

NATHALIE SARRAUTE'S ENFANCE
OR TROPISMES REWRITTEN

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by

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ABBREVIATIONS

- E Sarraute, Nathalie. Enfance. Paris: Gallimard, 1983.
- T Sarraute, Nathalie. Tropismes. Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1957.
- ES Sarraute, Nathalie. L'ère du soupçon. Paris: Gallimard, 1956.
- CDH Minogue, Valerie. "The Child, the Doll and the Hands that Hold: Tropisme 1 as a Paradigm in the Work of Nathalie Sarraute." New Novel Review 3:1 (1995): 21-34.

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DEDICATION

In memory of my father, Jean-Marc Boyer

INTRODUCTION

Sarraute's writing is unique because it concerns the elucidation and exploration of tropisms that she defined as "des mouvements indéfinissables, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience; . . . ils se développent en nous et s'évanouissent avec une rapidité extrême, sans que nous percevions clairement ce qu'ils sont . . ." (ES 8).

In an interview with Serge Fachereau and Jean Ristat reported in Digraphe (1984), Sarraute said that when she was looking for a title for her first book the biological term "'tropisme' était dans l'air" and that she appropriated it because it served to approximate the fleeting instinctive perceptions that her work addressed (9). Le nouveau petit Larousse illustré of 1939 defines the term as "[l'a]ccroissement ou progression d'un organisme dans une direction donnée, sous l'influence d'une excitation extérieure (lumière, chaleur, activité nutritive, etc.)."

Nathalie Sarraute's work was published in the prestigious Pléiade series in 1996 while she was still alive. Her work has been translated worldwide and has been discussed extensively both during her lifetime and after her death in 1999. Sarraute scholars have written about the repetitive occurrence of themes and symbols in her work, such as the child as victim. They have discussed the metaphorical role of her language. Sarraute critics have addressed a very wide range of topics. No one to date however, has noticed

that Enfance is conceptually Tropismes repackaged and rewritten. This thesis will show that Enfance is Tropismes retold.

Enfance, published in 1983, is an autobiographical work that Sarraute wrote when she was 83 years old. It purports to revive the tropisms of her childhood. Tropismes is her first work. It is a collection of short, rather abstract prose vignettes. The first of these was written when the author was in her early thirties, that is in 1932. The first edition of Tropismes contained 19 unnumbered texts and was published in Paris in 1939 by Robert Denoël (CDH 31). The second edition, published in 1957, contains 24 numbered texts. That is the version in print today, and the one used in this thesis.

Thus, the original edition of Tropismes, not to mention its first texts, pre-dates the “Nouveau Roman” movement of the mid-1950’s by about fifteen years. Subsequent to the publication of this first work, in essays written between 1947 and 1956, Sarraute formalized many of the principles that she had spontaneously used there. These were published in 1956 as a collection entitled, L’ère du soupçon. In it Sarraute heralded many of the positions on the novel of the “nouveaux romanciers.” She, too, saw the traditional need for character development and plot as outdated. She felt that the novel needed to change to meet the interests, needs, and, indeed, the skepticism of modern readers. Sarraute shifted the focus of the reader to the interior perceptions and musings of the characters.

Though often called the leader of the “Nouveau Roman” movement, Sarraute rejected this appellation. In an interview with Bettina Knapp in 1967, Sarraute commented on similarities and differences between her work and that of the “nouveaux

romanciers” such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Robert Pinget and Claude Simon:

Les écrivains qu’on appelle nouveaux romanciers, ont certes, des points communs avec moi. Ils ont aussi voulu dégager le roman de certaines formes devenues inutiles – telles que la peinture des caractères, l’intrigue, etc. . . qui détournent l’attention du lecteur de l’essentiel, de ce que nous voulons lui montrer. Mais ce que nous montrons est très différent. Robbe-Grillet montre l’extérieur, les choses, les objets, vus du dehors. Moi je montre au contraire les mouvements intérieurs: son univers est un univers plutôt immobile, et le mien est en perpétuel mouvement, en perpétuelle transformation. On peut dire que c’est presque l’opposé, comme tempérament et comme vision. (286)

Also, in L’ère du soupçon she says that “la plupart des idées exprimées dans ces articles constituent certaines bases essentielles de ce qu’on nomme aujourd’hui le ‘Nouveau Roman’” (12). When questioned in an interview with Simone Benmussa about this work, she acknowledged that she was staking out a claim to the territory she wanted to work in and on, and did so “[p]as du tout pour le Nouveau Roman, rien de tout cela. C’était pour moi” (103).

Tropismes (1957) and Enfance (1983) stand apart from Sarraute’s other works. Although they in turn appear to be very different from each other, a closer examination reveals striking similarities. At their core both works are, structurally, a list of tropisms. Both address the same themes. The same reference points are used to anchor these

themes. In essence, Enfance is a rewrite of Tropismes. Despite a time gap of over forty years, the author returns to the same series of tropisms that she expressed in her first work. In hindsight it becomes clear that Enfance is like an annotated version of Tropismes. In Enfance, Sarraute revives the unexpressed and inexpressible feelings of the child who was abandoned and betrayed by her mother. In Tropismes, her first work, the adult Sarraute presents these same feelings and perceptions as vignettes.

Tropisms are indescribable silent movements at the edge of a person's awareness. They are alerts or warnings. Sarraute's literary purpose is to bring them to light by slowing them down. She explained this in L'ère du soupçon: "Il fallait . . . décomposer ces mouvements et les faire se déployer dans la conscience du lecteur à la manière d'un film au ralenti" (9). She also explained in an interview with Arnaud Rykner that a tropism can move around and that she will transform the circumstances of a tropism to meet her literary needs (Jefferson 150). She does not say that she changes the tropism itself.

This is the situation in the two works under discussion. In Enfance she acknowledges that she is the receiver of the tropism. In Tropismes she shifts this to unnamed creatures. The setting might also shift, but on closer observation, the real setting will be the interior awareness of the creatures instead of any external situation. In both works being considered here, these barely discernible perturbations result in a condition of unhappy tension. This malaise relates to the constant ambiguous threat of underlying betrayal. Related secondary themes of education and security are also present in both works. At the age of 83, Sarraute, in Enfance, not only evokes the same tropisms

as those in the first work, but provides us with a very plausible story about their origin.

Through them, we re-experience Tropismes, her first work.

Chapter I will note parallel structural aspects in the way the tropisms are presented. Enfance approaches the method of straightforward listing found in Tropismes. Similarities of setting and of the characters are also apparent, despite their lack of conventional definition, particularly in Tropismes. The lack of both character development and plot will not prevent the recognition of Natacha as a central figure here, nor prevent recognition of references to other characters and events in the later work.

Chapter II will compare the themes of betrayal, education, and security in both works. Events common to both works will be pointed out, sometimes despite their surface camouflage. The interrelationship of these themes will be discussed, showing how formal knowledge becomes an antidote to the malaise of keenly sensed but ill-defined betrayal. The childhood sadness will be allayed; security will be attained; a kind of peacefulness will be possible – but not the longed-for mother's love.

Chapter III will compare the childhood experience of reality presented in Enfance with the author's approach to writing demonstrated by these two works. In childhood, spoken and written assurances of love proved to be hollow, so became suspect. The author's writing techniques are consistent with the child's reaction of caution to repeated betrayal. Just as the child Natacha did, the reader will glean information from body language, such as gestures and facial expressions, from non-verbal sounds, such as grunts or tone of voice, and from rhythm generated by the sound of words more than from their meaning. Even silences will speak. Metaphor is abundant as is use of words of indefinite

meaning, use of the impersonal, and use of fragmentation in presentation, which all echo the non-dit of Sarraute's representation of her childhood.

CHAPTER I

STRUCTURES

Tropismes and Enfance are outside the categories into which Sarraute's work usually falls since neither is a novel, play, or essay. Furthermore, Enfance does not fit neatly into the category of autobiography since it does not conform, on two counts, to the basic definition of the genre given by Philippe Lejeune: that author, narrator and protagonist should all refer to the same person and that the story should be told retrospectively (14). Enfance has two adult Sarraute narrators, one male and one female, as well as Natacha, the child the author was, who all tell the story. Also, the perspective shifts back and forth from the past to the present. The two works seem to be very different from each other. Yet there are striking similarities between them quite apart from both being outliers.

Tropismes, like Sarraute's childhood, is a departure point. Not only is it her first literary work, but the author acknowledged it was the baseline from which all the rest of her work developed: "Mon premier livre contenait en germe tout ce que, dans mes ouvrages suivants, je n'ai cessé de développer" (ES 9). Childhood, the subject of Enfance, is another departure point.

The locations specified in Enfance are either in major cities (Paris, Moscow, St. Petersburg) or in the countryside of France, Russia and Switzerland. Though locations

are not given in Tropismes, there is nothing to indicate any inconsistency with these European scenes.¹ Certainly, they would not be mistaken for an American suburb or an Arctic wilderness, for instance. More importantly, in both texts any settings described are incidental to the dominating interior worlds of the characters presented.

Tropismes does not have a plot and the presence of one in Enfance is arguable.² As discussed earlier, a major purpose of Enfance is to showcase the tropisms of the author's childhood. According to Denès, Sarraute "fera d'Enfance non pas un rapport sur une période de sa vie ni même un récit rétrospectif à proprement parler mais l'autobiographie de ses tropismes d'enfant" (15). Sarraute said, in a letter to Sheila Bell cited in the preface of the latter's translation of Tropismes, that the sequence of the tropisms in her first work was essentially random: "Il n'y avait aucun principe régissant l'ordre des Tropismes" (CDH 31), effectively leaving the book without an ending. At the end of Enfance Sarraute, again very abruptly, decides to stop reminiscing about the tropisms of her youth: "[J]e n'en ai plus envie. . ." (E 277). The result is that in both works we are looking at a series of stand-alone verbal snapshots that may or may not add up to a plot. By piecing together the bits of the puzzle the reader puts together a storyline. Tropismes has no plot, but with its images and feelings it too has a story to tell.

In Tropismes, although there are characters, none is named.³ Nothing is known about these nameless ones, other than some feelings and perceptions, as suggested or

¹ An exception is "Tropisme 18," which names London. See discussion at end of Chapter II. "Tropisme 18" will be referred to as T18, "Tropisme 1" as T1, "Tropisme 2" as T2, etc.

² Gatton's entire paper, "Towards Narrativity: Nathalie Sarraute's Enfance," argues for a plot.

³ An exception is T18, which names the cook, Ada.

conjured up by the images delivered as a momentary living tableau encapsulated in each text. For example, in T17 some unnamed “ils” are in inhospitable woods with the companion of their leisure hours, a solitary, morose, compliant little boy who sits next to them on his folding stool, absorbing all they say instead of playing. This description captures a few moments in time – a few blurry frames in a film. Nothing more needs to be known about the characters and nothing else is, because as Tutuc notes, they “need to be seen only as simple bearers of tropisms,” and because they are “for the most part ageless, anonymous, [and] of no determinable physical appearance” (44). They are, nonetheless, recognizable in retrospect as different manifestations of Natacha or some transformations of people or events mentioned in Enfance, such as the old folks of T16 and the grandparents in the autobiographical work (E 55-56), or the immigrants of T3 and the community of Russian immigrants in Paris who were friends and acquaintances of the family and who often came to Natacha’s father’s house (E 194-99). A forerunner of Natacha is recognizable in T9 as the male appeaser of a tyrannical male taskmaster in whom we recognize Natacha’s perception of her mother. T9 is the first tropism that Sarraute wrote when she started writing them in 1932 (CDH 32), and is laden with emotion. T4, with its exacting unrelenting dance master, is another version of T9. This time a group of “elles” tries to please. The alone, isolated female of T5 is also Natacha. T7 foreshadows the same underlying tension found in Enfance caused in both cases by a worrisome consideration of what can and cannot be said. In the solitary little boy of T17 there is a Natacha who ignores the obvious and remains blindly attached to her mother, absorbing every particle of her presence. Natacha is in each one of the child victims of

T1, T8, T15, and T17, who are seen by Minogue as mirroring “the tension at the heart of Sarraute’s writing between the fluidity of pre-linguistic experience and the fixity of linguistic expression” (CDH 23). These are all Natacha struggling, ostensibly, with the grip of language, which for Sarraute it is necessary to master or control in order to be free of its imprisonment. Language becomes the scapegoat. Language is also empowerment. In T11 we recognize Natacha in the nameless female who fiercely and determinedly seeks to absorb knowledge. In Enfance Natacha finds both peace and prestige by being an excellent student: she says she wants to live “jusqu’à ce que ‘je sache tout’” (E 174).

Likewise, in Enfance the characters are far from developed. Physical traits and personality characteristics are sparse or non-existent. The characters have labels – industrialist, writer, husband of, wife of, divorced from – but we really don’t know any more about their lives, characteristics, and interests than we do about any of the characters in Tropismes. In Tropismes there is also “un professeur au lycée” in T3 and a professor at the Collège de France in T12. The reader has almost no information about the step-father, the step-mother, the father, or even the all-important mother. Rather, from momentary emotionally revealing snapshots the reader learns how the child Natacha felt about them and how they made her feel about herself and, by extension, about the world – her world. Natacha is the only real character in the work. It is from her internal perspective as a victim of betrayal that the reader knows her. This is exactly like the nameless victims of Tropismes.

Another similarity regarding characters in both works is the isolation of Natacha in Enfance and of all the characters in Tropismes. Tropismes is replete with loners

surrounded by others. Natacha is a child, alone, also surrounded by others. They all suffer silently. In Tropismes the reader is plunged directly into the tropism of this tense silence. Despite the number of shadowy figures present, the tropism is rendered as being experienced by only one. In Enfance all the tropisms are experienced alone, but then such is their nature. They are, however, triggered by an “other.” Sarraute said that “ils ne peuvent pas se passer de partenaire” and “[s]ouvent c’est un partenaire imaginaire surgi de nos expériences passées ou de nos rêveries” (ES 118).

In Tropismes, the very title announces its content. Although Enfance is presented as an autobiographical work, there is consensus among Sarraute scholars that this work is primarily a series of tropisms as well. Ann Jefferson refers to the “stated emphasis on the tropistic element in all the scenes it portrays” (151) and says that “the anecdotal material of the childhood memories will be validated as a literary enterprise chiefly by virtue of the fact that they all contain ‘little bits of something still alive’ – in other words, the lived tropisms which constitute the material” (150). Lina Anguita not only acknowledges their presence but discusses how the author delivers these tropisms to the reader in her article entitled, “Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute: La déchireur salutaire.” Also, Sarraute said that her purpose in writing Enfance was to bring to light some of the tropisms of her childhood and not to write a traditional autobiography. In its opening pages the book states outright that its content refers to tropisms – “C’était ressenti, comme toujours, hors des mots, globalement. . .” (E 17) – and at the end of the work as though for emphasis, “Je ne pourrais plus m’efforcer de faire surgir quelques moments, quelques mouvements qui me semblent encore intacts, assez forts pour se dégager de cette couche protectrice

qui les conserve, de ces épaisseurs blanchâtres, molles, ouatées qui se défont, qui disparaissent avec l'enfance. . ." (E 277).

Artistically, Sarraute saw the texts of the first work as "mouvements séparés." In an interview with Simone Benmussa she said that at the beginning, in Tropismes, "ce n'était alors que des points séparés," after which in book after book she tried to extend her territory (104). In the Knapp interview, when asked if there had been an evolution "dans la forme, la signification, ou dans la façon dont vous vous êtes servi de ces 'tropismes' dans votre oeuvre," she replied that there certainly was, and that her first novel, Portrait d'un inconnu, was written in order to develop these movements beyond their limiting constraints: "J'ai pensé qu'il serait peut-être intéressant de prendre deux personnages entre lesquels ces sortes de mouvements pourraient aller en s'amplifiant et en se développant" (283-84). Minogue says that "[p]arts of this novel were originally intended to be Tropismes, but Sarraute began to feel cramped by brief texts in which movements could not be developed as she now wished them to be, so the project changed and became a novel" (CDH 33).

In both Tropismes and Enfance the method by which the tropisms are presented to the reader seems to be the same. In fact, each work presents the tropisms using a different technique, but the effect is that of a collection of separate tropisms. In Tropismes the reader is discreetly moved in and out of the tropism through the use of adjectives and adverbs, from a position of observer to that of participant (Barbour 135-36).

Sarraute achieves in Enfance the effect of Tropismes's presentation of individual unconnected tropisms, but using techniques she developed later. Here the reader is moved in and out of the tropism by means of a change of verb tense (Anguita 39). The "sous-conversations" and "conversations" technique that Sarraute developed after writing Tropismes, the interior musing suddenly changing to dialogue and vice versa, here takes the form of recollections of memories in the imperative or past tenses. This acts like the "sous-conversations," out of which the reader is suddenly ferried into the live experience of the tropism itself, delivered in the present tense. A word or phrase is usually the catalyst for this launch. Natacha simply re-experiences the tropism in the present tense. The typical probing and searching of Sarrautian internal monologue-like "sous-conversations" is replaced by the reminiscences of the narrators, who are made to sound like any two people discussing and arguing over details of some past event.

Sarraute said, as pointed out earlier, that Tropismes "contenait en germe tout ce que, dans mes ouvrages suivants, je n'ai cessé de développer" (ES 9). She said that it was "l'expression spontanée des impressions très vives, et leur forme était aussi spontanée et naturelle que les impressions auxquelles elle donnait vie" (ES 8). Furthermore, in an interview with Bettina Knapp, she repeated that she had written these first little texts "d'une manière tout à fait spontanée" and added that she did so "sans même bien savoir ce qu'ils étaient, ce que cela représentait exactement" (283). In contrast, Sarraute has said about all her subsequent work that writing for her is a great effort requiring enormous concentration. Very interestingly, during that same interview, Sarraute said that it was only while writing Tropismes that she became aware that there

kept recurring a certain same order of sensations (284). All this points to Tropismes capturing the tropisms of Sarraute's childhood.

It would seem that these sensations had been incubating and had finally broken through in an artistic literary expression. Feelings in Tropismes are very intense. All the texts of Tropismes express a disappointment with the inherent falseness of the everyday scenes they portray. This incessant betrayal resonates strongly with the continual unnamed betrayal felt by Natacha in Enfance. The texts portray, in essence, the same on-going disappointing falseness of Enfance and enough subject matter to allow the reader to recognize them clearly the second time around, in Enfance. Furthermore, chronologically these childhood sensations are closest to those in Tropismes, and since they are still present in Enfance it seems that they never went away.

It is to be expected that intense but un verbalized and unacknowledged feelings of sadness and betrayal throughout one's childhood would not disappear. This would apply equally to the situation regardless of whether Enfance were an autobiography or fiction.

On the surface, Natacha's everyday life seems calm. It is the unspoken, the non-dit, that perturbs and betrays, just as it does in Tropismes. The tropisms signal the unformulated awareness of threatening or actual betrayal in both works, which in Enfance the narrators finally label. Translated as a living experience, it is the revisiting of a series of abandonments by the mother. Natacha and the reader are left in both works with the feelings generated.

John Taylor, writing about his interview with Sarraute in her Paris apartment when she was almost 97 years old, notes that she "always dismissed . . . the interest of

biography as a critical tool for comprehending her writing.” Yet he states that “it is obvious that certain outstanding facts of her early life cast her relentlessly maniacal analyses of interpersonal relationships . . . into a different light.” As a consequence, he concludes that the “renowned ‘impersonality’ of her work can be seen as a courageous ‘objectification’ of her own experiences of linguistic, emotional, familial, geographical, social, even racial uncertainty.”

CHAPTER II

THEMES

A comparison of the relived episodes in Enfance and the vignettes in Tropismes that constitute the tropisms in both works reveals the presence of the same feelings and perceptions. Tropismes expresses the essence of the childhood experiences described in Enfance. As the following examples will show through their themes of betrayal and education, one work is the rewrite of the other.

T5 associates the sun, its heat, and a sudden loss of warmth with the suffering of silent apprehension. In the great emptiness described everything seems suspended under the silent heat: “[U]n grand vide sous cette chaleur, un silence” (T 33). Tension is heightened with the sudden introduction of cold: “C’était dans cette chaleur, dans ce silence” that there is “un froid soudain, un déchirement” (T 33). The link between sun and cold is repeated: “[C]ette sensation de froid, de solitude, d’abandon dans un univers hostile où quelque chose d’angoissant se prépare” takes place under “le soleil torride” (T 34). The unnamed female of the text appears imprisoned in this situation: “[E]lle restait sans bouger . . . occupant le plus petit espace possible” (T 33). Whatever is threatening is not named.

Enfance reveals the source of this highly emotional association between the sun and betrayal. The child, filled with sadness and apprehension, is in a great emptiness

crossing the snowy plains. She does not name what is threatening. She and her mother are on a train going from Russia to the transfer point in Berlin where the parents' mutual friend will replace the mother and accompany Natacha for the remainder of the journey to her father in Paris. Although she does not have the child admit it, Sarraute makes it clear to the reader that her mother was betraying her daughter's trust by heartlessly sending her away to her father. In the text Natacha says: "Par moments ma détresse s'apaise . . . je m'amuse à scander sur le bruit des roues toujours les mêmes deux mots. . . venus sans doute des plaines ensoleillées que je voyais par la fenêtre. . . le mot français 'soleil' et le même mot russe 'solntze.' . . . Un jeu abrutissant que je ne peux pas arrêter" (E 107). Suddenly the game stops as she dissolves in tears. She is very clear about her mother's behaviour: "Ce qui ne se confond avec rien, c'est maman assise en face de moi près de la fenêtre, son geste quand étendant le bras elle essuie avec son mouchoir déjà trempé mon visage ruisselant de larmes" (E 107). At this point in the text the narrators, not the child, suddenly start discussing the memory and one says: "– J'ai peine à croire, oui peine, au sens propre du mot. . . . Non, il n'est pas possible qu'elle ait délibérément voulu me laisser à mon père" (E 108). The child, just like the person in T5, does not name what is threatening. Emotionally, she cannot bring herself to acknowledge and assign either the concept or the word "traitor" to her mother. Instead she associates "soleil" and its attributes with her unhappiness, and assigns them the role of traitor.

Having established a negative, somber, and threatening tone, T5 continues to deliver the feeling of total isolation in hostile territory. The protagonist, an unnamed female alone in a room, sits motionlessly on the side of her bed, "occupant le plus petit

espace possible, tendue, comme attendant que quelque chose éclate, s'abatte sur elle" (T 34). The atmosphere of intense apprehension as well as some uncharacteristic details lead the reader to recognize a matching scene in Enfance. The use of the possessive "son" referring to "lit" and the reference to an office door closing somewhere in the house indicate that the "elle" is at home, or at least in a location that somehow belongs to her. Correspondingly, a very emotional scene takes place in Natacha's father's office which is separated from the dining room by a door. It is in this room that Natacha experiences incapacitating anguish and total isolation. Betrayal reaches a zenith as the child experiences the overpowering and suffocating knowledge that her mother has abandoned her, and that the mother-daughter secret code that they had worked out for communicating the possible need for rescue, as well as the rescue itself, is nothing more than an empty hoax. Natacha, reliving the moment, says that she is "atterrée, accablée, sous le coup d'une pareille trahison" (E 115).

It's also interesting to note that in Enfance this event is the major turning point in the book, where the child suddenly and wordlessly understands her family's inter-relationships through her pain. An invisible bond is strengthened between father and daughter. It is not a coincidence that T5 is singled out by Tutuc in her discussion on the subjectivity of Tropismes for its description of intense anguish (59).

Both Tropismes and Enfance deliver to the reader the recognition that underlying betrayal is everywhere. Apprehension abounds. As noted above, the person in T5 lives in resigned, silent dread. Similarly, in Enfance Natacha is in constant dread that her mother won't keep her word but will betray her by abandoning her.

Indeed, the apprehension of betrayal is all-pervasive and free-floating throughout Enfance and its existence is brought out at times by innocuous circumstances. One example is the episode in the Moscow apartment, when her father gently and quietly left her bedside before she was fully asleep despite his promise to stay. Suddenly we are launched into a description of what the child Natacha understood as a fundamental pact of responsibility between them: “[T]u m’as promis . . . je veux juste t’indiquer, puisque c’était convenu, qu’un pacte entre nous a été conclu, je sais que tu veux le respecter, et moi aussi, vois-tu, je le respecte, je te préviens. . .” (E 54). The narrators in hindsight identify the real problem: “[C]’était le désir d’empêcher ce qui se préparait, ce qui allait arriver, et qui avait déjà pour toi le goût de la trahison sournoise, de l’abandon?” (E 53). The child is left mired in the vagueness of the tropism, confusing the father’s innocent abandonment with the mother’s, an example of which is the train ride incident. They are associated only insofar as they are both betrayals, despite the difference in magnitude and consequence.

Two important points to note in Natacha’s view of betrayal are its abstraction and its incorrect assignment. Sarraute has the reader understand that the little Natacha in the Moscow apartment understood well the nature of betrayal. There is no anguish directed towards the father because he left the room. The fear of betrayal seems to be present in a disconnected sense, indicating its constant presence as an underlying abstract entity. The train ride betrayal occurred later. However, the author leads us to understand just how invasive and diffuse this apprehension of betrayal must have been when even the memory

of innocuous circumstances, such as the tip-toeing father in the Moscow apartment, launched its reliving.

Other direct and indirect references in Tropismes to the sun in its traitorous capacity are found in T17. An indirect reference is seen in the budding leaves of spring that are undernourished by the sun: “[D]es feuilles fraîches commençaient à sortir; elles ne parvenaient pas à jeter autour d’elles leur éclat” (T 103). In a direct reference to the sun, the writer accuses it of wrinkling children’s faces in hospital rooms, thereby implying an annoyance or worse. The inadequacy of the budding leaves is further compared to the sick children’s “sourire aigrelet” (T 103), thereby compounding blame. T2 also accuses the sun of being a traitor. “Il n’y avait rien à faire. Rien à faire. Se soustraire était impossible. Partout, sous des formes innombrables, ‘traîtres’ (‘c’est traître le soleil d’aujourd’hui, disait la concierge, c’est traître et on risque d’attraper du mal’)” (T 17). Here, there is no reason associated with the story aspect of the vignette to accuse the sun. It is, nonetheless, singled out for blame, totally at random it would seem – until we understand its significance from Enfance.

T17 has many images of false promises. The allure of a recreational walk for city dwellers in a suburban park is sharply reversed by the images of impenetrable underbrush and rigid crossroads. Inhospitability is reinforced by the discomfort and ugliness associated with “les taillis broussailleux” and “les clairières pelées,” the only places available to use for picnics and resting. “[L]’atmosphère épaisse dans laquelle ils vivaient toujours les entourait ici aussi, s’élevait d’eux comme une lourde et âcre vapeur”

(T 103-04). The park is traitorous. It delivers a message of inadequacy, disappointment, and betrayal to the visitors seeking a refreshing country outing.

The barrenness of T17 further serves to depict, abstractly and forcibly, the emptiness of the mother's love for Natacha. Here a pathetic little boy scrapes the dusty earth, amassing "feuilles sèches" and "des cailloux." He cannot be seeing or thinking clearly since the dense air, as though sticky from damp dust and sap, has adhered to his skin and eyes. This "petit enfant solitaire" refuses to play with other children. He always clings to his parents and absorbs their every word: "Il restait là, agglutiné, et, plein d'une avidité morne, il absorbait ce qu'ils disaient" (T 104).

Natacha in Enfance, remembering a previous explanation by her mother regarding the origin of babies and hoping for a sibling, collects dust for her to swallow. She too absorbs literally, that is blindly and unthinkingly, everything her mother says. She too refuses to go and play: "Tu ferais mieux de jouer, comme tous les enfants," clinging instead to her mother, "au lieu de traîner derrière moi sans rien faire" (E 30).

The blind trust of the little boy of T17 can be compared to Natacha's. She also absorbed what was said literally and with avidity when she took to heart her mother's parting instruction regarding chewing her food until it was "[a]ussi liquide qu'une soupe" (E 15), and she panicked after disobediently touching the electrocuting utility pole despite the warning: "Si tu touches à un pôteau comme celui-là, tu meurs. . ." (E 27). In Enfance the reminiscing narrators reveal that Natacha did not question her parents' motivations. She trusted them completely and unquestioningly: "[J]e ne me posais pas de questions de ce genre. Et ma mère était toujours pour moi, aussi bien que mon père, au-

dessus, au-delà de tout soupçon” (E 72). There is a forceful insistence on the child’s blind trust. This position allows her to cling to her mother and to her perceived protection of childhood. The reader knows of her awareness of this protection. It is shown by her compliant behavior at a wedding where she is hoisted up on a chair so that the guests can see and hear her recite despite her small size, and where she deliberately made her voice more baby-like. About this she says, “Je perçois parfaitement combien est fausse, ridicule, cette imitation de l’innocence, de la naïveté d’un petit enfant” (E 62).

On the other hand, there existed the fear that the parent-child pact, referred to above, would be broken. By being a good little girl she was keeping her end of the bargain – staving off betrayal – but deep down she knew.

Correspondingly, Tropismes is replete with people who keep their part of the bargain – who are good little girls – and who are all somehow betrayed. The most obvious is T21’s well-behaved, conforming child now grown into a correct, conventional, accommodating but very frustrated woman. There is the child of T8 trustingly taking the grandfather’s hand only to be taught fear and sadness; the eager innocent little girl of T15 who ends up mercilessly gripped by the hypocritical old man – one of those “vieux Messieurs.” There are both the displaced people and the professor and his family of T3; the reluctant keepers of this bargain of T23 – “enfin tous réunis, bien sages, faisant ce qu’auraient approuvé nos parents, nous voilà donc enfin tous là, convenables, chantant en chœur comme de braves enfants qu’une grande personne invisible surveille pendant qu’ils font la ronde gentiment en se donnant une menotte triste et moite” (T 135). There are T16’s resigned keepers of the same bargain, the old folks waiting for the end – there’s

nothing else left – and the expert shopper of T13. Betrayal is always present.

Psychologically or experientially, these are all Natacha, just in different forms. Minogue cites the same protagonists of the above-mentioned texts, referring to them as “puppet-like people” (CDH 23) who are “in the grip of convention” (CDH 31). In Enfance Natacha is presented as a doll who is aware of being trapped in convention, as described in the wedding episode cited earlier.

After reading Enfance it becomes clear that the “elle” in T9 is Natacha’s mother and the “il” is Natacha. The child struggled to keep the truth hidden especially from herself. T9 describes a demanding, soft, “douce” and “lisse” woman who is at the same time fear-inducing, “effrayante.” In this text a superhuman force is seen as being required to face the “douceur [qui] était menaçante.” Someone is needed with the courage to remain “en face d’elle,” (the text emphasizes, “bien en face”) in order to engage and confront her. This would require someone “qui oserait . . . ne pas se détourner de son tortillement.” This someone would have to need to know what might come out and be brave enough to not be scared of whatever that might be: “Qu’elle parle, qu’elle agisse, qu’elle se révèle, que cela sorte, que cela éclate enfin – il n’en aurait pas peur.” The anonymous character in the text says he would never have the strength. Instead, he must distract this soft tyrant with mundane topics because “[il fallait] contenir cela le plus longtemps possible, empêcher que cela ne sorte, que cela ne jaillisse d’elle, le comprimer en elle, à tout prix n’importe comment.” Panic, fear, and the frantic scramble to distract and to mollify her follows. This person feels that the soft woman always pushes him into this situation “par la force [ou] par la menace.” The text ends with a

description of this tyrant as “accroupie sur un coin du fauteuil, toute douce, toute plate,” all references to softness (T 57-59).

In Enfance the mother is the soft tyrant who must be faced and who pushes her daughter away. Throughout the work Natacha strongly associates softness and soft skin with her mother, and she does here as well in recounting this very painful betrayal. When Natacha’s mother finally visits her in Paris after a two-and-a-half year absence, the initial meeting is awkward. On the first day of the visit Natacha finds her mother so changed that she says she wouldn’t have recognized her in a chance encounter. This introduces an element of disappointment and is associated with her new hairdo in “deux rouleaux lisses” that don’t suit her. This is the first time the mother’s softness is seen in a negative light. Natacha is obviously struggling with this, but all is set to rights as soon as her lips touch her mother’s skin. She says, “je ne connais pas d’autre peau semblable, plus soyeuse et plus douce que tout ce qui est soyeux et doux au monde” (E 251). The reassurance is fleeting because it is at this meeting that the child feels as never before her mother’s indifference. She says, “d’un coup je sens, comme jamais je ne l’avais sentie avant, l’indifférence à mon égard de maman” (E 255). Furthermore, she senses that her mother is pushing her away: “[E]lle déferle sur moi avec une telle puissance, elle me roule, elle me rejette là-bas, . . . elle me pousse vers celle qui la remplace” (E 256), echoing the soft tyrant of T9. Natacha is being pushed into a situation not only of living with her father and step-mother, but of wanting the truth and being scared of uncovering it. Two days later the tyrannical mother cuts short her visit and angrily leaves because of an unintended slight by her eleven-year-old daughter (E 250-58). This betrayal by the

soft tyrant is very painful for Natacha. It is a double betrayal, as well, because the slight was deliberately orchestrated by Véra who arranged to take the innocent Natacha and her friends on the longed-for outing to Versailles within the first days of the mother's arrival, with the assurance to the child that "elle sera ravie de savoir que tu t'amuses" (E 248).

An earlier reference to the child's perceived notion of her mother's silky smooth skin occurs on the occasion of another betrayal, again by the denial of love. This time it is the sickroom scene in Russia (E 38-40) where Natacha's mother is her reluctant nurse. When reading to the sick child, her tone is disinterested and distant. She is always too eager to close the story book and stop this duty. She carelessly voices within the child's hearing the inconsiderate and selfish remark: "Quand je pense que je suis restée enfermée ici avec Natacha pendant tout ce temps sans que personne ne songe à me remplacer auprès d'elle" (E 40). The critic narrator says that what the child felt at that moment was not "vite effacé" but "s'est enfoncé, plutôt. . ." (E 40). Then the narrator goes on to say that all it took was a gesture or caressing word from her mother and "je me serre contre elle, je pose mes lèvres sur la peau fine et soyeuse, si douce de son front, de ses joues" (E 40). The narrator implies that by burying the memory of the mother's unloving words and resentful behavior she refuses to admit the painful and ugly truth of being unloved and rejected. Instead the comfort provided by contact with the mother's soft skin is used by Natacha as a substitute for loving feelings denied to her. The mother's silky skin, "douce et soyeuse au toucher, plus soyeuse que la soie" (E 93), hides the indifference that suffocates the child. The hurt and resentment, though buried deeply, are there and will come out.

Dominique Denès, in Nathalie Sarraute: Étude sur Enfance, describes the resentment and hostility felt towards the silky absent mother manifested by the childish attack on the silken chair in Switzerland as the first “déchirement” of many, referring to them as “les séparations avec sa mère . . . toujours douloureusement vécues” (35). Another wrenching break is expressed by the ripped apart soft silky teddy bear, “l’objet fétiche de Natacha, son confident, dont la douceur, ‘soyeuse’ elle aussi, rappelle et remplace la peau maternelle” (35).

Unlike Enfance, Tropismes does not present softness in a positive light. In T19 there is soft skin but in an unpleasant context. Here false kisses and embraces completely enclose a troubled child-like person who meekly and politely offers his smooth cheeks for them. The text opens with: “Il était lisse et plat, deux faces planes – ses joues que tour à tour il leur offrait et où ils déposaient, de leurs lèvres tendues, un baiser” (T 111). It closes with: “Il ne pouvait que tourner vers eux poliment les deux faces lisses de ses joues, l’une après l’autre, pour leur baiser” (T 112). In his weakness he turns to the “ils” for their false love. Silky smooth skin is no longer very appealing. It is losing its power. This is the same expression of the waning appeal of soft skin found in Enfance where the mother is portrayed in a negative light consistent with the child’s growing critical awareness of her short-comings.

Throughout Enfance education is shown as an antidote to Natacha’s entrapment, created by the deprivation of the mother’s love. During the last summer just before her start at the lycée, Natacha embraces not her mother but the nourishing sap hopefully transmitted through the mossy soil on which she is lying and the limitless possibilities

suggested by the big open sky above her: “[J]e colle mon dos, mes bras en croix le plus fort que je peux contre la terre couverte de mousse pour que toutes les sèves me pénètrent, qu’elles se répandent dans tout mon corps, je regarde le ciel comme je ne l’ai jamais regardé. . . je me fonds en lui, je n’ai pas de limite, pas de fin” (E 275). As in the “joie” episode, her happiness is expressed here by merging into her surroundings. We understand that Natacha has a future through her studies and that she can continue to find this more modest happiness through them – more modest because, no matter how she excels, the painful longing for her mother remains unfulfilled.

This theme of knowledge as power is present in both works. In Enfance it is presented as a counter-balance to the theme of betrayal and an antidote to its pain. Natacha does find her “way out” through excellence at school and through the respect and independence it will bring her. Alone, enclosed in her room doing her homework, “j’accomplis un devoir que tout le monde respecte. . . je contrains ma main et elle m’obéit de mieux en mieux. . .” (E 134). This is also a point in Enfance where the world of logic, education, and the security they provide is associated with the father. According to Denès, this “[l]ien invisible mais indéfectible unit les deux êtres qui se ressemblent moralement le plus, par l’intensité de leur sensibilité vraie, par leur intériorité, par leur intelligence, par l’importance de ‘l’autre vie’ qu’est l’usine pour un et l’école pour l’enfant” (43). This clear-headed independence is in distinct contrast to the painful muddled longing for the mother and is Natacha’s escape from it. This liberation and sense of belonging to a world of one’s own making is as close as she gets to happiness.

In Tropismes knowledge is also the escape theme. The “elle” in T11 has a compelling need for “[t]oute ‘l’intellectualité.’” Her need is shown as urgent: “Il la lui fallait. Pour elle. Pour elle, car elle savait maintenant le véritable prix des choses. Il lui fallait l’intellectualité” (T 70). T11 describes an active, aggressive need for the pursuit of knowledge in direct contrast to the feelings of victimization and imposed suffering referred to previously in the other texts. This vignette, T11, starts with a reference to hidden knowledge that is scented and sniffed. The unnamed female of the vignette “avait flairé où se cachait ce qui devait être pour tous le trésor véritable” (T 69). Natacha in Enfance that day before the train ride to Paris had sniffed at knowledgeable good-natured Kolia, who was writing in his study surrounded by his books. T11 is also a reference to public school education, the above-mentioned “trésor véritable” so valued by Natacha (E 174) and her father in Enfance but disdained by her mother (E 251-52).

T11 continues. “[S]ur tout cela elle se promenait, flairait partout, soulevait tout de ses doigts aux ongles carrés” (T 70). In Enfance the shape of Kolia’s nails is referred to in the context of that farewell when Natacha says, “quand j’ai regardé encore une fois la forme de ses ongles. . .” (E 106). The next paragraph in T11: “Lui cacher cela – vite – vite avant qu’elle ne le flaire, l’emporter, le soustraire à son contact avilissant,” continues with the image of knowledge being valuable and exclusive, something to be hidden from vile contact. Natacha is avid for knowledge and an excellent student. Her step-mother resents her ability and perceives her as unfairly appropriating academic advantages. She firmly excludes Natacha from the English lessons given to Lili, her own daughter (E 261-63). She withholds certain food perceived as beneficial to learning from her, such as the

dish of brains, reserving them for the high-strung Lili (E 143-44). Natacha's own mother had little formal education and even less regard for it. Natacha obtained knowledge despite objections and obstacles.

In T11 a nameless female with an insatiable thirst for knowledge is compared to ugly parasitic creatures. She fiercely absorbs information: "On ne l'en délogerait plus. Elle écoutait, elle absorbait, gloutonne, jouisseuse et âpre" (T 69-70). Of it all she says, "C'est si beau," in direct opposition to the ugliness described (T 71). In Enfance Natacha's mother "avec une sorte de bonheur" uses the same phrase, "C'est si beau," about the ugly words "courroux" and its Russian equivalent, "gniev," as she unloads her icy wrath on her 11-year-old daughter (E 258). Natacha accepts with great pain and feelings of helplessness her mother's cruel and selfish rejection, opting for lonely independence and the beginning of her own empowerment. It is cold comfort. Natacha sadly pulls away: "je me recule toujours plus loin, là où les paroles qui vont venir ne pourront plus m'atteindre. . . mais maman ne s'en aperçoit pas" (E 255). As an answer the pursuit of knowledge is incomplete, still a betrayal. In the escape into knowledge and intellectualism of T11 there is a sense of self-preservation, of desperate greed, of triumph, but no sign of warmth.

T12 again addresses control through knowledge by demystifying Proust and Rimbaud, reducing these literary giants to the everyday. The college professor says, "je les tiens dans le creux de ma main" like a creator (T 76). He claims that they are hardly different from "ces intelligents, . . . curieux et amusants loufoques" who come and tell him their interminable stories "pour que je m'occupe d'eux, les apprécie et les rassure"

(T 76). The professor has all the power and control here. There is no trace of warmth or love, only of disarming an enemy, which is self-preservation. T12 also dethrones Proust and Rimbaud who are left to sleepwalk or wander aimlessly at large (T 77), close on the heels of text in T11, debunking literature with imagery of sucking Mallarmé and Rimbaud dry: “[R]épandant leur suc sur les coins de Rimbaud, suçant du Mallarmé” (T 71). Furthermore, T11 ends with a tongue-in-cheek description of the quester for knowledge: “[elle] ouvra[it] d’un air pur et inspiré ses yeux où elle allumait une ‘étincelle de divinité’” (T 71). This conveys a grim amusement which harbors dissatisfaction with this empowerment, again revealing a betrayal within the very triumph.

Associated with the notion of triumph is that of a goal reached which generally is associated with some sort of happiness. Since in this case the triumph is presented as flawed, it seems appropriate to associate it with the modest “joie” of Enfance referred to earlier.

The “joie” episode occurred when Natacha was very little. She was sitting “au Luxembourg, sur un banc du jardin anglais” with her father and Véra and a story book when all of a sudden she felt a sensation of violent but peaceful oneness with her surroundings. Sarraute makes sure the reader understands that this is a powerful event with a happy connotation, but she also very explicitly qualifies it as modest: “ ‘Joie,’ oui, peut-être. . . ce petit mot modeste, tout simple, peut effleurer sans grand danger. . .” (E 66-67). She discards “bonheur,” “félicité,” “exaltation,” and “extase,” and settles on the word “joie” even though it cannot contain the intensity of this experience that is

flowing out of her and the surroundings, making her one with them, and that eludes definition (E 66-67).

The choice of the word seems incorrect, since “joie” is a stronger description of happiness than “bonheur.” Sarraute seems to be referring to the modest physical size of the word “joie,” however, rather than to its precise definition. She might also be referring to the compactness of the word’s sound. Both these considerations are of particular importance to this author.

Sarraute refers to this event two more times in Enfance. The second time she makes what seems to be a casual reference to looking forward to seeing her father and “la gentille dame . . . auprès de moi sur le banc à ce moment-là. . . quand cela s’était produit. . . quand cela m’avait emplie, irradiant de partout, de la lumière, des petits murs de briques, des espaliers, des marronniers en fleurs. . . cela me revenait encore parfois. . .” (E 105). The third mention of this event is when she is remembering a time when Véra looked as relaxed and gay as she had “quand elle était assise auprès de mon père et de moi au Luxembourg, devant les pelouses du jardin anglais. . .” (E 247). One can deduce how anxious Natacha must have always felt as a child if such a simple feeling of peace and security meant so much. This feeling can also be viewed as a point de repère for the child in her sea of malaise.

The presence of Véra, the step-mother, with whom she had a mixed relationship and who is the “elle” in each of these references to the “joie” episode, subtly underscores the flawed nature of this happiness. A rosy park bench setting is also associated with the mother’s “courroux-gnief” utterance and all it implied made just prior to her vengeful

departure. That also took place on a park bench in a garden or a square with the sun setting and Natacha sitting next to her: “[J]e regarde dans la lumière du soleil couchant son joli profil doré et rose” (E 257-58). These negative associations serve to draw attention to the compromised nature of the “joie.”

In Tropismes the closest thing to happiness is described in T18, with its English cottage where a woman sits, solidly and stiffly, reading an English magazine, anticipating her cup of tea: “Elle sait que dans quelques minutes on va sonner la cloche pour le thé.” Another woman, predictably and on schedule, will be preparing it: “Elle sait que bientôt il sera temps de faire griller les ‘buns’ et de sonner la cloche pour le thé” (T 108). This scene takes place in the outskirts of London. It is the only vignette where a location is named. It is also the only vignette where a character is named. The atmosphere is secure enough in this vignette to allow such definition. Here we find quietude and security and peaceful predictability with a hint of rigid control, but certainly no exuberant happiness. In both works there is an English garden as well as the presence of English reading material, subtly tying this modest happiness to the theme of education. It was probably not a coincidence that this was the last tropism in the 1939 edition – a kind of happy ending, perhaps (CDH 26).

In this comparison of episodes in Tropismes and Enfance there are some points to note. One is that Sarraute’s characters are very fluid. Their gender is unimportant. This is also true of the narrator role in Enfance, where there are both a masculine and a feminine narrator and both are the same person. In her interview with John Taylor the author denies her own ego: “Oh, ça ne m’a jamais intéressé d’être ‘quelqu’un’, d’avoir un

‘moi.’” Taylor said that Sarraute considered herself to be not a "person" but rather a "vessel of psychic states."

Another point to remember is that a given tropism is not always fixed to a specific set of circumstances, as previously mentioned. Although Jefferson is looking at the fiction versus autobiography aspect of Enfance, she brings up a salient point in the argument that Enfance rewrites Tropismes: “in Sarraute’s case . . . truth-claims are psychological or experiential rather than anecdotal” (150). In an interview with Arnaud Rykner, Sarraute clearly explains how she draws on lived experience and represents it in fictional scenarios:

Quelquefois je pars d’un tropisme vécu, mais que je déplace: je le prends dans d’autres circonstances, je crée autour de lui un milieu ambiant dans lequel il pourra s’épanouir et qui n’est pas celui où je l’ai personnellement vécu. [. . .] Prenez le texte sur l’angoisse dans Portrait d’un inconnu. Le fait que sa fille lui vole du savon réveille le personnage en pleine nuit. Dans la réalité, je n’ai jamais expérimenté cela, de près ou de loin. Ce que j’ai expérimenté, c’est cette sorte d’angoisse qui tout à coup se fixe sur une chose quelconque. Cherchant à rendre cette sensation, je me suis décidée pour la barre de savon qui en elle-même ne répond à aucune expérience personnelle. (Jefferson 150)

Thus, knowing how Sarraute uses a tropism makes it easier for the reader to recognize the similarities between the figures and events in Tropismes and in Enfance.

Despite their very different presentation, at their essence the two works present the same subject matter and themes. Enfance describes a betrayal, which is in essence the missing mother's love. In every text in Tropismes there is also a kind of betrayal or deception. Often the texts are sad, sometimes urgent, always negative. Something is not what it seems; things are always falling short. In Enfance this is how the child, Natacha, experienced her childhood, unwittingly taught by the person who meant the most to her, that is, her mother. She longed for not just the missing mother but the missing love of this distant mother. This mother's words said that she loved her but her actions belied them. The child clung to the words and to the hope of the words, experiencing the pain of the absence and the lie, but refusing to admit the discrepancy. All this is in Tropismes but none of it is labeled. Enfance does that.

CHAPTER III

WRITING STRATEGIES

The writing strategies that Sarraute uses that are common to both works are an important component in the argument that Enfance rewrites Tropismes. This is because they are enmeshed with the causes of the feelings that are associated with the tropisms as described in Enfance. These writing strategies mimic lessons logically learned from an absent mother's empty words of love and a loving father's silent presence. Whether Enfance is fact or fiction, it relates this connection. Years earlier Tropismes, using the same strategies, told of the same feelings and even used the same references. Hewitt too sees a connection between Sarraute's writing and the influences she experienced in childhood, and suggests "without setting out to prove a causal relationship" that Sarraute's "complex difficult rapport with her mother . . . is articulated in her tropisms" and that her "identification with her father and her desire for her mother become inscribed in her writing as themes and as style" (72).

These writing strategies, like the tropisms they seek to portray, are characterized by elements of the elusive. They include use of fragmentation, the indefinite, contingent association, antithesis, repetition, sound, rhythm, gesture, and metaphor. Most of these strategies have been discussed by Sarraute critics. The point of this chapter is to identify examples from both works and show the relationship between the strategy and its

purported childhood tropistic experience in order to draw attention to the parallels in the two works.

According to Tutuc, Sarraute “considers [Tropismes] to be the first written expression of her effort to represent the domain of the amorphous, vague and pre-verbal states of consciousness. . .” (47). Correspondingly, at the very beginning of Enfance we learn that everything in her childhood was elusive, vague, uncomfortable, disconcerting, undefined, and unsaid:

Tu n’as vraiment pas oublié comment c’était là-bas? comme là-bas tout fluctue, se transforme, s’échappe. . . tu avances à tâtons, toujours cherchant, te tendant. . . vers quoi? Qu’est-ce que c’est? ça ne ressemble à rien. . . personne n’en parle. . . ça se dérobe, tu l’agrippes comme tu peux, tu le pousses. . . où? n’importe où, pourvu que ça trouve un milieu propice où ça se développe, où ça parvienne peut-être à vivre. . . (E 8)

Clearly, Sarraute is telling us that Natacha learned the difficulty of definition in her childhood. Sarraute’s writing, where the indefinite “ça” flourishes, incorporates the spirit of this description of childhood. In both works the circuitous writing strategies described below contribute to that incorporation.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation in Enfance occurs by means of the presentation of significant discrete episodes that reveal some of her childhood, snap-shot style. This, of course, leaves out what is not in the pictures. As Himy-Piéri writes, “Ce processus de

fragmentation s'inscrit dans une incertitude généralisée. Il n'y a pas dans Enfance un contenu clairement déterminé à exprimer (l'enfance). Au contraire, tout vient signifier que le contenu même du récit est obscur" (79). Out of this obscurity, moments of vivid feeling surface. They are the tropisms and are expressed in the present tense. In Enfance Natacha's childhood is presented as a patchwork made up of different households, countries, customs, and languages. Demarcations are emotional as well as geographic. Walls of animosity between the patches reinforced the disconnection. For example, her mother's name was not to be mentioned at her father's. During the years that her parents shared her custody, he never went to get her at her mother's. Occasionally her uncle acted as go-between. Otherwise she could not say how she was delivered from one household to the other nor could she imagine a situation where her parents would see or talk to each other. Natacha's mother sends her post cards – fragments of her life – written documents of malaise for the child.

Further fragmentation of presentation in Enfance is evidenced by there being three Sarrautes: an adult female narrator, an adult male critic narrator, and the child she was. In Tropismes the figures are various manifestations of Natacha, as has been shown in Chapter II.

Sarraute's sentence structure is also in fragments. For example, in T4 of Tropismes there are sentence fragments strung together to make one very long run-on sentence starting, "Mais non! ah! c'était fou, cela ne l'intéresse pas ou cela lui a déplu," and ending eight lines later (T 28). There are also unfinished sentences: "Mais oui, le ton enjoué, oui, encore, doucement, sur la pointe des pieds, la plaisanterie et l'ironie" (T 28),

though far fewer than in Enfance, where they predominate. Denès described Sarraute's writing as "une dentelle de parole's" (64)⁴ whose placement on the page seems to cause them, visually, to surge up, like the tropisms themselves.

Fragmentation is a form of expressing absence and the childhood of Enfance is one in which Natacha constantly experienced and suffered from the absence of her mother. Tropismes is a collection of 24 prose poem-like texts. They are a literary interpretation of fragments of her life, as is Enfance.

The Indefinite

In these two works the indefinite is manifested by the use of ellipses, the impersonal form of verbs, and pronouns and other words of indefinite meaning. Definition avoidance also occurs by describing what something is not as well as by outright silence.

Sarraute scatters ellipses throughout Tropismes and uses them overwhelmingly in Enfance. Though indicating something that is not said, these three little dots suggest some kind of unidentified awareness, or anticipation, or insinuation. They indicate a loaded silence. They indicate tension. The result is that information has to be surmised by the reader. That insinuation brings the so-called facts of Enfance closer to those of Tropismes.

The malaise so characteristic of Tropismes is partly achieved by inadequately defining or by not defining characters and issues. De-emphasis of character description is

⁴ Denès credits Philippe Lejeune with this expression.

a hallmark of the “Nouveau Roman” movement, and Sarraute’s version is in evidence here. Instead of by name, she refers to people using personal pronouns. She refers to things or issues with the demonstrative pronouns, “cela” and “ça,” and with “en” as an indefinite personal pronoun or as an adverb. She keeps things vague with “on,” indicating the impersonal form of the verb. Almost everyone in Tropismes is an “il,” “lui,” or “elle,” or part of some group of “ils,” “elles,” or “eux.” For example, in T1 the reader, from the last paragraph only, can deduce that the crowd of unnamed “ils” are parents accompanying children, or at least some of them are. T2 focuses on an unnamed female housekeeper type of individual and on an “il” who is a member of that household. The “ils” of T3 seem to be referring to immigrants. Unnamed “elles” of T4 are forever dancing attendance on some unnamed “il” of a task-master.

Sarraute further minimizes definition of the characters as she slides from one pronoun to another without warning, as in T23 where we are led along from the “ils” who are “laid” and “plat” to those who “ne demandaient rien, rien d’autre que de temps en temps la voir,” while on the way to the “ils” who weren’t scared and to those who “resserraient le lien un peu plus fort,” and then to those who “font la ronde gentiment,” all while remembering to wonder who the “la” could be (T 133-35).

In T7 the “ils” also slip from one identity to another. There are the “ils” and “eux” who “ne s’en préoccupaient pas,” who “continuaient.” We are not told what they are not worried about. In “[t]ant pis pour eux,” the “elle” is probably referring to the group who is present, but might possibly be referring to the next “ils” who should come in for a minute anyway: “[Q]u’ils entrent pour un instant, Van Gogh, Utrillo ou un autre”

(T 46). Are these new “ils” the paintings or the painters or the idea of either? It doesn’t really matter. The objective of describing strongly felt apprehension about something undefined has been met.

She uses other impersonal articles and pronouns. In Tropismes issues, subjects, or topics are referred to as “cela” as in “ils connaissaient tout cela,” and “quant à tout cela” (T 134).

In Enfance the author uses impersonal terms to refer to apprehension and to painful issues. The opening lines question whether or not the author wants to revisit the disturbing “ça” of her childhood where “rien” was stable and where “personne” talked about the “ça.” The reader has to deduce the identity of the “je” or “tu” of the narrators’ dialogue discussing this. Often the narrators approach touchy issues with “il est étrange” and “il est curieux.” Sarraute uses “tout” to slip in a reference to the non-dit of Natacha’s life with “Avec tout ce qui s’y trouve” (E 184).

In Natacha’s violent reaction to the maid’s comment, “Quel malheur quand même de ne pas avoir de mère,” she first refers to the situation labeled by the maid as “ça,” and “cette chose” and says “je suis dedans” (in “it,” understood), “ce qui avait fait couler les larmes” (E 121), referring to the previously-mentioned wrenching sorrow on the Russian train. Here ambivalence is created with “dedans,” an adverb of concrete meaning, but the “it” is not defined, the location is not described, and we are once again tossed into the realm referred to by the critic narrator in the opening pages of Enfance. Furthermore, her determined refusal to accept the maid’s logical comment is bolstered by the distance created through the use of the impersonal and indefinite “ça” in “je repousse ça” (E 122).

This episode reveals how and why Natacha clung to non-definition as a means of avoiding and even denying her painful reality. Though the explanation is missing in Tropismes, the strategy of using words of vague or inadequate definition is a central characteristic of that first work.

The indefinite is also delivered paradoxically by enumeration. This technique, which typically would render a text clearer, instead actually contributes to the sense of the indefinite according to Himy-Piéri (80), who cites the passage about the wordless experience of the rosy glow in the Luxembourg Gardens. There the vagueness is rephrased many times: “jamais plus cette sorte d’intensité-là . . . parce que je suis dans cela, dans le petit mur rose, les fleurs des espaliers, des arbres, la pelouse, l’air qui vibre” (E 67). Sarraute wants the reader to become undefined along with Natacha as she feels she is dissolving into the rosy glow. In Tropismes the strategy occurs as well, as in T11 where an unnamed female’s greed for knowledge is described. Here the notion of tightly held acquisition expressed by “parasites assoiffés et sans merci,” “sangsues fixées,” and “limaces collées” changes to one of amorphous diffusion with repeated images of seeping, spreading, smearing slime represented by “répandant leur suc” and “se passant les uns aux autres et engluant . . .” (T 71).

The indefinite is also shown by allowing for multiple interpretations or conclusions. By using two narrators Sarraute can distance herself from hard facts, leaving the two narrators to disagree with each other about their significance. An example concerns the interpretation of being pushed away by Natacha’s mother when, as a small child, she wanted to protect her in the playful altercation with Kolia (E 74-76).

Hewitt says regarding the two narrators, “The vacillating point of view destabilizes attitudes towards the past and casts doubt on evaluations of people and events that the voices remember. The meanings of any given episode always hover in the interstices of dialogue” (73). Not now, not then, does Sarraute have to commit to one reality. This method parallels the confusion of the lived experience and in fact contributes to a deeper understanding of it on the part of the reader. In both Tropismes and Enfance Sarraute wants to tell the reader something she does not or perhaps dares not acknowledge or at least not easily acknowledge, and proceeds to do so in a hide-and-seek way. In Enfance the tale is disconnected. The reader has to wait for things to be explained or to figure them out for him/herself, even the date of Natacha’s birth: “[I]l y a si longtemps que je ne l’ai pas vue, je n’avais que huit ans. . . – Huit ans et demi exactement, c’était en février 1909. – Et le 18 juillet, j’ai eu onze ans. . .” This information is not provided until page 249, almost at the end of the book. In Tropismes the tale, such as it is, is disconnected, and everything has to be understood from suggestion and innuendo.

Sarraute will say what something is not rather than what it is. For example, attempting to find the correct word to describe the “joie” episode in Enfance, Sarraute discards “bonheur,” “félicité,” and “exaltation,” before finally, maybe, settling on “joie” (E 66-67). In T5 of Tropismes she describes a staircase in terms of what is missing, “un escalier qui ne semblait pas avoir gardé la moindre trace des gens qui l’avait parcouru, pas le moindre souvenir de leur passage” (T 35).

Sarraute doesn’t give any name to that which is in every text of Tropismes. Every text is a kind of parable for the underlying, the unuttered, yet the message remains the

same. In Enfance Natacha says, “Je ne donne à cela aucun nom, je sens confusément que c’est là, en lui, enfoui, comprimé” (E 127). Consistent with this logic then, total silence could be seen as the ultimate indefinite. Indeed, Sarraute harnesses it to convey information to the reader. Since meaningful silence is associated with the father figure, it is not surprising to observe that it is used to convey the antidote to malaise. The closest thing to happiness in Enfance is the wordless experience of the “joie” episode in the Luxembourg Gardens that Natacha experienced while sitting with her father and Véra. T18 is the only text in Tropismes with mildly happy overtones. It too is a silent scene describing a secure pleasant cottage with “rideaux de percale, avec la petite pelouse par derrière,” inhabited by three separate, solid, independently functioning individuals: the owner, the cat, and the housekeeper (T 107).

Consistent with the position regarding the influence of Sarraute’s family interactions on her writing, it should be noted that it was through silence that her father expressed his affection and regard for both her and her dead uncle. In the scene where her father shows Natacha the postcard found on his body, the critic narrator interjects, “Il ne t’appelait plus jamais Tachok. . .” (E 153-54). This was the affectionate diminutive he had been using for them both. Overt emotion is stifled: “J’ai envie de pleurer, il me semble qu’il a envie de pleurer comme moi . . . je n’ose pas” (E 154). Silent self-control reigns. The father is “distant, fermé” (E 154). Natacha learns the power of unspoken words. Sarraute, the author, is telling us a story about how she learned this technique.

Tropismes is characterized by an inherent silence – the silence of the ever-present non-dit. When, in Enfance, the unstated is actually named, for example, by the

commiserating maid who tells her “Quel malheur de ne pas avoir de mère,” Natacha realizes that this maid knows the truth. She can see “malheur” on her face. But Natacha cannot face the truth. Initially she is devastated, then pulls herself together, and her response is one of determined denial. She refuses “malheur,” “cette carapace,” “ça” – rationalizing it away, though perhaps not entirely convincingly.

In hindsight, the hard protecting surface of the “carapace” can be recognized in the image of T23’s perfectly smooth pebbles, devoid of any physical definition that might provide a grip or toehold: “[T]out lisses comme des galets, tout polis, sans une entaille, sans une prise.” They are hiding “tout cela,” here referring to “les clichés, les copies” of literature that is false or not alive (T 134). The carapace also covers the clichés and lies of the mother’s love, perhaps also not alive. Sarraute and the child Natacha are much more at home in the undefined. That is not to imply they are happy there.

Contingent Association

Sarraute creates an atmosphere using contingent association. Tutuc uses this term to describe the means whereby the value of a word (or words) is transferred to other words or phrases, or applied to characters, simply because of their physical proximity on the page leaving the reader to deduce an association (51-52). Accordingly, Sarraute does not need to straightforwardly say that the family outing scene is inadequate or disappointing or sad. Instead she uses vocabulary ascribing those conditions to the setting with the words “broussailleux,” “aigret,” “fautif,” “lourde,” “âcre,” “inquiétants,” “chétif,” and “morne,” allowing the reader to draw his or her own conclusions (T 104). In T5 Sarraute heightens the tension being experienced by an “elle”

sitting alone on the side of her bed, taking up as little space as possible, “attendant que quelque chose éclate, s’abatte sur elle dans ce silence menaçant” (T 33). Images of immobility and of hostile territory are conjured up by “une lumière éclatante et dure” and a “prairie pétrifiée sous le soleil” (T 33-34). She continues with: “Étendu dans l’herbe sous le soleil torride, on reste sans bouger, on épie, on attend” (T 34). She names disturbing sounds, “le grincement d’une chaise,” “le claquement d’une porte,” “le cri aigu des cigales,” “le petit bruit [de] la clef dans la serrure,” all signifying threats (T 33-34). The reader must make the association between these disturbing descriptions and the situation of the “elle.”

Another example of this insinuation by association is given in T8 where the lifeless atmosphere and heavy mournful aspect of the houses surrounding them transfer their value to the man and little boy who are walking along the street in front of them, “L’air était immobile et gris, sans odeur, et les maisons s’élevaient de chaque côté de la rue, les masses plates, fermées et mornes des maisons les entouraient. . . . Et le petit sentait que quelque chose pesait sur lui” (T 52-53).

Sarraute also uses contingent association in Enfance to have the reader make a connection or draw a conclusion she does not straightforwardly state. Two seemingly unconnected events are shown to be directly connected largely because of their physical proximity to each other in the book. For example, immediately following the episode of the theft in the candy store (E 155-56), we are suddenly launched without explanation into an altogether different memory where Natacha anguishes over having her mother’s mark on her. This is triggered by a maid’s remark about incorrectly handling a pair of scissors

(E 159-60). It is only remembering the nature of the father's response to the shop-lifting, which suddenly changed from perfunctory admonition to intense anger as soon as the guilty child said, "C'est parce que 'j'en avais tellement envie. . .'", that the connection becomes clear (E 157). With these words the reader suddenly understands that what is at issue is the mother's irresponsible willfulness. Contingent association is in keeping with Sarraute's overall approach to, or rather distance from, her literary expression.

Antithesis

Since antithesis is a balanced juxtaposition of direct contrasts, it is an apt means of echoing the reality of the childhood perceptions in Enfance. Denès says that the childhood described in Enfance was robbed of its fundamental insouciance (32). Natacha's lived reality of betrayal and the verbal professions of maternal love were definitely at odds. Somehow these destabilizing contradictory elements had to be kept in balance. To write the non-verbal is a kind of antithesis also, since the concept itself of expressing in words that which cannot be said is a balancing of opposites. Sarraute does exactly that, however. In Tropismes she presents us with innocent everyday scenes behind which lurk constant falseness, danger, frustration, and sadness.

Sarraute uses antithesis to express ambivalence and thereby creates an atmosphere of discomfort. In T17 she pairs opposites, such as "avidité morne," "sourire aigri," "compagnon . . . solitaire," and "printemps chétif," driving home the feeling of uncertainty. The last three examples emphasize the negative, since "sourire," "compagnon," and "printemps" all have some connotation of something pleasant. Betrayal and disappointment occur when the nouns are coupled with an adjective that

robs them of their inherent positivity. “Avidité” conjures up an idea of intense lively strength but “morne” kills it. This can be seen as an echo of the emotional conflicts in the author’s description of childhood in Enfance, where betrayal was denied with loving words even while it was occurring. What was real? Which opposite was true? Or were they both true simultaneously? The dilemma lives on in this writing strategy.

Repetition, Sound and Rhythm

Sound and rhythm as a writing strategy are used extensively throughout Tropismes. In addition to the contribution of their own musical beauty, they reinforce the message that Sarraute is delivering. She creates an atmosphere with sounds that are not spoken words, as well as by the repetition of words and syllables. This technique is related to her awareness of and interest in sound revealed in Enfance.

T7 describes a self-satisfied little whistle, an audible form of non-verbal expression: “[I]l faisait entendre parfois, plissant la joue, pressant la langue contre ses dents de côté . . . un bruit particulier, une sorte de sifflement qui avait toujours chez lui un petit ton satisfait, insouciant” (T 46). According to Curren, this detailed description “provides the reader with a virtual reenactment, almost obliging him to recreate the particular sound for himself. In this way the reader is encouraged to use his own physical memory – in some cases perhaps even recreating the sound – thus deepening his experience of the text” (112). Echoing T7 is the sound made by Lili’s self-assured, worldly-wise babysitter “lorsque relevant et plissant la peau d’une de ses joues maigres, elle faisait passer l’air entre ses dents de côté avec un petit claquement qui semblait signifier ‘J’en connais un rayon. . . Je connais la vie. Je ne m’en laisse pas conter’”

(E 161). Just as in the earlier work, this gesture and accompanying little noise is an expression of being comfortable with oneself or a situation. From her child's position, Natacha observed and listened. As an author, Sarraute used both the technique and the insight she described in Enfance.

In Enfance we encounter other situations where words are said or written for reasons other than their meaning. Véra made a funny little sound, “accompagné de ce petit bruit sec, km, km, que Véra émettait” (E 200). There were the non-understood or partly understood words her mother was saying or reading that were so comforting just for the sound of the mother's voice and for their contribution to the child's enjoyment of the reassuring security derived by leaning against the mother's body (E 20). The meaning of the words was of no importance whatsoever. Another example is the “soleil . . . solnitze” chant on the train. Expressing an opposite meaning, the mother said “Dieu que c'est beau. . .” about “gniev” and “courroux” (E 258). In the last two cases, especially the latter, the words would sting. As Natacha gets older she will be forced to focus on the meaning of words rather than on their auditory comfort, and it will become more traumatic to separate the sound from the meaning.

In T10 Sarraute uses repetition of the endings for the imperfect indicative tense⁵ and the present participle, that is the “ait” and “ant” sounds: “elles parlaient, parlaient . . . répétant . . . les retournant, puis les retournant encore . . . les pétrissant, les pétrissant, roulant sans cesse . . . avaient extradite de leur vie . . . appelaient . . . pétrissant, l'étirant,

⁵ Anguita sees Sarraute's use of the imperfect tense in Enfance as a means of ferrying the reader in and out of the tropism itself. For Anguita the imperfect tense aligns itself with the memories that trigger the tropism.

la roulant,” to deliver disappointment in the form of “une petite boulette grise,” which is all that is left of the banal chatter about such things as “l’ensemble bleu et gris” (T 64-65). This can be seen to be an expression of Natacha’s childhood where truth was not spoken though words were.

In T11 repetition of the “é” sounds in the passage “parasites assoiffées et sans merci, sangsues fixées . . . limaces collées . . . répandant leur suc” reinforces the images of absorption and consumption in the sarcastic message describing an “elle” who is gluttonously and single-mindedly devouring the contents of books. More “é” sounds follow, “d’un air pur et inspiré” and “étincelle de divinité,” describing the same person but now in a contradictory way. Between these two extremes we have a break in the repetitive sounds with “‘C’est si beau,’ disait-elle en ouvrant ses yeux,” which serves as a kind of fulcrum balancing the opposing characteristics of the “elle” (T 71). This again relates to the ambivalent nature of Sarraute’s description of childhood reality.

In T8 Sarraute uses repetition to mimic the typical sound of an adult talking to a young child, “tu n’auras plus de grand-père, il ne sera pas là, ton grand-père, car il est vieux, tu sais, très vieux” (T 52). Then she uses repetition to emphasize the hammering in of the conventional safety lesson: “il lui apprenait, en traversant, à attendre longtemps, à faire bien attention, attention, attention, surtout très attention, en traversant les rues” (T 52). The last sentence containing “avec précaution et bien regarder d’abord à droite, puis à gauche, et faire bien attention, très attention,” insistently harps on the helpless, captive child who “trottinait doucement et très sagement, en donnant docilement sa petite main, en opinant de la tête très raisonnablement” (T 53). The innocent sing-song sounds hide

an ominous trap. In Enfance the word game Natacha played on the Russian train hid a similar trap.

The repeated words in the description of the mechanical doll's eyes in T1, "s'allumaient, s'éteignaient, s'allumaient, s'éteignaient, s'allumaient, s'éteignaient . . . s'allumaient de nouveau et de nouveau s'éteignaient," mimic a mesmerizing and therefore controlling on/off signaling. Repetition here insists on a child's helplessness and victimization. As noted previously, this child is Natacha.

T10 has "une volière pépiante," with women's chatter that sounds like birds' chirping and twittering, saying, "C'est une femme d'intérieur qu'il lui faut. . . . Mais non, je vous le dis. C'est une femme d'intérieur qu'il lui faut. . . D'intérieur. . . D'intérieur . . ." (T 64). The very sound of the French words themselves, musical and bird-like, reinforces the image of meaninglessness. Words and phrases are repeated throughout T2 such as, "Ils sont avares, avares tous, et ils ont de l'argent, ils ont de l'argent," "surtout, surtout ne pas leur faire sentir, ne pas leur faire sentir," and "[s]e plier, se plier" (T 16-17). They deliver the obsessive permeating nature of the text. Tutuc notes the rhythm created by the repetition of words and phrases in the passage starting with "[e]t il sentait filtrer de la cuisine la pensée humble et crasseuse," saying, "[it] conveys, in its entirety, the image of a fast and fervent dance-like movement: it starts with a sort of time-marking or trampling step, then it goes round and round, in circles, it becomes more and more rapid, and continues to the point of dizziness and exhaustion" (Tutuc 50).

T9 also delivers a rhythm, going faster and faster, using repetition of words of urgency and short phrases, like a beat, alternating between "à" and "de," then hammering

on the “de” to build to a crescendo, starting with “Il se mettait à parler, à parler sans arrêt,” before dropping to the soft ending, “toute douce, toute plate, se tortillant” (T 58-59).

In T15 there is more hammering repetition, this time by an old man. Tutuc says this is how the girl would have heard the words – that the presentation here is different from the way the original scene must have occurred (57). This brings us to how Natacha would have heard words. We know that how the words sounded was an important part of how Natacha related to words. She probably had an ear for the sounds. She was bilingual in Russian and French from early childhood, and she picked up German when she was very young, and English, indirectly, even surreptitiously, from Lili’s governesses. We can deduce that sound and how words sounded was unusually important for this child. Also, it wasn’t much to her advantage to examine too closely the deeper meanings of words, as they would only cause confusion and hurt. Plus, she tells us that she took words at face value.

Finally, the importance Sarraute attached to repetition can be deduced from her use of it in Enfance to describe the “joie” scene in the Luxembourg garden previously mentioned, and to refer to it not once but three times.

Gestures

As a means of communication gesture is silent and eloquent. Not only is it a logical choice as a writing strategy of the non-dit, but it is a significant emotional feature of the childhood related in Enfance. Gesture is a fundamental means of communication that is learned at a very early age, probably even before a child learns to speak. It taps

into “the experiential, visceral understanding that each reader knows from inhabiting his body. . . . Gesture becomes part of an evocative body language that transcends the very words that describe it because it translates the action represented by speech into visual, physical terms” (Curren 153). Thus, the movement of the tropism, “des mouvements indéfinissables” (ES 8), recognized by Sarraute from a very early age, is consistent with her identification of the concept in these terms. That the message of the tropism is an alert about something most often negative is also consistent with the events, revealed as tropisms, in Enfance’s story of childhood.

The meaning of gestures can be complex. Gesture without accompanying words is usually straightforward, but gesture accompanying words can emphasize or even negate them, as well as create any degree of ambivalence between the extremes of a totally obvious contradiction to an extremely subtle disturbance. It is this complexity that reflects so well Natacha’s childhood.

The presence of gesture in both Tropismes and Enfance will be addressed. Those in the latter work will reveal where, how, and why she learned to be on the alert for them. She recognized that they are subtle, unspoken, but eloquent, and she harnessed them as expressions of emotion in her writing, just as she understood them from her experience of family interactions.

Given the communicative power of gestures even at a young age, we should not be surprised that, at the very beginning of Enfance, it is through gestures and movement that the critic narrator so forcefully makes the reader know how childhood actually was

for Natacha, where “tout fluctue, se transforme, s’échappe. . . tu avances à tâtons, toujours cherchant, te tendant. . .” (E 8).

In that milieu Natacha learned rejection through her mother’s gestures. When her daughter was very young, the mother, during the hairdresser’s doll incident discussed previously, “lâche [s]a main ou la tient moins fort” (E 95). On another occasion she excludes the child from the playful mock fighting in which Natacha had tried to side with her mother against the step-father: “[E]lle m’a repoussée . . . je me suis écartée” (E 74). There are also the mother’s gestures during the train ride incident, already presented under the discussion of themes. During the very sad vengeful departure incident Natacha says “elle me roule . . . elle me pousse vers celle qui la remplace” (E 256). Natacha’s reaction is described as “médusée par l’étonnement” and with “soubresauts de révolte” (E 257). We know that Natacha’s mother is self-absorbed because she has a habit of looking at herself in the mirror (E 93) and of not looking at her daughter when she speaks to her (E 20).

Her father’s gestures, though rare, expressed love for his daughter. When Natacha is in despair in her father’s home office following the news that her mother had no intention of honoring their secret code for rescue, it is the father’s gesture that is the turning point of the book. Natacha says, “mon père me serre dans ses bras plus fort qu’il ne m’avait jamais serrée, même autrefois. . . il sort son mouchoir, il essuie avec une maladresse tendre, comme tremblante, mes larmes et il me semble voir des larmes dans ses yeux” (E 115-16). This is one of the most wrenching moments in the book, but the words uttered, “Va te coucher, ne t’en fais pas. . . [. . .] rien dans la vie n’en vaut la

peine. . . tu verras, dans la vie, tôt ou tard, tout s'arrange. . .” (E 116), are minimal, almost dismissive. It is the accompanying gesture that delivers the message. This gesture is in sharp contrast to the mother's similar gesture, adept but false, on the Russian train.

Body and facial gestures expressed what words did not or could not. Her uncle's tenderness towards her is revealed by the look in his eyes. This tenderness is amplified because of the connection with the father. Natacha says that his eyes “ressemblent beaucoup à ceux de papa mais ils sont moins perçants” (E 153). She noticed this when he wordlessly stopped, leaned down to her, removed his glove and awkwardly rebuttoned her collar. The father's silent facial expressions, “le froncement de ses sourcils . . . le plissement de ses lèvres qui s'avancent . . . ses paupières qui se rapprochent,” are clear warnings of something as undesirable as it was unnamable (E 127).

As a very young child Natacha was very aware of her father's reluctance to tell her that he loved her. She recognizes this by his facial expression and gestures. Such verbal expressions “étaient de ceux qui le feraient se rétracter, feraient reculer, se terrorer, encore plus loin au fond de lui ce qui était enfoui.” She recognizes this retraction “dans sa moue [et dans] sa voix” and avoids seeking verbal commitment of his love “pour empêcher qu'il me repousse d'un air mécontent” (E 58).

Similarly, gestures abound in Tropismes. They are harnessed to express the same feelings that are in Natacha's childhood as an emotional lament. In T7 an unnamed female “se tenait aux aguets, s'interposait pour qu'il n'entendît pas” (T 45). What is overheard would be dismissed: “[E]lle s'écarterait tout cela du revers de la main” (T 46).

This “elle” is desperate to hide something, which is a very strong reminder of Natacha who likewise was desperate to hide from acknowledging her own “malheur.” This female is very worried about keeping some “il” happy. She seems to be emotionally at his mercy. She understands that, for the moment at least, the situation is under control from his odd but revealing habit of making a little self-satisfied noise that involved gesture: “[P]lissant la joue, pressant la langue contre ses dents de côté pour chasser un reste de nourriture” (T 46). It has already been pointed out that this is the same gesture used by the maid in Enfance.

In T2 everybody has to submit to the empty words of a busybody with tyrannical overtones. The unnamed harassed “il” says that “se plier, se plier, s’effacer” is the best approach to take (T 17). The protagonist would like to destroy these words by the gesture of throwing himself on them. The frustrated young woman of T21 lives a life of empty gestures, then escapes both them and the banal words that describe them through a sudden hole in the wall. In Enfance Natacha’s mother made the gesture, seemingly of obligation, of sending her letters and postcards full of empty words. She too felt that she would like to throw them out, but yielding to the words and their empty promise kept them in a special little box, emotionally not able to part with them.

Regarding the grandfather figure of T8, Curren says “[The gesture of] touching literally translates the desire to appropriate these young beings. . . . The only way Sarraute is able to express these fleeting intimate sensations is through the literalness of our everyday experiences in the human body, the common ground for the reader par excellence” (113-14). She quotes Valerie Minogue, “Des mouvements intérieurs souvent

très complexes nous sont communiqués par des notations extrêmement fines et subtiles de mouvements et de gestes . . . le corps a un rôle primordial comme récepteur et émetteur d'impressions ” (Curran 114).

All these examples show that Sarraute consistently uses gesture throughout these two works. The movement of gesture approaches the very movement of the tropisms themselves. It is ironic that she chose to be a writer rather than a filmmaker given the non-verbal nature of gesture, this powerful means of communication so crucial to her expression of tropisms. It is also interesting that she referred to slow motion film to capture the fleeting movement of tropisms. Be that as it may, she did choose to write and to express the non-dit in words and harnessed gesture to her art.

For Natacha and for the writer Sarraute, gestures are tightly intertwined with communication. Since neither parent honestly verbalized his emotions towards Natacha – her father’s almost total reticence and her mother’s on-going lies – she was nourished emotionally on clues, largely delivered through gesture. In Tropismes Sarraute relies heavily on gesture to deliver this non-dit. As Curran writes, “When dealing with such abstract entities as sensations sparked by any number of verbal and non-verbal cues present in interaction, it is no wonder that gestures end up bearing much of the signifying weight in Sarraute’s writing” (174). In Enfance, Sarraute describes the tropistic experience of recognizing and receiving emotion and the part it played in the significant formative events of Natacha’s childhood. It is also in those passages that she tells the reader very clearly, how she learned it – through gesture.

Metaphor

It is logical that metaphor evolved as a writing strategy from Natacha's penchant for distancing herself from hurtful facts since it is a trope that indirectly compares one object with another. Since metaphor is, and simultaneously is not, that which it represents, it is an apt mechanism for approaching Sarraute's avoidance of definition. Like an asymptote, it gets closer and closer but never touches the axis. The non-dit is described in terms of something instead of being something.

According to The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, metaphor can be either prosaic or essential, the former being most closely aligned with its original definition, which is that of "a trope of transference in which an unknown or imperfectly known is clarified, defined, or described in terms of a known" (490). Essential metaphor is far more encompassing and harder to describe. It would include associations beyond the immediate words used. According to this encyclopedia entry, it involves "more complex, instantaneous, and even non-logical relation" (491). In Tropismes Sarraute uses prosaic, or what I shall refer to as traditional, metaphor extensively. In Enfance she uses both.

Françoise Asso says that in both Tropismes and Enfance "la métaphore se trouve . . . fondue dans le texte, irrepérable" (237). In the first work, this is a function of the powerful imagery, in the later work a function of metaphor's transference characteristic. Examples from each work will show how metaphor is present and how it functions.

Each of the 24 texts of Tropismes not only contains but largely relies on traditional metaphor to communicate meaning. In T20 some "elles" visit a child-like man

“[pour] prendre entre leurs mains les peurs blotties en lui” (T 116). The fear will reappear “au fond des tiroirs qu’elles venaient d’ouvrir” (T 117). As mentioned in Chapter II, the mechanical doll of T1 is a metaphor for predictability, and the children of T1, T8, T15, and T17 are a metaphor for the trapped. The soft suffocating mass of T8 that the little boy is forced to swallow is a metaphor for his grandfather’s and society’s values: “Une masse molle et étouffante, qu’on lui faisait absorber inexorablement, en exerçant sur lui une douce et ferme contrainte, en lui pinçant légèrement le nez pour le faire avaler, sans qu’il pût résister” (T 53). In T1 a crowd is described using characteristics of water: “[I]ls formaient des noyaux . . . occasionnant quelques remous, comme de légers engorgements” (T 11).

Françoise Asso sees metaphor as stagnant in all the texts of Tropismes because it does not transfer, but is instead stuck in an eternal condition and held there by the use of the troublesome imperfect tense. These texts have no exit. They are caught in the net of the most elementary metaphors where the strength of their powerful imagery has all the power and trumps their capacity to tend towards anything. They are an expression of primitive emotion, especially of unnamed fear. Although both banal and deep languages are present, there is no transference between them (237-39).

In 1987, well after Enfance was published, Sarraute told Simone Benmussa “J’aime travailler l’écriture . . . C’est cette recherche des mots qui m’intéresse, de l’écriture et non du dire . . . C’est une façon de revivre, de retrouver les sensations et, quand je les revis, la forme devient plus vivante” (115-16). One way that this creative manipulation of words finds expression is as metaphor where words themselves in

Enfance are used as tactile objects. Sarraute can then control them as Natacha controlled her “cocottes,” the paper dolls representing teachers and classmates that she had created to help with her homework and entertain herself at the same time (E 220). She refers to words as “ces mots qui vivent ailleurs” and says about other words, “ils ne savent pas comment se comporter, ils ne savent plus très bien qui ils sont” (E 87). Here words function as three-dimensional objects.

In Enfance metaphor is used in both traditional and untraditional ways. An example is the handling of the word “malheur” used in the sympathetic maid’s utterance, “Quel malheur quand même de ne pas avoir de mère.” Natacha’s response is a traditional metaphor, “le mot frappe . . . de plein fouet” (E 121). This is immediately followed by: “Des lanières qui s’enroulent autour de moi, m’enserrent” (E 121). This is also a metaphor for “malheur” despite the mismatch of singular and plural number. In “le malheur qui ne m’avait jamais approchée, jamais effleurée, s’est abbatu sur moi” “malheur” is gaining power as a word though it is still within the context of traditional metaphor (E 121). Referring both to the word and to the unhappiness that the word means, she says, “Je suis dedans” (E 121). Next she uses metaphors with overtones of physical manipulation, setting the stage in a sense for using words as physical objects. Here she describes physical pushing and tearing, “je repousse ça, je le déchire, j’arrache ce carcan, cette carapace. Je ne resterai pas dans ça, où cette femme m’a enfermée” (E 122). But what shell or carapace is so violently being pulled off? What will it no longer be protecting? The confusion in the metaphor is a strategy to reveal the confusion

regarding the nature of the “malheur” and who caused it (E 121-22). The image of the protecting shell also suggests the element of denial or hiding from the truth.

Finally, the words emerge as powerful controlling objects, making it crystal clear that they are being used as a metaphor for their very meaning. Still referring to the same word, “malheur,” the narrator asks “–C’était la première fois que tu avais été prise ainsi, dans un mot?” The answer is, “–Je ne me souviens pas que cela me soit arrivée avant. Mais combien de fois depuis ne me suis-je pas évadée terrifiée hors des mots qui s’abattent sur vous et vous enferment” (E 122).

The text promptly continues in this vein with the word “bonheur” being the next repulsed: “–Même le mot ‘bonheur,’ chaque fois qu’il était tout près, si près, prêt à se poser, tu cherchais à l’écarter. . . Non, pas ça, pas un de ces mots, ils me font peur, je préfère me passer d’eux, qu’ils ne s’approchent pas, qu’ils ne touchent à rien. . . rien ici, chez moi, n’est pour eux” (E 122).

Overall, being caught in a word is a metaphor for being caught in the situation the word describes. The previously mentioned “malheur” refers to the condition of having a mother of such inferior quality and absenteeism that she might as well not have existed. Similarly, dissociation from the word “bonheur” refers to the absence in her life of the feeling the word represents.

Words in themselves are presented as having power to lose. Véra squeezes the vowels out of Natacha’s name as she pronounces it, thereby causing the intrusive unwanted step-child to take up less space in her life (E 114). Her father and Véra refer to her mother as a place, avoiding having to say her name, “Tu as une lettre de

Pétersbourg,” signaling their disapproval of her and their desire to deny her existence along with her name.

The phrase, “‘Véra est bête’. . . un paquet qu’elle m’a donné à emporter, comme ceux qu’on remet à son enfant qu’on va placer comme interne au collège,” becomes a metaphor when seen as a package to be used by far-away Natacha (E 188). This phrase was delivered by the mother to Natacha in the hotel room on the eve of her departure for Paris with no good intent. A different package metaphor had been used earlier. It contained the mother’s response to little Natacha’s confession that she found the hairdresser’s doll prettier than her mother: “Un enfant qui aime sa mère trouve que personne n’est plus beau qu’elle” (E 95). Immediately afterward, the narrator says of the phrase, “J’emportais en moi ce qu’elle avait déposé. . . un paquet bien enveloppé. . . Ce n’est qu’une fois rentrée, quand je serai seule, que je l’ouvrirai pour voir ce qu’il y contient. . .” (E 95). The content, in fact, left the child tormented by guilt and troubling “idées” for years afterwards (E 95, 135).

In both Tropismes and Enfance metaphor plays a very important role. It is integrated into the narrative in each case. In Enfance the narrative voice that in Tropismes was being smothered has become strong and clear. In the later work there are fewer traditional or visible metaphors. Instead, the transference characteristic of metaphor is harnessed to revive the childhood tropisms (Asso 239). The back and forth movement of the narrators’ language and the language of the tropisms is the metaphor. The unknown and the known are compared throughout – the unknown of the tropism

itself versus the narrators' perspective. In both Tropismes and Enfance "la métaphore est l'écriture de 'ce qui est là'" (Asso 241).

In summary, all the writing strategies discussed above are used extensively throughout both texts. They reflect the influence of Natacha's early family life. We see her father's influence on the skillful controlled aspect of Sarraute's writing. It reflects the security and solidity he contributed. We see her mother's influence manifested in the subject matter, the tropisms themselves. Here is the fluid, undefined, organic, which in both Enfance and Tropismes is the persistent, non-verbal, troubling non-dit. Sarraute uses a very controlled set of writing strategies to express what seems to be the epitome of the indefinite, certainly of the unnamed. Sarraute delivers without ever naming that which she is delivering. This is a reflection of the childhood experience described in Enfance.

CONCLUSION

In 1939, while in her thirties, Sarraute wrote and published Tropismes, an unusual work of strong literary worth. It wasn't until the 1950's that the author resumed her writing career, throughout which she acknowledged that this first work was the basis for all her subsequent literary creativity.

In 1983 at the age of 83, she wrote Enfance, a non-traditional autobiography about which she said in a radio interview given in the late 1980's that she "just tried to show certain moments separated from each other . . . [and] tried to show certain feelings [or] inward movements that [she] found interesting, because they gave birth to a certain way of writing."⁶ Whether the story itself is true or not is irrelevant here. What does matter is that in this work the author revisits the same tropisms on which the first work was based. Although superficially very different, both works have at their core the troubling non-dit accounted for in Enfance. Both works use similar writing strategies to approach and elucidate it. It is as though Tropismes, the work of the talented groundbreaking beginner, were being written again in Enfance, this time with a plausible explanation for the prevailing malaise of the first work. Again and again the disturbing undercurrents of Tropismes show themselves in the work of the accomplished and established author of Enfance. They both give voice to the same series of significant

⁶ This radio interview is referred to in an article entitled "Nathalie Sarraute" in the electronic publication Answers.com.

tropisms identified in Enfance as those of Sarraute's childhood. Imagined or real, fact or fiction, they are the same tropisms. As has been shown, it is in the essence of the tropisms dealing with a forlorn betrayal and in the writing strategies used to express the indefinite element of their core that we see how Enfance rewrites Tropismes.

Twice in Enfance there is a reference to a spontaneous movement of rejection by the body of foreign matter. The first time occurs when Natacha was very young. Her mother and step-father were playfully tussling. Natacha wanted to join in but was prevented from doing so by her mother. She says that she felt as though she had been violently pushed away. In a tropistic insight the child describes herself as "[u]n corps étranger. . ." and adds, " Il faut que l'organisme où il s'est introduit tôt ou tard l'élimine . . . (E 76). She also says of the insight, "c'est apparu, indistinct, irréel. . . un promontoire inconnu qui surgit un instant du brouillard. . . et de nouveau un épais brouillard le recouvre. . ." (E 76). The second reference is made by Véra angrily telling Natacha in Russian, "[t]iebia podbrossili," which means "'jeter,' mais qui a de plus un préfixe irremplaçable, qui veut dire 'sous,' 'par en dessous' et cet ensemble, ce verbe et son préfixe, évoque un fardeau dont subrepticement on s'est débarrassé sur quelqu'un d'autre. . ." (E 182-83). Although hurt by being told by her step-mother that she was a burden, the child's focus is on being rejected by her mother: "On ne veut pas de moi là-bas, on me rejette" (E 184). This Russian phrase can be seen as a stinging reference to her birth and, in the aggregate, a total rejection of her by her mother.

At the same time, the concept of an organism rejecting foreign matter is a reminder that Sarraute appropriated the term "tropisme" from biology, knowing it meant

a spontaneous movement by an organism, to describe certain inner movements that her literary techniques sought to capture. It is not unlikely that there was a perceived connection between these movements by organisms, at some level. This would mean that the awareness from early childhood of undefined movements at the edge of her consciousness, which she called tropisms, was, in fact, the awareness, or at least something tied to the awareness, of being rejected by the mother. The title of the work, Tropismes, would then have referred to this rejection, just as its content would then be the first verbal expression of this haunting perception. Such a linkage by the author of the spontaneous movements of these organisms reinforces the position that Enfance is Tropismes retold.

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