions so important to the play would perhaps be more effectively marked if eased from time to time by a musical background. A classical piece would seem appropriate--a Mozart sonata with intricate movements centering around one theme. The volume of the music would correspond to that of the authority in the voices already regulating the appearance of the characters' rubber facades as well as the projection of images on the wall screens. It seems easier to

accept Les Fruits as hinging entirely upon man's dramatic nature if audible and visual evidence of his creative assets can be linked to Nathalie Sarraute's own ingenuousness. However, like the music, the golden book lying on the table is but a pale reflection of the magnificent complexity of the drama being constructed by Mme Sarraute and brought to life by the actors. Through this interaction, each parasitic character is able to assert an identity: "Les arguments d'autorité. Rien d'autre. Jamais aucun contact vrai, aucun sentiment spontané."⁵ Conversation, sub-conversation, the invisible, and the visible have fused. Through the help of the resources of the theatre, a tropism has come to the surface.

After re-reading Mme Sarraute's "novels" and either reading or hearing her two radio plays, the literary critic Henri Peyre wrote that he admired the work of Nathalie Sarraute but that her intentions had not been conspicuously fulfilled in her fiction.⁶ Perhaps Mme Sarraute has never been aware of this statement, but particularly in view of the closing dialogues of Les Fruits and of the very names of her two admitted plays, Le Silence and Le Mensonge, I feel that she would second

⁵Sarraute, Les Fruits d'or, pp. 58-59.

⁶Henri Peyre, The Novelists of Today (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 364.

M. Peyre's comment. Nathalie Sarraute created the critical dilemmas in Les Fruits because her clearly defined purpose of revealing tropisms was being misunderstood. In order to obtain a more appreciative response from her public, she allegedly changed genres in her next artistic offerings.

Once again, the intent of Nathalie Sarraute's "novels" must be considered. It will be found that the tentative outline of man's inner movements in Tropismes has matured to the point where the character in Les Fruits can act authentically and dispose of cumbersome appearances:

Et soudain, c'est comme un effluve, un rayonnement, une lumière... je distingue mal sa source restée dans l'ombre... Cela afflue vers moi, comme une vibration, une modulation, un rythme... C'est comme une ligne fragile et ferme qui se déploie, tracée avec une insistance 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...

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 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.⁷

⁷Sarraute, Les Fruits d'or, pp. 195-96.

Tropisms and art have been more and more closely aligned. Appearances, gestures, actions--all have taken on added dramatic significance. As the spotlights dim on Les Fruits d'or as play, the images on the walls become invisible; the deflated "heads" of the characters as well as the fading strains of music are almost indistinguishable. The public must make a collective effort to hear the last exchanges of words. There is a silence after the play's final question, a silence made more oppressive because the audience too is waiting for an answer. The curtain of simulation which has never really come down over Nathalie Sarraute's creation now rises on the two works which she herself termed plays.

CHAPTER V

LA MISE AU JOUR

Nathalie Sarraute's first play, Le Silence, was broadcast over the radio in 1964. The lack of attention given it was a repetition of what had occurred upon the appearance of Tropismes, the work which set a stage for her artistic treatment of man's inner movements. The reading public showed the same type of indifference toward Les Fruits d'or, the work which provided a synthesis of all the tiny actions and reactions forming the nucleus of Nathalie Sarraute's creation. In regard to Le Silence, it must be remembered that the critics' equivocal comments at least followed a consistent pattern, for Mme Sarraute had now dramatized her obsession with man's tropisms and with the atmosphere which these movements create.

Le Mensonge, a sequel to Le Silence, was broadcast in 1966; it also dramatized tropisms but with the difference that the characters' reasons for reactions to one another's movements had changed. These characters were no longer afraid of the absence of audible recognition of their actions; rather, they had begun to doubt the reality of their fellow characters' professed solicitude. Neither a radio broadcast nor a novelistic treatment could make these reactions meaningful to the public. It

took Jean-Louis Barrault's staging of these two playlets in 1967 to elicit praise not only for these dramatic offerings but for the whole of Mme Sarraute's work, for her sensuous and sensitive treatment of the visible as well as the invisible man.

In January, 1967, Le Silence and Le Mensonge were the first plays to be presented in a small, renovated room in the Odéon-Théâtre de France. Called the Petit Odéon, the small theatre with its one hundred seats has provided a kind of laboratory where directors like Barrault can enhance the starkness of contemporary dramatic texts for enjoyments by a sophisticated public.¹ The audience is not seated on the stage as it was in the origins of an enthusiastic French theatre. However, the spectator is close enough to the actors really to feel the vitality of the play's movement, to become a part of the imagination brought into play by the author through the dynamic force of the actor-characters. For an audience in such a privileged setting, there is no opportunity to fantasize or to resort to the facile pleasure of putting identities into neat piles. Even the passage of time seems to be suppressed, although a reader can literally chop the play into segments at his convenience. Indeed,

¹Notes, "Jean-Louis Barrault à l'Odéon-Théâtre de France," World Theatre, XV (November-December, 1966), p. 537.

Mme Sarraute has suspended time in Le Silence and Le Mensonge, for the actor's particular movements and counter movements defy termination. Mme Sarraute's creation, rather than simply the copy of life, has become a real and inexpressibly unique game of physical and mental interaction, a work of art incontestably worthy of the title "play."

Through Les Fruits d'or, Nathalie Sarraute tried to clear up any false assumptions about her writing. The realization had been made long ago that the people whom she was trying to reach through her art did not usually take the time to read even a conventional story;² why then would they bother with a "novel" without a plot? Nathalie Sarraute, like all writers, was and is searching for "truth;" and, like many other artists, she has infused her writing with realities of personal observation. Yet, even more than realists such as Flaubert and Dostoevski whom she often mentioned in her critical essays, Mme Sarraute has put up an unceasing struggle to arouse her public into thinking about man in a general sense even while being made aware of individual discrepancies. It seems to me that Mme Sarraute created two explicitly dramatic pieces in order to see if she was actually

²Nathalie Sarraute, "Les deux réalités," Exprit (July, 1964), p. 74.

projecting the reality of tropisms which she was striving to make evident:

'C'est pour moi une expérience très intéressante que de voir les deux pièces montées sur un théâtre; il y a souvent dans les jeux de scène des acteurs une sorte d'amplification de ces mouvements intérieurs qui leur donne une autre dimension encore qu'à la lecture ou à la radio. Ils deviennent à la fois plus nets, plus ample, et parfois, plus subtils. Il me semble que le théâtre est comme une nouvelle loupe, ajoutée aux autres.'³

If anyone could help Nathalie Sarraute to increase the force and thus the impact of the stealthy movements envisioned, it was Jean-Louis Barrault. One of the most renowned directors in the world, Barrault is no stranger to the principles of imitation esteemed by generations of respected playwrights. He has devoted his career to liberating the power of the word by the force of dramatic transmission, to helping create a universe to which an audience is magnetically attracted.⁴ Thus, for Barrault as for Nathalie Sarraute, the character and the ambiance in which he moves are all-important. The texts which Barrault consents to put on the stage must be authentically sensitive creations. Just so, the actors whom he selects

³Nicole Zand, "Entretien avec Nathalie Sarraute à propos du Mensonge et du Silence." Le Monde (January 18, 1967), p. 13.

⁴Michel Corvin, Le Théâtre nouveau en France (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), p. 106.

to imitate characters must at all times be sensitive to the import of their words, to the cause and effect of their seemingly spontaneous dialogue as well as to the involuntary quality of their gestures.⁵ The projected authenticity of the actions and reactions of the professional conversationalists peopling Le Silence and Le Mensonge are predictably, as well as essentially, compatible with Barrault's dramatic exigencies.

The Petit Odéon allows such a close rapport between actors and audience that there is no need for decorative spectacle in the plays presented within its small limits. However, this lack of decor constitutes an atmosphere of reality because of the intimacy of the room; there is no danger of an over-enthusiastic use of scenery and costumes leading to an obliteration of the actor. The minute quality of the stage in question makes the word games of Le Silence and Le Mensonge seem less ridiculous, the gestures and the facial expression of the actors more important. In these plays, all of the actors are necessarily on stage throughout the whole of the two performances. They are dressed in tastefully elegant clothes; their features are carefully and becomingly outlined. Each movement, expression, and utterance seems well

⁵Barrault, The Theatre of Jean-Louis Barrault, pp. 32-36, passim.

modulated. Diction is flawless. The artfulness of performers such as Madeleine Renaud and Gabriel Cattand supplements the dramatic effect of the fresco of man being presented,⁶ a fresco which creates its own decor

Le Silence and Le Mensonge, like many other contemporary plays, originated as dramatic texts too baffling for immediate presentation. Unlike other works of Nathalie Sarraute, they have been granted both visible and audible reality plus the ingenious direction of Barrault. In accordance with the theatre's favorable position toward new techniques, Mme Sarraute has been reckless in her "first" dramatic venture. From the very beginning of Le Silence, her characters form a clique which, because of the studied gossip of its members, seems both impregnable and vulnerable by turns. The actors form a society of snobs in which every member has a responsibility to fend off the interlopers of Time and Space. Thus, there is general defiance of conventional expressions and appearances, scorn in the face of their rigidity. It is these derisory reactions which act as magnets for the characters' tropisms which are struggling for recognition. For example, the actor-characters of Le Silence unite in condemning the one performer who does not join in with their

⁶Jacques LeMarchand, "Le Silence et Le Mensonge de Nathalie Sarraute," Figaro Littéraire (January 26, 1967), p. 16.

prattle: "'Qui ne dit mot ne consent pas.'"⁷ The characters of Le Mensonge express opposite sentiments: "'Qui ne dit mot consent.'"⁸ The unidentified character of Le Silence who utters the first version of the cliché is seen and heard in Le Mensonge as Jacques, the character who neglects to negate the second part of his earlier statement. The exterior aspect of this actor, Dominique Paturel, remains apparently unchanged, unruffled. However, the increased intensity of his inner agitations is evident to an audience who can interpret the clearly marked tilting of an eyebrow, the fingering of a garment.

A spectator witnessing Le Silence and Le Mensonge cannot help being impressed by the quality of acting and the intensity of the atmosphere which Barrault has literally willed. Like Mme Sarraute, Barrault is striving to give precedence, through his art, to truth rather than to objective or aesthetic beauty. Through his experience in acting, directing, and writing for the theatre, he has formed a strong loyalty for the drama. He has found that truth and reality can be games of hide-and-seek, that the starting point for the reality which artists as well as the rest of humanity are seeking lies right under their

⁷Nathalie Sarraute, Le Silence suivi de Le Mensonge (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 36.

⁸Ibid., p. 82.

noses. Nathalie Sarraute, then, must be considered by him to be a very perceptive human being because she has not only discovered her particular link with mankind but also because she has been able to give some of this notion of truth to a suspicious public. Through the dramatic medium, Barrault has aided Mme Sarraute in amplifying the possibilities of valid appreciation and criticism of her art.

Since 1933, Nathalie Sarraute has been struggling to make known her unscientific discoveries which are undocumentable except by common sense and alertness. Under Barrault's direction, the representations of Le Silence and Le Mensonge enable a public to combine the forces of senses and reason in an encounter with the invisible and visible realities of tropisms. In this way, what is real for Nathalie Sarraute can at least be pinpointed as an entity containing a core which is surrounded by a screen of vapor. Sometimes, strange but decipherable noises seem to issue from this gaseous shield; at other times, there are no indications of activity. However, at infrequent intervals, the vapor almost clears and the splendor of reality's substance becomes accessible to human senses. Nathalie Sarraute's art cannot be discounted as just another vague experiment to discover something new under the sun when the drama ties in so

beautifully with her work, with that form of creation which Barrault called the "art of Sensation."⁹

Returning to the dramatizations of Le Silence and Le Mensonge, it becomes evident that Nathalie Sarraute's characters are living versions of the dramatic conflict between the exterior and interior facets of man, a battle for identity in which the observer and the observable are equally involved. In order to communicate to her public this two-dimensional sensation of man's conflict, Mme Sarraute again brings snobism into play through gestures and words, concentrating on the high-keyed reactions brought about by silence and lies. These latter techniques coupled with Mme Sarraute's reluctance to dictate the movements of her characters can be sufficiently accomplished only through the theatrical medium, only through the visual prodding of the modern public's imagination which the theatre affords.

The characters of Le Silence use their facades of snobbishness to fill the silence that envelops and protects the only "unsociable" member of their group. The society of Le Mensonge finds words irresistibly complementary to its degrees of sophistication; silence is not

⁹Jean-Louis Barrault, Le Phénomène théâtral (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 20.

admirable because it is not possible. Like the mixture of voluntary and involuntary actions and reactions present in Le Silence, the alternation between the uncertain and calculated deceptions in Le Mensonge makes the bombardment of appearances seem increasingly impossible. The actor-characters further reveal their instability by impersonating and ridiculing a friend who is absent. However, these actors, continuing their performance begun in Le Silence, warm to their roles. Like the silent Jean-Pierre who is the object of envy in the first play, all the members of Le Mensonge have names; still, they thwart attempts at identification by not being able to cast aside their overlearned roles:

D'abord commencez par ne pas appeler ça la vérité. Changez son nom. C'est un nom dès qu'on le prononce, il impressionne. On se cramponnait à ça comme si notre vie en dépendait... On se croit obligé... Il faut changer ça... Appelez ça la mensonge.¹⁰

It is Jacques who utters these lines, the same performer who reversed his feelings about the quality of personal contact. Like all the other characters, he has spoken many apparently meaningless lines of dialogue; he represents the desires particularly of the male characters in being able to synthesize audible as well as inaudible

¹⁰Sarraute, Le Silence suivi de Le Mensonge, p. 97.

thoughts to form a living nucleus of commonly sensed fact and ideas. Yet, in these plays as in all the works of Mme Sarraute dating from Martereau, it is the unobtrusive female characters who perform much of the subtle groundwork leading to the men's "realizations." In Le Silence, it is the women who bring up the names of Baudelaire, Sand, and Balzac; it is the female characters who encourage imitation and criticism of the figures which they have held up as models; it is they who bring the double visage of authenticity and sham to every snatch of dialogue. In Le Mensonge, it is the women who find meaning in Jacques' change of mind, in the inherent changeability of all the characters:

Tout le monde fait ça plus ou moins. Des petits mensonges... Les gens ont besoin de se valoriser, que voulez-vous... On fait ce qu'on peut.¹¹

Later in the same play, Simone is the only character who admits playing the game of falsehoods which has involved all the actors: "Bon, bon, bien sûr, je jouais... Voilà. Vous êtes contents?"¹² Another tropism has come to the level of consciousness.

¹¹Sarraute, Le Silence suivi de Le Mensonge, p. 73.

¹²Ibid., p. 112.

The characters of Le Silence and Le Mensonge, as theatrically presented, cannot give back to the author exactly what she created any more than the spectator can pinpoint his "real self" among the actors on stage. Nathalie Sarraute has tried to place herself and her public on the inside of existence. Together they occupy a vantage point looking out upon the slavish reproduction of life which is the product of a tangible world. They see the fruits of a universe of copies in which the only originality occurs in the form of man's reactions to the inner, nagging sensations or tropisms of which the whole of mankind is composed. Le Silence and Le Mensonge are two such reactions. Through the aid of Barrault's sensitive direction, Mme Sarraute's public can begin to see that all creation and imagination have a common denominator.

Qui, Bon, je veux bien... (Ton franc.) Bon, bon... bien sûr, je jouais. (Il rit doucement)... Je jouais... (Ton hypocrite.) Bon, bon, bien sûr. ¹³

The production on the stage appears to draw to a close, but echoes of the inflected form of jouer continue to agitate author, cast, and audience. All of these players must judge for themselves the efficacy of their

¹³Sarraute, Le Silence suivi de Le Mensonge, p. 123.

roles in this artistic imitation of life. There are intervals of talking and silence as the audience perceives that in it, in them, lies the culmination of Nathalie Sarraute's dramas.

As in the earlier works of Mme Sarraute, a tangible barrier allowing the isolation of any part of man's dramatic universe is superfluous. A spectator no longer has need to feel uneasy about realizing the weaknesses of the characters on stage who are exemplifying the appearances of mankind. Nathalie Sarraute has conferred on both actor-characters and audience a concern for what they honestly believe themselves to be, not for what they appear to be. The falling of a curtain on these plays, like the closing of their text, ascribes a kind of death to Mme Sarraute's works, a sense of nonexistence whose nothingness she has dramatically opposed. Therefore, the line of demarcation separating actors and audience becomes mythical. The gap which exists between Le Silence and Le Mensonge can be neither obscured nor bridged by anything which is not vitally present. Artificiality cannot of itself clarify Mme Sarraute's art; for the tropisms that are struggling for recognition can be identified only during the metamorphosis from latency to action and reaction, during the dramatic transition from artistic theory to the vibrancy of life.

CHAPTER VI

UNE RÉACTION CRITIQUE (II)

All the characters of Nathalie Sarraute, all her repertoire of clichés, all of the vibrations which she tries to set in motion seem to reach a peak of development in Entre la vie et la mort (1968). In this work, it is no longer a question of characters trying to maintain a secure position in the anonymity of the circle representing man's readily recognizable world. Rather, all the characters are in a kind of limbo, a stage in the dramatic evolution of man and of art where the actor-character is neither attracted nor repelled by other objects of beings. In Entre la vie et la mort, the thread between action and reaction becomes all-important since the meaning of this work depends solely upon the interplay of the visible and invisible facets of man, upon an interaction which Nathalie Sarraute wants her public to share not so much aesthetically as empirically.

To a greater degree than Mme Sarraute's other works, Entre la vie et la mort dramatizes the apparent latency of tropisms; however, the artist's treatment of her obsession is ever urgent, sensuous, and impartial. As in Le Silence and Le Mensonge, the circle which is the basic expression of her form falls short of being a perfect

sphere. Nevertheless, Mme Sarraute's purpose of bringing out the intrinsic richness of man is unchanged from that goal which caused her to write Tropismes. Mme Sarraute mercilessly uses her stock of metaphors, repetitions, and flashbacks with which she couples the dramatic devices of live characters, subtle movement, and the catalyzer of physical setting. In so doing, she is able to go from the particular aspects of her thesis of tropisms to the general area of their manifestations. It is the potential mobility of the characters in this drama which makes Entre la vie et la mort immediately relevant to a public which is striving to become intellectually and emotionally mature:

Un instant il hésite. Il étend le bras... leur cercle autour de lui crée comme un champ magnétique, répand autour de lui comme une mer phosphorescente... de son bras qu'il étend, replie, abaisse, des gerbes d'étincelles jaillissent... il serre le poing, il ouvre la main, il secoue la tête... 'Je jette... Encore et encore. Son geste devient plus ample. Plus assuré. Sa voix est ferme. J'arrache. Je froisse. Je jette...' Ils suivent enchantés, comblés, tous ses mouvements.¹

Since Mme Sarraute's two "real" plays were staged in the Petit Odéon, it is probable that a production of Entre la vie et la mort would take place in the same intimate

¹Nathalie Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), pp. 205-06.

setting. This work is like Le Silence and Le Mensonge in that only one aspect of tropisms is emphasized, that is, these movements' vital force in the creative acts of man. Thus, there is no need for the linking of scenes effected by lights and props as in the earlier proposed plays. Rather, there is an atmosphere in this drama which is complementary to the potential interchangeability of actors and spectators, a climate of staging provided by the communal aspect of the Petit Odéon and accented, in this production, by panels of mirrors on the stage's back partition. The composition of every second panel in this wall of mirrors would cause distorted reflections of the characters, although adjoining mirrors would reflect clear images. The stage would be furnished with a swivel chair placed in a diagonal position between audience and backdrop. The characters approaching the nondescript figure seated in the chair near center stage would be dressed in two-toned garments. As each character ends a personal encounter with the personage acting as the focal point of dialogue, he goes to the corners of the stage nearest the audience, faces the stage's mirrors, and assumes a crouching position. The audience's back view of these characters reveals identically brown-clad actors; however, the mirrors reflect the brightly colored appearance of these same beings.

In this conception of Entre la vie et la mort as play, the actors would wear only normal stage make-up. Facial expression would still be important, but the dramatic links of gestures and words, as well as the lack of movements and speech, have been implemented more effectively in Mme Sarraute's work than in the days of Tropismes. The actions and reactions composing the nucleus of her work have now formed a tenacious substance which is exemplified by the apparent tranquillity of the central character--a personage whose presence is inescapable throughout the course of the play. Despite his poise, this actor-character is horribly insecure; this instability becomes obvious when Mme Sarraute's third-person descriptions of him take the form of a dramatic monologue in which je is the source and secondarily the object of the troubled musings:

Il a perdu la notion du temps. Par moments, tant l'abandon où il se trouve est grand, tant est forte la sensation de solitude, de silence, tandis que passent à travers lui comme des effluves, des relents, qu'il en vient à se dire que personne probablement, s'étant laissé déporter si loin, n'en est revenu, puisque personne n'a jamais raconté une telle expérience. C'est ce que doivent dans les tout derniers instants se dire les mourants. S'ils le supportent avec tant de facilité c'est qu'ils sont sans doute comme lui dans un état de torpeur et submergés déjà d'indifférence.²

²Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort, p. 91.

Because of Nathalie Sarraute's expressed goal of making characters and thus her public relive their two-sided roles of existing, it is particularly important in Entre la vie et la mort that the character of main interest be allowed to utter the words which Mme Sarraute has only recorded.

The actor dominating the movements of the secondary figures plays the role of an author. More than any of the other characters created by Nathalie Sarraute, the actor-author is aware of the potentialities of words. In recounting the making of his career to the various characters who approach him, the "writer" makes many allusions to childhood preoccupations with sounds of as well as with idiomatic uses of words--infantile games which have meant much to him as a mature literary artist. In response to the questions of the gaily attired characters, he reminisces about the verbal reactions of family and friends to his adolescent announcement that a work of his creation had been accepted by the publishers. Some of his listeners had lauded him as a future Flaubert, a Balzac. The actor-writer's face remains impassible, his body motionless, as he mimics his father's long ago reaction to his child's success: "Combien t'a-t-on pris pour publier ça? ... Combien t'a-t-on pris?"³ All the entities

³Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort, p. 162.

on stage seem irrevocably immobilized by the vicarious scorn of his words. There is no alternative but to submit their own actions and words for appraisal by the actor-author.

The audience has thus far been concentrating on the elusive identity of the character at center stage. However, as the number of actors peopling the limits of the stage increases, the spectators focus their attention upon the mirrors which, because of the deliberate inclusion of imperfect panels, reflect clearly or wildly distort the gaudy facades of the actors. Nathalie Sarraute had already talked of these apparently minor characters in her essays, speaking of them as simple emanations, even dreams of the autonomous main character with which the author is identifying himself.⁴ In a traditional novel, these characters would be literally unnoticeable since even primary characters are but dim representations of their real counterparts; in regard to the "new novel," all characters would become not only extremely nebulous but also incomprehensible to all but a handful of sophisticated readers. With Mme Sarraute's inside vantage point in mind, it is hard to believe that she would discount any of her characters in the manner to which a

⁴Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort, pp. 91-92.

novel is fettered. In a theatrical production of Entre la vie et la mort, the very positioning which Mme Sarraute has unconsciously ascribed to her characters would accentuate the levels of sureness and timidity with which a character's self-identification is reached and projected to the public. As the invisible tropisms which are uppermost in Nathalie Sarraute's mind become distinguishable as the forces sobering and emboldening her lifelike puppets, an alert public recognizes that it is not essentially the character-author who determines the course of Entre la vie et la mort, that each character possesses a value which is neither a part of his printed role nor of any psychological implications. A public, aware of the production of Le Silence and Le Mensonge, thus puts the entities of life and death into a physical setting and then turns this image inside out.

In the dramatic presentation of Entre la vie et la mort which has evolved from that of Tropismes, the use of mirrors would again insure credibility of the overt qualities of the characters' seemingly indifferent behavior. Glancing at the mirrors, the actor-writer's voice reflects astonishment as he remarks: "Ils se répercutent. Ils se reflètent, ils miroitent..."⁵ In Tropismes,

⁵Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort, p. 97.

there was no one singled out to bluntly proclaim these imitative qualities of man which are part of his anonymity. It is the pivotal character of Entre la vie et la mort who, after glancing again at the actors around him, finally condescends to alter his position in order to get a panoramic view of both fellow actors and their reflections. In fulfilling the particular role of the artist who is striving to fathom the distinction between reality and illusion, the actor-author involuntarily reveals his reaction towards the people to whom he had originally delegated all such movements:

Je ne me sers que de deux mots... à 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. Et c'est mort. Rien ne passe. Pas une vibration.⁶

Between these equivocations of death and life, there is a lonely actor on a stage.

The actor-author is not alone in observing people and collecting material which will satisfy his creative instinct any more than Nathalie Sarraute is the sole artist using tropisms in the molding of a work of art. Many times during the course of Entre la vie et la mort,

⁶Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort, p. 99.

the central figure tries to break away from the role of oracle which has been thrust upon him because of his experience in projecting an imitation of life. Although angered by the cocksureness of the motley group of people approaching him and commenting on his work, the actor-author jealously collects and savors each mark of attention given him. Although there are neither spotlights nor scenery in this play, the halting words of the central character justify providing a theatrical stimulus for tropisms. These words--the final issue of tropisms--constitute the beginnings of a dramatic atmosphere, of the conjuring up of a world where words conveying mutual understanding and support are infrequent. Yet, these same words are believable because they are pronounced by a human voice in communication with the vital presence of other beings:

Son public assis autour comme au théâtre en rond s'exclame, s'esclaffe, on se pousse, on se donne des tapes sur le bras sans se regarder, on ne veut pas perdre une seconde du spectacle... 'oui, c'est ça exactement, je l'ai remarqué aussi, pas vous?--Bien sûr que si... c'est lui tout craché...' Une même vibration les parcourt, c'est vraiment ce qu'on appelle être sur la même longueur d'onde.⁷

⁷Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort, p. 71

There is a touch of scorn present in the main character's mimicry of his fellow actors on the outskirts of the stage. Yet, this derision is meant to arouse the reactions of these characters and of a public, for the reality of a work of art cannot depend only upon the components of that work. Thus, the actor-artist of Entre la vie et la mort considers it a duty not only to test and perfect his stock of creative devices but also to direct his sensitive but inarticulate admirers towards admission into the dramatic universe--a world for which they provide the form, substance, and impetus. The central actor's words intensify the reality of a scene which was originally a mere contrivance:

Il est impossible qu'ils ne le voient pas. C'est là, surgi du néant. Cela se dresse, se déploie avec assurance, avec une audace tranquille.

Au centre de cela, il y a quelque chose d'indestructible. Un noyau qu'il n'est pas possible de désintégrer, vers lequel elles gravitent à une vitesse si énorme qu'elle donne à l'ensemble l'apparence de l'immobilité. Autour de cela des ondes se répandent, tout oscille, tout vibre autour, si on s'en approche on se met à vibrer.⁸

The audience, the society which causes the success of a play, begins to sense its own collective immobility. The spectators may have chosen to go to the theatre in

⁸ Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort, p. 129.

order to give rein to imagination, to turn their back on life. In Entre la vie et la mort, however, they find that Nathalie Sarraute is using the clichés which they have so snobbishly banned from their own conversation, that she is beating them at their own games of conversational artistry. The public is finally aware that Mme Sarraute and her director are uncompromisingly involving the audience in the serious game of existence. As the circle of brown-backed actors widens to acknowledge other presences, each spectator is able to glimpse himself in the stage's mirrors; he becomes hypnotized by the combination of his efforts to filter out the elements of imitation and, finally, to face an undistorted reflection of his appearance. It is as if all his inner urgings have solidified, as if only his instincts separate him from the plight of the actors who have surrendered themselves to the whims of art. In a scene which was outlined in Tropismes and developed throughout all of Nathalie Sarraute's works, the center of the human circle in Entre la vie et la mort, although outwardly different, becomes one with all the other characters in trying to project his impression of identity. This character-author has absorbed the frightened advances of the others and is preparing to lessen this common anxiety of the bearers of tropisms, of all those who belong to the human

race and thus share an involuntary dependency upon one another. The intensity of his thoughts brings them to the surface in the form of actions and words:

Il se lève entre les morts. Il y a ici de ces résurrections. Les jeux ne sont pas encore faits--on peut toujours reprendre sa mise. On renonce, détruit, oublie son report. Tout recommence.⁹

Unlike the reader, the spectator of Entre la vie et la mort is not the same person he was upon choosing to see this drama. He is now continually faced with a mirror in which his reflection from still another mirror is visible. He has become a critic, a bona fide arbitrator in the theatre's revelation of the tension between the active and passive camps of life. Again, though, Nathalie Sarraute has outclassed him. She has placed her own mirror on stage. She has magnified, wired, and x-rayed her copy of a copy of a copy of man for the whole world to scrutinize--and to applaud.

⁹Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort, pp. 101-02.

CONCLUSION

In a dramatic, vibrant manner, Nathalie Sarraute has taken away part of the ambivalent facade of art which has caused une ère du soupçon. From Tropismes through the gamut of her works, she has intermittently pierced this layer of pseudo-creativity. She has provided a look which penetrates the disguises of a world whose only ready coherency lies in a synthesis of its sensuous atmosphere and the variety of human expression possible within these limits. Her apostrophes, through actor-characters, to all other human beings become increasingly animated in their form, intent, and impact. Finally, these verbal movements reach a kind of peak:

'Debout les morts!' Et tous sursautent.
Debout les morts! Il a crié cela, levant la
main ornée de bagues... Debout les morts!
comme le claquement d'un fouet. Debout les
morts! ils reculent, leurs yeux sous leurs
paupières abaissées échangent des regards
apeurés...¹

Her characters are trapped in a region where their appearances are not only transparent but also precariously affixed. Through the world of the theatre, the tropisms which lie at the vulnerable center of Mme Sarraute's

¹Sarraute, Entre la vie et la mort, p. 207.

creation are no longer hypothetical but dynamically living facets of man's life force.

Through the drama, then, the whole of Mme Sarraute's works from Tropismes to Entre la vie et la mort attains individual as well as collective cohesiveness. Her works serve as a common denominator through which the artist's degree of sensitivity to self and to others is adjusted to meet that level attained by the individual and communal powers of an audience's appreciation. The form of Mme Sarraute's works remains consistent--an eternal circle which envelops character and onlooker. Her purpose of bringing into relief the authenticity of man's tropisms is continually reinforced by motion-filled images and their inevitable repercussions. Such a form and purpose cannot be satisfied in a purely literary context, for they are not part of a description of life but, rather, of a confrontation with humanity, with all the movements and counter movements which ensue. These dramatic agitations cannot find adequate stimulus in a novel. Because of Nathalie Sarraute's attunement to mankind, they clamor for and receive the stamp of reality issuing from the privileged atmosphere of the staging, acting, dialogue, and applause which are basic parts of the drama.

Like all artists, Nathalie Sarraute is imagining reality from what she sees reflected in others; like

playwrights through the ages, she is actively communicating these impressions to a public with the same verve, urgency and trust which are demanded of a theatrical audience. Nathalie Sarraute's is a projection which defies passivity, time, and precision. It is neither a cerebral study of the "inner man" in keeping with the trend of the twentieth century novel, nor is it merely the provocative treatment of appearances which has characterized the contemporary play. Mme Sarraute is attempting to share a particular vision of man with her public in a manner which focuses attention on her characters' experience of living rather than on their printed attributes which are but artificial contrivances:

Il ne faut pas chercher derrière les noms des personnes réelles. Ce sont des gens dont on parle dans un cercle d'amis, comme on parle des gens qu'on connaît en essayant d'en faire des personnages.²

It matters only that her characters live, that they can take stock of and thus effectively transmit the motley array of their human assets and imperfections.

The recognition of the substance of Nathalie Sarraute's tiny dramas seems to depend solely, then, upon the uninterrupted emission and reception of the pulsation

²Excerpt from a letter dated Paris, February 11, 1970, received from Nathalie Sarraute by the author of this thesis.

of life. As a curtain rises to reveal a dramatic interpretation of her works, the combined consciousness of writer, director, actors, and audience is forced into alertness. As the matter and form of the plays unfold, the theatre becomes full of the tension of living creatures who, above all else, are aware of the power of human existence. The sensation of drama is further increased by the evolution of Mme Sarraute's efforts to strengthen communication between man's spontaneous acts and the immediate but often stifled responses which are generated. Tropisms can become apparent only in this meeting ground of actions and reactions. In its turn, this give and take which constitutes life finds its impetus only in the activity of tropisms.

Nathalie Sarraute's artistic creation can never be assigned a tag just as the tropism underlying creation can never be pinpointed. Yet, the vibrations, gropings, sinkings, and surfacings inherent in tropisms form a link between her creation and the human resources of the play. Since the tentative partnership of man's visible and invisible aspects defies the anticlimatic falling of a curtain, Nathalie Sarraute's mirror, the mirror of the play, is unobscured. Thus unhampered, the course of her dramatic works can reflect realistically the phenomenon of

living. The audience's applause in her two "real" plays confirms my thesis: Nathalie Sarraute's works with their visions of tropisms belong to the dramatic genre.

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