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Nathalie Sarraute and the Thought from the Outside

Véronique Flambard-Weisbart

The modern text leaves no room for the singular, the personal, the particular: the subject is absent from the text. Because the text is putting its own discourse (metalinguistic discourse) into question, the subject is systematically projected towards the outside, the impersonal, and the status of its singularity become problematic.

Metalinguistic discourse involves a duality between two systems of signification: a linguistic system and a philosophical system. In Sarraute's texts, the duality is formulated by a double "regard" as demonstrated in the following passage:

. . .son regard attendri caresse ces parcelles infimes de lui-même, ces paillettes qui scintillent dans la terre grise, faisant pressentir l'énorme gisement . . . tandis que la moitié qu'il a déléguée parmi nous, semblable à nous, avec nous dans un silence perplexe médite.¹

Each system puts the other into question in a back and forth movement: a movement of which the possibility depends on a gap, on an abyss left between the two systems of signification. The gap, otherwise called the "hors-texte," represents the threshold, the space where the two systems communicate, but not the systems themselves. It is a no man's land and in that respect, it is quite impersonal. But it is in this no man's land where everyone communicates in a neutral "common place" through "commonplaces"/"clichés." In that area of contact between two systems the subject can be apprehended. In other words, the "hors-texte" where people communicate leads paradoxically to singularity.

In order to gain access to this strange relation which simultaneously asserts the existence of language *in* the text and the absence of a subject *from* the text, we may consider Foucault's formulation:

. . . a form of thought whose still vague possibility was sketched by Western culture on its margins. A thought that stands outside subjectivity, setting its limits as though from without, articulating its end, making its dispersion shine forth, taking only its invincible absence; and that at the same time stands at the threshold of all positivity, not in order to regain the space of its unfolding, the void serving as its site, the distance in which it is constituted and into which its immediate certainties slip the moment they are glimpsed—a thought that, in relation to the interiority of our philosophical reflection and the positivity of our knowledge, constitutes what in a word we might call *the thought from the outside*.²

The thought from the outside implies silence beyond language and nothingness beyond being. In other words, the discursive exteriorization of the subject opens onto an abyss. Paradoxically, the ultimate aim of the thought from the outside is the interiorization, the return of the subject upon itself by means of language. The work of Nathalie Sarraute is exemplary in this respect.

Sarraute aims not only at revealing but also at provoking discontinuity which is closely associated with the use of language as a means of apprehending the subject inside the text. Indeed, Sarraute condemns any form of writing which refuses to deal with its own intrinsic discontinuity. To be able to reach its final aim, the *authentic* work, in the words of Starobinski,³ is not limited by preexisting meaning. It is free both to deform and to invent as long as it remains faithful to its own internal rules which are not discussable. Furthermore, the rules of authenticity do not forbid anything; they are never bound to the referential illusion of an original event. Authenticity must produce its own truth freely and continuously; writing must acknowledge its own duality. Any writing that does not deal with this duality principle automatically erases one of its terms. It thus prevents access to the "hors-texte" and, by extension, to the subject.

Sarraute, in her text *Entre la vie et la mort*, demonstrates both the objective and subjective aspects of language, the objective aspect being language as a system and the subjective aspect being the discussion of that system. She distinguishes between "ceux d'ici" and "ceux de là-bas" by clearly expressing divergent attitudes towards them.

"Ceux d'ici" understand each other beyond the means of language.

Their relationship is transparent and immediate. In the contact of "ceux d'ici,"

. . . toutes les barrières dressées en lui . . . qui le divisent en petites parcelles bien closes et empêchent celui qu'il a laissé pénétrer sur l'une d'entre elles d'aller où bon lui semble ont disparu . . . elle peut entrer partout, tout est à elle, à eux deux. . . Elle est ici depuis toujours, elle a toujours vécu ici, ils ne font qu'un. . . . (15)

When they speak, "ceux d'ici" use "la même langue" (15), a language in which words have plural meaning, where they are "une arme à plusieurs tranchants." Words provoke movements, "des ébranlements . . . [dont] les ondes se répercutent très loin" (16). They are play words that can be transformed along with the images they create: "Hérault, héraut, héros, aire, haut, erre, haut, R.O." (22).

"Ceux de là-bas" do not understand these games. Words they pronounce enable others to establish them—"de déceler leur présence" (16). They never put words into question but rather use them automatically with their most accepted meanings—les mots utilisés "couramment sans que personne ne trouve rien à y reprendre" (16). Finally they do not trust their own feelings but only what has been classified and demonstrated—"ils ne se donnent droit de cité qu'à ce qu'on leur a montré, ce qui est connu, reconnu, classé . . ." (17). When there is no reference to some common thing outside the text, no quotation, "le mouvement de l'écriture"⁴ stops.

The main difference between "ceux d'ici" and "ceux de là-bas" lies in their use of common language. While "ceux d'ici" turn to the future and rely on the creative power of language, "ceux de là-bas" turn to the past and use language as a means of representation through the imitation of what they believe to be an original event: "ceux de là-bas" condemn themselves to produce the referential illusion of the original event on which they base the act of writing. The existence of "ceux d'ici" does not depend on an original event outside of language, whereas the very existence of "ceux de là-bas" is determined by that original event. In her work Sarraute is closer to "ceux d'ici" than to "ceux de là-bas." Indeed, it is not sufficient to simply use common language. It is also necessary to particularize oneself on the basis of common language and to trust its creative power. Ideally, common language should construct a secure bridge above the abyss and give an account of the subjective nature of objectivity and vice-versa.

In *Les Fruits d'or*,⁵ Sarraute once again maintains her distance from "ceux de là-bas" by referring to them as academics—ceux qui veulent "revenir aux classiques, à [leurs] auteurs préférés" (35). She considers that they sacrifice the subject, using common language in a naively referential manner. She also manifests a lack of respect for those who go to the opposite extreme, refusing to share common language and looking upon it as a sacred object: "la littérature est un lieu sacré, fermé, où seul un humble apprentissage, l'étude des maîtres peut donner le droit à quelques élus de pénétrer" (34). If a subject can find its articulation through a subjective language, then we enter into the realm of "esotericism." Sarraute denounces those who write this kind of literature:

J'ai vu s'accomplir sous mes yeux leurs tout premiers mouvements . . . quand ils se sont barricadés . . . pour empêcher de pénétrer en eux . . . pour que ne puisse se projeter en eux la vague petite image négligemment esquissée de pauvres bougres, de gens obscurs, d'auteurs inconnus d'écrits illisibles rejetés partout. Ils se sont enfermés à triple tour. Seuls avec une autre image qu'ils n'ont plus cessée de contempler, une image d'eux-mêmes aux proportions gigantesques, toujours plus énorme, se déployant de tous côtés. (68)

They use the common good but refuse to contribute anything in return. They appropriate common language yet estrange it from everyone except themselves and their followers. By transforming the energy offered by language they are the only ones to profit from it. Thus nothing survives around them.

Sarraute has several authors in mind when she speaks about esoteric and academic works. In 1947, she published two short texts about Valéry and Flaubert in *Les temps modernes*.⁶ In these two texts, she stresses how hard it actually is to separate a work from the general enthusiasm of which it has become a prisoner, how difficult it is to look at this work as an authentic one. In the text on Valéry, written after his death, Sarraute shows how the absolute veneration as well as the absence of discrimination by the critics towards Valéry's work render any reading of this work generally disconcerting if not discouraging. As for Flaubert, Sarraute underlines how he has been considered by modern novelists as "their master" on account of his attachment to pure descriptive forms. However, Sarraute tries to read his work without these preconceived ideas, and remarks that his fixed, frozen and varnished style fits perfectly with

a universe of appearances which allows Flaubert to introduce into literature what will later be called "inauthenticity."

For Sarraute, academism or esotericism in literature are equally unfortunate because one of the terms of the duality of language has been overlooked. Therefore the back and forth movement between two systems of signification stops; the gap of the "hors-texte" is filled, leaving no possible access to authenticity or to the subject. Those who write academic works only copy authentic works while trying to improve them. They believe that imitation can be better than the real thing. Sarraute rejects this belief:

Eh bien non, justement. Parce que c'est mort, vous le savez, c'est forcément mort une copie . . . pas de sensation spontanée, neuve, pas de contact direct avec une substance intacte, inconnue. . . .

(Fruits d'or 128)

Sarraute also speaks against those who write esoteric works. She invites the reader to examine the inauthentic works from which life is absent:

On n'a pas besoin de faire de grands efforts . . . ces paroles précieuses, si rares, elles ne contiennent . . . aucune charge de denses et subtiles pensées. Ce sont de pauvres mots vides, assemblés grossièrement suivant des procédés que vous pourriez, si vous le vouliez, découvrir et reproduire facilement, des trucs très simples de prestidigitation, des tours de passe-passe tout à fait banals.

(Fruits d'or 73)

Academic and esoteric works are inauthentic for two reasons: on the one hand they use common language that is inauthentic *par excellence*, and on the other hand they leave no room for authenticity, for the subject to fill in the gap between the objective (language as a system) and subjective (discussion of that system) aspects of language. Sarraute asserts the need for the abyss in which there is room for movement and life, authenticity and the subject.

It may seem paradoxical that the subject can find its authenticity in the commonplace/common place which is impersonal. But the commonplace/common place is also the only possible spot where the movement between the same and the other can exist. While none of the systems of signification in themselves are capable of movement, the commonplace/common place opens onto an abyss that is always individually reinterpretable and leads to the subject. Everyone can *interpret* the abyss. To interpret a text does not consist in giving it

a meaning but in appreciating the ambivalence which constructs it. The interpretation of the plurality of the text is not arbitrary: it is not a question of hypostasizing several meanings in order to weigh their pros and cons, but on the contrary of affirming the being of plurality which has nothing to do with the true, the probable, the possible.⁷ Every new interpretation sets the text in motion again and again, eternally, as is demonstrated by the list of homonyms quoted above: "Hérault, héraut, héros, aire, haut, erre, haut, R.O." (22). This example shows the extent to which language can be playful when accepted in its duality. A diversity of changing images are called upon by these words whenever they are pronounced. For instance the word "hérault" suggests in turn the following images which are only two of numerous possibilities: "la corne mauve aux contours mous s'étend sur la mer bleue. . . ." (22) and "la branche immobile du pin parasol s'étend au dessus de l'auvent recouvert de tuiles arrondies oranges et roses . . ." (23). Even this list of homonyms is not exhaustive, one can always add new words that will suggest new images. For instance: "Air haut . . . Air, oh . . . Air, Eau . . ." (27-28). Thus, it becomes obvious that the role of language is not to re-present things or to lead back to the usual clichés which sterilize the text in the process. On the contrary, Sarraute's game with language privileges movement, life and the interpretation of the textual void.

Sarraute does not ignore the fact that she uses common language and that, in this respect, she touches upon inauthenticity. But although the inauthenticity is unavoidable, she will exploit it by placing it at the very center of her work. Paradoxically, inauthenticity will turn into the very source of authenticity. In Sarraute's novels, the instability of the subject inside the text will in fact evolve around a *quest for non-identity* or a *quest for the other*. Indeed, Sarraute never tries to give back to the subject in the "hors-texte" the identity it lost in the text. Rather, she underlines the ambivalence of the authentic subject, plural in its character because it is always turning towards the world and towards itself. Any apparent identity between the linguistic and philosophical aspects of language is simultaneously destroyed by the movements of a plural writing whose discourse puts itself systematically into question. The fragmented and displaced subjects of Sarraute prove that her writing is motivated by a quest for the other. Creation, life and movement depend upon an irreconcilable plural writing that asserts the abyss while writing itself.

Plural writing reveals a double intention, or "regard," directed simultaneously towards the objective and the subjective nature of language. In *Entre la vie et la mort*, this "regard" is presented as follows:

On dirait qu'il se scinde, se dédouble. Une moitié de lui-même, déléguée auprès de nous, prend place parmi nous dans le cercle, avec nous à distance contemple, interroge . . . ensemble nous cherchons à élucider le mystère, à expliquer le miracle. (10)

Whereas "l'autre moitié restée au milieu du cercle s'efforce comme elle peut de nous aider . . ." (10). In other words, it is only under the condition of this double "regard," turned towards itself as well as towards the other, that a unique movement is felt between the lines, in the abyss of the text: what Sarraute calls "tropisme."

"Tropisme," a movement both unique and fragmented, arises from plural writing. It marks the coexistence of the two aspects of language and, simultaneously, the distance that separates them. However "tropisme" does not stand for either of the two aspects in themselves: it allows the authenticity of a statement in the text through other means than the linguistic utterance. Authenticity, the real subject of the text, does exist, but not in the text itself. It is relegated to the "hors-texte," to the margin of the text. "Tropisme" articulates the space of the "hors-texte" in which the subject is perceptible but not tangible. Authenticity, which is the objective of the text, is met in the "hors-texte," never in the text itself. "Tropisme" illustrates the inherent contradiction of a text that on the one hand announces its objective (authenticity), and that on the other hand never realizes this objective inside the text, but rather outside the text. "Tropisme" cannot be expressed in words but it can be grasped. It comes from an abyss found between the objective and subjective aspects of language, and in the same movement, it substitutes itself for this abyss. "Tropisme" creates the illusion of a reunion, of an identity between the two aspects of language. Nevertheless, it is only an illusion and the abyss remains even though it can no longer be seen. Thus "tropisme" tries to hide the void from whence it arose, but at the same time, it preaches its necessary existence. This situation is, of course, paradoxical. But contradiction and plurality are the very essence of "tropismes", for "tropisme" is the mediation of opposites. It compromises the tension between inauthenticity (the language and the other) and authenticity (the subject and the other).

The quest for the other creates an illusory harmony between the subjective and objective aspects of language.

Plural writing in Sarraute's work creates "tropismes" that constitute the very experience of ambivalence. This ambivalence cannot be translated into words without an immediate betrayal of one of its terms, as was seen in Sarraute's inflexible criticism of esotericism and academism. The authenticity that comes with "tropisme" has to take its ambivalence into account because authenticity cannot exist without ambivalence. It depends on the coexistence—coincidence?—of the two aspects of language, and *the rest is literature*.

A prime example of "tropisme" putting the authentic subject into evidence can be taken from the text *Enfance*.⁸ In this autobiographical text, Sarraute uses the pronoun "I" with verbs in the "imparfait," a past tense used in French for description and habitual action in the past. Sarraute depicts her relationship as a child with her mother and her step-father: "Ce qui passait entre Kolia et maman, ce courant chaud, ce rayonnement, j'en recevais, moi aussi, comme des ondes. . ." (73). In this passage, the "I" is omniscient and maintains a distance from the scene which is viewed from the outside. The authentic subject has been sacrificed to the image suspended in time. Nothing can filter between the lines of the text because one of the terms of the duality has disappeared. The image represented is suspended in time and does not change. For that reason, later in the passage, Sarraute is compelled to textually provoke the fragmentation of the enunciation by dividing it into an "I/you." This fragmented enunciation represents in the text what I have previously described as a "double intention" which takes into account the double aspect of language. The authentic nature of the relationship between Sarraute, her mother and her step-father will be revealed through the use of this double intention:

. . . j'étais un corps étranger . . . qui gênait . . . —Oui: un corps étranger. Tu ne pouvais pas mieux dire. C'est cela que tu as senti alors et avec quelle force . . . —Non, cela je ne l'ai pas pensé . . . pas pensé, évidemment pas, je te l'accorde . . . c'est apparu indistinct, irréel . . . un promontoire inconnu qui surgit un instant du brouillard . . . et de nouveau un épais brouillard le recouvre. . . . (75-76)

The fragmented enunciation reveals a subjective consciousness that analyzes itself from the center, but that, at the same time, turns to the outside to apprehend itself. Is it ironic that what comes out from

the abyss between the two aspects—that which is represented in the text by elliptical dots—is the tragic discovery of separation? In this example, the division is perceptible first at the level of the enunciation before it is perceptible in the linguistic utterance, with “I/you.” Even though we discover separation, “tropisme” seems to be powerful enough to make the division disappear. Plural writing is not unifying by definition, but it does create a type of harmony in the text. The subject is apprehended at the moment when all barriers are down and the text is transparent. Nonetheless, this moment of euphoria does not last. Indeed, thought succeeds feeling. With thought the division is reestablished in the text.

Therefore “tropisme” can be born only from the open abyss in the text, between the two systems of signification: linguistic and philosophical. At first, “tropisme” seems to reconcile the two systems by hiding the abyss: an illusion of unification which remains only briefly before revealing the reality of division in the text. For Nathalie Sarraute, this division is not negative because “tropisme” can be perceptible only under these conditions. This “tropisme” symbolizes the thought from the outside by placing the subject, not *in* the text itself, but *outside* the text. “Le mouvement de l’écriture” does not state the subject, but restores its singularity, rendering the subject perceptible in the “hors-texte.”

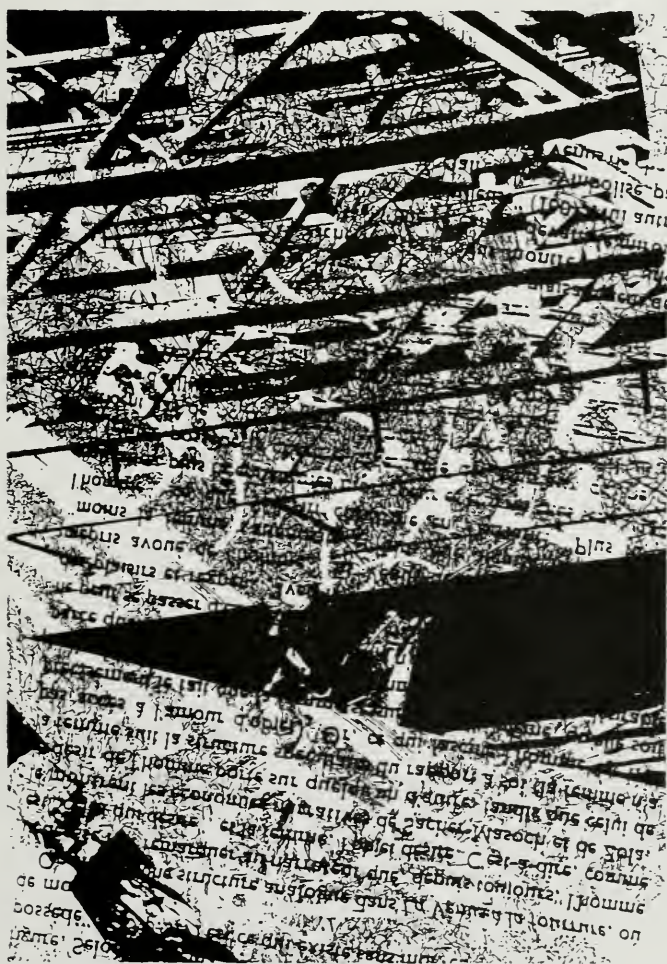
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Notes

1. Nathalie Sarraute, *Entre la vie et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1968) 11.
2. Michel Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside” in *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1987) 15-16.
3. Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: la transparence et l’obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard-Tel Quel, 1971).
4. “Le mouvement de l’écriture” is not translatable into English. What we mean by “le mouvement de l’écriture” is that writing is a process of self-creation.
5. Nathalie Sarraute, *Les Fruits d’or* (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1963).
6. Nathalie Sarraute, *Paul Valéry et l’Enfant d’Eléphant* and *Flaubert le précurseur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).
7. Cf. Barthes’ analysis of “interpretation” in *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970) 11-12.
8. Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance* (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1983).

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Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait
ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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