

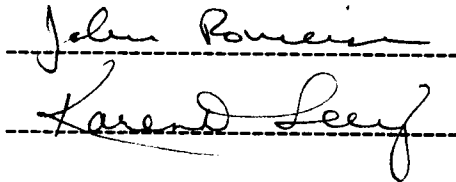
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Michelle Rae LeGault entitled "Rethinking Gender and Autobiography in Nathalie Sarraute's Enfance: A Survey of Critical Approaches." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in French.



Christine Holmlund, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of The Graduate School

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master's degree at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library. Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgment of the source is made.

Permission for extensive quotation from or reproduction of this thesis may be granted by my major professor, or in her absence, by the Head of Interlibrary Services when, in the opinion of either, the proposed use of the material is for scholarly purposes. Any copying or use of the material in this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Signature Michelle Kegan
Date Mar. 25, 1992

Rethinking Gender and Autobiography
in Nathalie Sarraute's Enfance:
A Survey of Critical Approaches

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Michelle Rae LeGault
December 1992

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. Chris Holmlund, for her thorough and thoughtful editing. I would also like to thank Dr. Karen Levy for her time and for initially suggesting that I take a look at Enfance. Thanks also go to Dr. John Romeiser for reading my thesis during his sabbatical leave. I would like to express my thanks to the members of my family for believing more in me than in my thesis anxiety. Many friends were around during the writing of this thesis, and I thank them for their understanding during the times when I needed to “go under.” Thanks in particular to Nace for keeping me current with the Times; to Scarlett for asking about Nathalie; and to Harley, Emma and Gracie for being there when I needed to play.

ABSTRACT

This research addressed questions of gender and genre with regards to the French author Nathalie Sarraute and her autobiography, Enfance. A working familiarity with her oeuvre, her concept of tropisms, and with the scope of autobiography was essential. An awareness of the ways in which certain textual techniques employed by Sarraute have been viewed as "feminist" was equally important. The range of critical reception to the primary text was surveyed. It was found that Sarraute and Enfance were interpreted through different but overlapping critical perspectives--textual/ critical, feminist, psychological, and reader-oriented. It was decided that a presentation of the text's reception in all its complexity served to positively enrich one's reading of the text.

It was concluded that Enfance was both autobiography and something other than autobiography in that the text possesses certain innovative means of sidestepping generic conventions. It was also concluded that regardless of her personal distaste for labels, Nathalie Sarraute will continue to be read at times as feminist for her work with "the neuter" and with gender stereotypes. Finally, to the extent that Sarraute pushes her readers to reexamine gender with all of its traditional associations, it was concluded that she furthers the sticky debates of difference.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

iv

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. Critical Discomfort: Sketching Nathalie Sarraute's Biographical and Literary Backgrounds	1
II. "Neither man nor woman:" Nathalie Sarraute on the (Un)importance of Gender	12
III. Of Memory and Loss: Autobiography, Sarraute and <u>Enfance</u>	22
IV. "Tu ne vas tout de même pas faire cela . . .:" Dialogue and Voice in <u>Enfance</u>	31
V. "Nein, das tust du nicht:" Language, Power and Writing in <u>Enfance</u>	44
VI. Gender Revisited	59
BIBLIOGRAPHY	66
VITA	73

I. Critical Discomfort: Sketching Nathalie Sarraute's Biographical and Literary Backgrounds

Writing a short and simple introductory chapter on Nathalie Sarraute, her life and her works, offers the rather frustrating but not altogether surprising experience of watching Sarraute successfully slip out from under every available critical category. One wonders how much biographical data are pertinent and fair? I will be discussing, after all, her autobiography, Enfance. It would seem an easy task to offer a brief summary of Sarraute's personal and creative history, based on my background reading. Yet, I cannot help but feel uneasy when I write something like, "Nathalie Sarraute was born in Russia on July 18, 1900. Her parents divorced early and remarried shortly thereafter. The young Nathalie, or Natacha as she was called, spent the first years of her life with her mother and step-father, both writers, in Russia, before being abandoned to her father's care by her mother. Her father, a chemist, lived in Paris at the time and it was in this city that Sarraute received her formal education and where she later pursued studies in history, sociology and law. She also spent some time at Oxford where she studied English. She married Raymond Sarraute, a fellow law student, in 1925. They had three daughters...."

My discomfort does not stem from the content of the words. All these events actually took place and the biographical description is therefore 'true.' Rather my unease stems from what the words do, how they change my relationship to Sarraute the writer. These

words capture Sarraute, pin her and her creativity down, make her as lifeless and dry as an encyclopedia entry. I would like to do without them, to start my analysis of Enfance and its critical reception in some seemingly pure place where there is just the text, the critics and my own approach to these two. Have I fallen into some carefully laid trap crafted by Sarraute, an avowedly private person who has said that she cannot understand why some writers go on and on about themselves, (Saporta 23) and who has never liked to blend her life and her work ? Perhaps I have undergone a Sarrautean initiation these past few months, becoming irrevocably sensitive to words and the politics they hide and carry?

Or is the genre of autobiography itself at the root of my discomfort? Autobiography, after all, has long been viewed as a sort of bastard of 'traditional' literary genres, because it lies somewhere between fact and fiction. Does it change or complicate the situation to remind ourselves that Enfance is an autobiography written by a middle-class white European woman? Perhaps my tenuous grasp of the task at hand arises out of the relationship between Enfance and Sarraute's earlier texts. After having read her somewhat inscrutable novels, with their absence of plot, character, chronology, and their deliberate lack of an omniscient or even reliable narrator, Enfance appeared like an oasis of biographical information, overflowing with childhood trauma and trivia. Yet this first impression was a premature one. At the end of my readings of Enfance I am left, like the voices/ interlocutors in Les Fruits d'or, gnawing uncomfortably on a hard, shiny, tempting text.

Indeed Enfance shares many stylistic elements with Sarraute's novels. As autobiography it is deliberately elliptical, slightly dissatisfying and often completely aware of itself. Its style, that of a fragmented dialogue between two different voices, is by no means traditional, and stems as do Sarraute's other texts, from her longtime fascination with, and articulation of "tropisms." Sarraute no more offers us a whole image of herself or the child she was in Enfance than she paints complete and easily understood pictures of the characters in her novels.

So why write an autobiography that leaves one hungry? What might this have to do with Sarraute as a twentieth century writer? What might it suggest about her position as a woman, as a woman writer, or as a feminist? I have never wanted to label Sarraute, and I react negatively sometimes to other critics' attempts to co-opt Sarraute for their own arguments. Yet I am intrigued by her last text, by my own and others' reactions to it, and I am willing to apply some pressure to Sarraute's words when she speaks about feminism, autobiography, or certain textual procedures. I would like to press her, to push against her silences and contradictions regarding these issues to see what they might add to the complexity of Sarraute, and, more generally, what they might contribute to the debates about writing in the latter part of the twentieth century, and/ or about writing as a woman.

In order to address these concerns, I would like to briefly outline Sarraute's approach toward literature before focusing on tropisms and the power of words. Sarraute's interest in literature

and artistic criticism is reflected throughout her texts. A book and its critical rise and fall are the subjects of Les Fruits d'Or; literary creation and the anxiety this provokes form the basis of Entre la vie et la mort. The collection of essays which first appeared in the N.R.F. and Les Temps Modernes, later published under the collective title, L'ère du soupçon take as their very theme the novel, the narrator, and the characters as they have been conceived traditionally and how they might be treated in the future¹.

In interviews, too, Sarraute emphasizes her ongoing love of literature. Even as a child, she says, she loved the clean orderly feeling she got from writing French compositions (Finas 394) or from trying to imitate the "classics" (Oppenheim 119). Sarraute wrote the beginnings of a novel while she was quite young, complete with a hero and a heroine who die tragically at the end. Yet she did not write "formally" until 1932, while she was in her thirties, when she produced the first of her sketches she called Tropismes. Prior to this, Sarraute says that although she wanted to write, she felt that she had nothing to articulate (Finas 394).

What, then, are these tropisms that gave Nathalie Sarraute the feeling that she had something to say, and that have become the underlying preoccupation of her entire oeuvre? Originally a biological term used to describe the growth of plants in the direction of external stimuli, Sarraute reworks and refines the term to fit her own needs. She is not at all concerned with the surface or apparent

¹For additional information regarding Sarraute's interest in literature and literary criticism, see Besser's "The Theme of Art" in Nathalie Sarraute.

reality of people or relationships. Instead, she prefers to explore what takes place on the inside, what sorts of “inner movements” are provoked “like that of plants, by an exterior excitement, by the presence of someone or some object” (Oppenheim 122-3). She goes on to explain that these “movements,” “glide quickly round the border of our consciousness, they compose the small, rapid and sometimes very complex dramas concealed beneath our actions, our gestures, the words we speak, our avowed and clear feelings” (Besser, Nathalie Sarraute 19)².

Sarraute believes that tropisms exist in everyone, at all social and intellectual levels (Kaiser 119-120). This thus suggests a kind of sensory-based psychological common ground or levelling agent. In an interview with Gretchen Besser in 1976 Sarraute said: “je suis persuadée qu’au niveau où se meuvent les tropismes, tout le monde sent de la même façon.” She elaborates on this a bit later: “au fond, là où derrière l’apparence se meuvent les tropismes, nous sommes tous semblables” (Besser, “Colloque” 284-6).

Sarraute’s attention to tropisms has allowed her to “work a form of her own” (Saporta 14), to “excavate a small fragment of the sensory world that has not been explored and put into form” (Rykiel 40), to “add to known reality and extend the field of the visible” (Kaiser 118-9). Her desire to allow these tropisms more space to grow and develop led her to write novels instead of pursuing her

²To Sarraute, we are like so many plants extending ourselves toward and retracting from the sun of other people and their words, perhaps only dimly aware (if at all) of the ways in which these movements betray and reveal our true feelings and actions.

articulation of tropisms through the short sketch format of Tropismes (Knapp, "Document" 284)³.

When Sarraute was approached with the idea of writing radio plays for Radio Stuttgart, she initially declined, thinking that dialogue alone would be an insufficient means of exploring tropisms. Instead, Sarraute found that by allowing the characters/ voices in her plays to say whatever they wanted, and with whatever tone they chose, the "unreal" or unusual dialogue that resulted was quite adequate to express tropistic movements (Knapp, "Nathalie Sarraute" 174)⁴. She eventually wrote five plays for Radio Stuttgart.

Tropisms thus gave Sarraute something to explore, and made writing a way of life for her. She has been called a very disciplined writer, as she starts writing each day at the same time, works slowly, listening to the rhythm of the words she puts down while trying not to think about any potential audience. Sarraute enjoys the total absorption that writing offers her. She has called the act of writing both "une souffrance" and a "raison d'être," (Besser, "Colloque" 289)⁵.

Certainly the desire to render tropisms and the experience of them accessible to others has been and remains an active pursuit (Saporta 19). It is not, however, Sarraute's only concern. Sarraute has always been aware of the power of words, of the way they can pigeon-hole and imprison a complex individual, reducing her/him to

³See also Knapp, "Nathalie Sarraute" in Off-Stage Voices (161-2).

⁴See additionally Sarraute's "Le Gant Retourné" (70).

⁵For more information about Sarraute's writing process, see Finas, Kaiser, and Rykiel.

a series of adjectives. This awareness of words and of their power to limit the multiplicity of meaning, experience, and identity is a common thematic thread that runs through all of Sarraute's writing, regardless of the genre (novel, essay, play, autobiography) in which she chooses to work.

Not surprisingly, then, when I initially read Sarraute's novels, essays and plays, I was struck more by her use of language, her privileging of voice and dialogue over plot, character and narratorial description, and by the surprising violence of tropisms than by anything that I or another reader might term "gendered" or "feminist." Yet upon reading early interviews with Sarraute and general introductions to her writing such as Adele King's French Women Novelists: Defining a Female Style, I was sympathetic to but not entirely convinced by feminist arguments that her texts might in some way be considered specifically "feminine." Sarraute herself consistently denies the personal in her writing. In contrast, she has few qualms about situating or positioning her work within the New Novel movement⁶. Sarraute even credits the New Novel movement with affording her a larger audience than she would have enjoyed had her work not come to be associated with the works of writers such as Butor, Simon, and Robbe-Grillet (Oppenheim 128). Sarraute's position vis-à-vis other women writers is much more complex. She has consistently denied any affiliation or identification with women writers although she is included in more than one text on modern

⁶She participated in the 1971 conference on the New Novel held at Cerisy-la-Salle and took part in a colloquium on the same topic at New York University in 1982. See Oppenheim and Ricardou.

French women writers⁷, and although she was invited to attend a conference on twentieth century women writers--she declined⁸. While the issue of gender is not my only concern, it is both a personal preoccupation and an organizational theme in my work on Sarraute and Enfance. Gender and its relevance toward an understanding of these two, therefore, will surface at times in the following chapters.

I will look in chapter two at how Sarraute perceives herself and why certain critics perceive her as a feminist. I will concentrate specifically on how the fluid imagery of Sarraute's tropisms and choice of gender for her fictional characters have been treated by feminists. In my probings, I will draw not only on biographical data of and interviews with Sarraute, but on examples from her texts prior to Enfance. I hope to demonstrate that Sarraute is very conscious of traditional gender stereotypes but deliberately ignores the significance of gender for her fictional voices. I believe she positions herself in this way in order to show that tropisms exist in everyone, in some space before gender. Sarraute's stance with regards to gender and feminism might also explain why she vigorously rejects feminist labels for herself and feminist connotations of her work--she wants as wide an audience for her tropistic forays as she can possibly attain.

In chapter three I will quickly outline the current status of and scholarship on autobiography, from the ungendered or "neutral"

⁷See Becker, King.

⁸See Besser, "Sarraute on Childhood" (154).

approach of Gusdorf and Lejeune to the gendered works of feminist theorists. After this general introduction to the genre, I will provide a plot summary of Enfance to facilitate a better grasp of the issues to be covered in this and subsequent chapters. I will then examine Sarraute's orientation toward the writing of autobiography and critics' reception of Enfance as autobiographical text. I will illustrate how Sarraute's misgivings about the genre along with her efforts to get around certain of its conventions prompt critics to interpret Enfance as something better than or different from autobiography.

In chapter four I will describe the various critical groups that, together with Sarraute's voice and my own, engage in debates surrounding several key elements in Enfance. Here, I will specifically argue that dialogue and narratorial voice in Enfance reveal Sarraute's ongoing autobiographical discomfort and disclose as well a pattern of relationship between Sarraute and her (actual) readers. In addition, I will point out how the genders of the two narratorial voices illuminate both Sarraute's ambivalence toward gender and critics' awareness of her unease.

In chapter five I will present a psychological interpretation of several interwoven themes in Enfance--language, the power of words, and the potentially important impact that Sarraute's mother and father may have had on her writing. I will argue that Enfance can also be read as Sarraute's journey from being scared by the hidden power of the spoken word to her eventual enthusiasm for writing and the written word. I will show how this journey was mediated by Sarraute's growing emotional independence, her

separation from her mother (and her mother's words), and her increasing affiliation with her father and his respect for books and scholastic endeavors. I will examine how Sarraute's mature writing style might have been influenced by her multilingual heritage, her relationships with her parents or their uses of language, or by Sarraute's own training in law and oral pleadings. Instead of tracing the development of Sarraute's style to only one or two determinants, I will conclude that her elliptical, "slightly dissatisfying" literary style grew out of a complex bed of sources.

In the first half of the last chapter I will return to the issues of gender and difference in an attempt to address once more the questions I raise in previous chapters with regards to Sarraute and feminism. I will pinpoint where gender appears and recedes in chapters one through five and address the question of Sarraute as feminist writer/ novelist/ autobiographer by looking at the many forms that gender takes throughout the various critical/ textual discussions. I will analyze my own obsession with this issue and will position my concern within past or current feminist arguments. I maintain that since critics continue to interpret Sarraute and her writings along feminist lines, my preoccupation has merit.

In the second half of chapter six I will recall how critics also read Sarraute and her autobiography from other than feminist perspectives. I will elaborate on which optics were used and why, and point to how these might have been used more rigorously. I will briefly acknowledge my reasons for not using certain critical perspectives in my study of Sarraute and Enfance. At this time, I will

also suggest those additional critical frameworks which might be useful for a longer work on Sarraute and Enfance. I will conclude with a summary of what I gained from this multi-critical approach toward Sarraute's autobiography, and, more broadly, what I learned from my work on Sarraute.

II. "Neither man nor woman:" Nathalie Sarraute on the (Un)importance of Gender

Quand j'écris, je ne suis ni homme ni femme ni chien ni chat, je ne suis pas moi, je ne suis plus rien mais plongée à l'intérieur d'une chose où je ne me pose aucune question d'âge, d'être. Je n'existe pas. C'est même un des plaisirs de tout travail d'être absorbé et de cesser d'exister. Jamais je ne me pense en tant que femme, je me mélange, je refuse de parler d'écriture féminine, de participer à des mouvements qui séparent les hommes, les femmes, c'est contraire à mes opinions.... Considérer les hommes et les femmes à part c'est une ségrégation destructive. Il n'y a pas d'écriture féminine, je n'en connais pas.

(Rykiel 40)

Nathalie Sarraute's ambivalent positioning of herself as a feminist writer is reflected not only by this quote but by what various feminist-oriented critics say about her. Some readers of her work state, for example, that Sarraute denies the importance of gender in her writing. She would probably not disagree. Yet, certain elements in her oeuvre provoke some of the same critics to claim that if Sarraute ignores gender, she moves beyond it as well.

Before turning to a textual/ critical analysis of Enfance, I would like to present and explore aspects of Sarraute's works prior to her autobiography which certain critics have perceived as feminist. By

doing so, I hope to achieve two things. To begin with, I hope to introduce some feminist concerns that may be relevant to the following chapters on Enfance, for Sarraute's autobiography too has often been perceived as feminist. Secondly, I intend to address in chapter six the question of whether it matters or what it means that Enfance was written by a woman. What, if anything, does Sarraute's particular attitude toward gender add to the sticky debates around difference?

The present chapter, then, will lay some of the foundation for the following three chapters. I will start by discussing Sarraute's involvement in the French women's movement. I will next look at certain essential and intertwining elements of her writing like tropisms or the notion of fluidity, filtering these through both the voice of Sarraute and the voices of several feminist theorists. Lastly, I will examine Sarraute's approach to the use of gender for her fictional characters and the ways that this approach has been interpreted by feminist critics.

Most feminist critics do not contest Nathalie Sarraute's personal involvement in the furthering of women's rights. Her early years as a lawyer and her personal involvement in the women's suffrage movement in France in the 1930's attest to her own commitment to feminist issues (Gross 44). Moreover, Sarraute has willingly spoken on the status of contemporary women, saying that she believes women are still held back, "maintained in a condition that prevents them from realizing their full potential" (Besser, "Colloque" 286). She is not reluctant to describe her participation

during the early years of women's push for liberation in France. Sarraute explains to Boncenne that she "has always been a feminist" and that she "always wanted the same rights as men" (92). A more detailed portrait of Sarraute's involvement in feminist issues comes from a conversation with Gretchen Besser:

Quant à moi, j'ai toujours lutté pour la libération de la femme. En 1935, je faisais des conférences pour obtenir le vote des femmes, mais il était très difficile de réunir des femmes qui s'intéressent à cette question. Maria Vérone et moi, nous avons fait des conférences devant 10 personnes. Certaines femmes craignaient d'être convoquées, parce que cela fâcherait leur mari ou leur père....

("Colloque" 286)

Some critics go further, however, to interpret Sarraute's literary explorations as feminist. They link tropisms and the metaphors of fluidity by which she evokes the former with aspects of Western mythology and current feminist psychoanalytical theories. One such example of Sarraute's fluidity is found in Portrait d'un Inconnu. Explaining how he pushes "le point fragile" of others, the narrator/ observer describes what happens next:

Là, je m'accroche, m'appuie. Et je sens alors
sourdre d'eux et s'écouler en un jet sans fin
une matière étrange, anonyme comme la
lymphe, comme le sang, une matière fade

et fluide qui coule entre mes mains, qui se
répand.... (Portrait 69)

Another example of Sarraute's fluid imagery is located in Entre la vie et la mort. The writer-protagonist lets down his guard and offers to impersonate a well-known couple. His idea is too much of a cliché, and initially sparks scorn and disapproval from his interlocutors. The writer, feeling vulnerable, tries to locate the source of his pain in their banal but mocking reaction:

c'est là en lui, il ne sait pas ce que c'est...
c'est comme un fluide, comme des effluves...
un mot quelconque, tout à fait banal, a
transporté cela, un mot a pénétré en lui,
s'est ouvert et a répandu cela partout,
il en est imbibé....Et avec l'obstination des
maniaques il cherche à découvrir d'où
viennent les élancements, il palpe les
endroits douloureux pour trouver leur
place exacte, délimiter leurs contours...

(69-70)¹

Perhaps because Sarraute relies repeatedly on such liquid metaphors and flowing movements, these feminist critics position tropisms against language. For them, language is predominately patriarchal

¹Another fluid passage comes from Vous les entendez?:

Ce qui sort de là, ce qui émane, irradie,
coule, les pénètre, s'infiltré en eux par-
tout, ce qui les emplît, les gonfle, les
soulève...fait autour d'eux une sorte de
vide où ils flottent, où ils se laissent por-
ter... (11)

in nature, governed by rules which stifle creativity and impose an ideological/ masculine interpretation of the world.

Gaëtan Brulotte, for instance, believes that Sarraute's entire oeuvre represents the struggle against "conformity" and the accepted (patriarchal) uses of language (40). Leah Hewitt views Sarraute's tropisms as positive "disrupters of discourse" (66) because they introduce into conversation the unexpected or the unspoken. This idea is corroborated by Sarraute who has also spoken of the battle to create meaning out of language, though without attaching any feminist connotations to this struggle. Elaborating on the potentially destructive power of words, Sarraute intimates that they are a necessary evil, without which she would be unable to share her concept of tropisms:

Moi, j'ai toujours dit qu'il y a des sensations
très floues, inexprimées, qui sans les mots
bien sûr ne sortiraient jamais, mais qui
existent avant et poussent les mots. Ceux-
ci nous servent à les communiquer. Ils
peuvent aussi, si on les jette tout de suite
sur les sensations floues, les figer et les étouf-
fer. Tout ce que j'essaie donc, c'est de laisser
vivre les sensations, jusqu'au moment où
elles-mêmes suggèrent des mots. (Boncenne 90)²

²Sarraute reiterates this idea in an interview with Bettina Knapp: "Tropisms cannot be expressed by means of the written word, but only through images capable of generating sensations" ("Nathalie Sarraute" 168).

For Hewitt, Sarraute's "images of oozing fluids, viscosity, rhythmic waves" are recurring and familiar themes in Western cultures, which have traditionally pitted masculine against feminine, and solid over fluid. She reminds one that these issues are of ongoing importance to such psychoanalytical theorists such as Kristeva and Irigaray (65).

Sarraute generally ignores feminist interpretations of her fluid vocabulary. She feels that the fluid is an effective way to transcribe the tropisms moving under the surface of everyday conversation. Moreover, by evoking tropisms through liquid metaphors and imagery, Sarraute intends to touch the reader, to bring her/ him closer to the sensations and emotions that are being evoked with words (Knapp, "Nathalie Sarraute" 168).

Sarraute does not, however, remain oblivious to critics' reactions to her use of gender to distinguish the various voices or characters in her novels. Her choice of gender is an aspect of her writing that is fraught with ambiguity, and one on which the opinions of Sarraute and her critics vary widely.

Sarraute consistently states that her choice of gender in her novels is "arbitrary" or that it is based on a desire for variety or a need for a different sound (Kaiser 124-5). Speaking with Germaine Brée about the voices in her plays, Sarraute says: "It was almost by accident that I wrote "man" or "woman." In truth I could have switched those designations or put them in the plural" ("Interviews" 146). Yet her portrayal of male and female voices betrays this supposed arbitrariness. Perhaps because she feels that women cannot yet represent the commonality of human experience, Sarraute

avoids using female protagonists in her texts (King 86). Female characters are not absent in her oeuvre, they are just secondary, placed in the background. To explain this unflattering portrait of women/ female voices or characters, Sarraute says that she paints women as they are (Becker 110), as they are cast in the second-class roles society has prescribed for them (Besser, "Colloque" 286). She has conceded that the use of a female character for the unforgettably neurotic/ insecure aunt in Le Planétarium was "une lâcheté" (Kaiser 120), explaining that she feared that people never would have believed her if she had chosen a young male for the same role (Kaiser 120; Boncenne 92). In contrast, Sarraute says she is delighted when male readers identify strongly with a female character (Boncenne 92).

Just as her use of the female gender for certain characters seems more informed than random, Sarraute's use of the male gender for other characters appears every bit as deliberate. For instance, the narrator/ observer of Portrait d'un Inconnu is almost painfully sensitive to the tropisms going on under the surface of the father-daughter relationship he witnesses. His tropistic awareness is involuntary, a manner of sensing the world that is beyond his control. Wanting to get closer to the daughter in the story, and unable to stop himself, he says repeatedly: "C'était plus fort que moi." Much like his Portrait counterpart, the narrator of Martereau is a seeker of tropisms. He acknowledges his passive, docile nature, his excess of self-effacement (7-8), his efforts to encourage others to let down their guard and reveal their true feelings. Both narrators

position themselves on the other side of decency. They are keenly aware that to probe beneath the surface of polite conversation is taboo.

If Sarraute seems aware of the disparity between her purportedly gender-free character designations and her sometimes deliberate choice of one gender over the other, perhaps she senses a certain slippage, irony or contradiction based on societal gender stereotypes. She seems at once to deny and uphold the construction/division of personality traits along gender lines. Yet, I would argue, Sarraute's recognition of what has been traditionally considered "masculine" and "feminine," along with her efforts to then obscure or at least superficially blend the two genders, are not unusual attitudes to take with regards to feminism.

Not surprisingly, then, gender in Sarraute's work is often perceived by feminist critics as gender-inclusive and positive. Adele King, for example, suggests that Sarraute satirizes gender stereotypes and privileges neither sex, since both are seen as aggressors, victims, and poor communicators. Additionally, she implies that the absence of reliable narrators in Sarraute's oeuvre reflects an absence of (patriarchal, male) authority as well (106-7, 89). Both Hewitt and King point out that male Sarrautean characters typically display the same lack of assurance or self-control and the same sensitivity to tropisms or "feelings", as do her female characters (King 90, Hewitt 67). This prompts Hewitt to suggest that Sarraute's male voices are "feminized." Furthermore, since Sarraute doesn't marginalize her female voices by making only them sensitive to

tropisms (70), Hewitt believes that she “decentralizes all discourses” (67).

Some theorists also posit similarities between oppressed or otherwise “marginal” peoples and certain of Sarraute’s characters. King locates potential “marginality” in the neurotic, obsessed/-ive nature of the father in Vous les entendez? or the observer of the father-daughter interaction in Portrait d’un inconnu (94-5). Likewise, Britton comments that the Sarrautean narrator/ observer often serves as a sort of “mad prophet” who dares to jump out of the mainstream thereby preserving her/ his freedom of expression (581)³.

Sarraute clarifies the misconception that her characters are “obsessed.” She first reminds her critics that her “characters” are really just “movement detectors,” not protagonists in the traditional sense. Sarraute explains further that for the purposes of depicting tropisms, she prefers to use more introverted, sensitive people, those who are “preoccupied with themselves and the inner movements within their beings.” Since in her opinion extroverts are not as introspective, her movement-sensitive characters probably do appear slightly neurotic or obsessed (Knapp, “Nathalie Sarraute” 165).

In the following textual discussion of Enfance, I will not be concentrating solely on feminist elements. Nevertheless, there will be points where one of the text’s themes or techniques is viewed from a feminist perspective by some of the theorists already

³See also Brulotte (40).

mentioned here. Although feminist reactions to Enfance will not be limited to tropisms, fluidity, and gender, a prior awareness of how these elements are often perceived as feminist will be useful. Perhaps the ongoing feminist interest in Sarraute is due to the personal nature of Enfance and the feminist argument that the "personal is political." Once I have examined several aspects of Enfance from feminist and other critical angles, I will return in the last chapter to the persistent question of gender as it appears (or disappears) in Sarraute's entire body of writing.

III. Of Memory and Loss: Autobiography, Sarraute and Enfance

Enfance could be considered as both an autobiographical text and as an example of women's autobiography. To be able to place this text in one or both (or none) of these categories, it is imperative that one have a rough grasp of what is meant by each of these terms.

The term "autobiography" was first coined around 1800 (Lejeune, L'Autobiographie 9; Bruss 7). A quick glance at the word tells one that it has something to do with writing, life, and the self. It is perhaps the deceptive simplicity of the term's etymology that has made it so difficult to concretize, to discuss in practical terms.

Theorists of autobiography have approached the gap between the concept and its real dimensions from a variety of perspectives. Some, like Lejeune and Bruss, try to narrow the gap by assigning rules and pacts to the writing and reading of autobiography¹. Others arrive at an understanding of the genre by discussing what they consider its requisite conditions or its historical evolution. Gusdorf,

¹In his continued effort to define the generic boundaries of autobiography, Lejeune has worked and reworked his well-known "pacte autobiographique." What his pact seeks to do is require that the author, narrator, and protagonist of a given autobiography share a common identity. Moreover, the pact states that the autobiographer is responsible for telling his/ her readers the truth, or for at least believing in that truth him/ herself. These concerns are taken up by Bruss in Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre. What Bruss adds to our understanding of Lejeune's pact is the recognition that these rules will occasionally be broken. In addition, she broadens the author's responsibility to be truthful to include the reader. We as readers accept as potentially true that which is written, but we are free to verify and/ or discredit the events reported. We may even critique the autobiographer's "truth-telling style" if we conceive of better or more convincing ways of reporting said events (10-11).

writing in 1956, states that autobiography is a uniquely Western phenomenon because it is only in Western European societies that one encounters an emphasis on the individual life and consciousness (29-31). This belief in the specificity of autobiography has been echoed in more recent times by both Lejeune and Pascal. Rather than constructing rules or cultural conditions to inform his comprehension of autobiography, Spengemann prefers to outline a broad historical pattern of the genre. In his view, autobiography has shifted from the biographical to the fictive mode.

In spite of--or because of--the numerous definitions and theories proposed, theorists readily admit that autobiography remains a confusing and elusive genre (Pascal 2-3; Olney 3,7; Spengemann xi). Perhaps because the boundaries and scope of autobiography continue to baffle them, scholars persist in offering new interpretations or ideas about the genre.

Feminist theorists in particular have done quite a bit of work in this area over the past 15 years. Much of their emphasis has involved questioning the shortage of primary and secondary sources on female authored autobiographies and recovering or bringing to light those texts which had been previously ignored by genre theorists. Here, as with the gender-blind/ generic theorists just mentioned, there is a lack of consensus on how or if autobiographies written by women differ from those written by men. If, as Stanton suggests, traditional (gender-blind) theorists of autobiography have a "generic fixation" when talking about the forms and limits of autobiography, then Miller is correct in describing the cultural legacy

left to French female critics, writers, and autobiographers by de Beauvoir as one informed by (fixated on) a thesis of difference.

To address the question of difference, feminist theorists of autobiography offer diverging perspectives. Some leave the question deliberately open², while others dismiss the query as essentialist. Brée imagines that because of the prior exclusion of female autobiographers from the genre, women writers are better equipped to see past the restraints of autobiography's conventions and rules. Female autobiographers would, in her opinion, join the likes of such recent autobiographers as Michel Leiris and Roland Barthes, two writers noted for their deviation from the typical Gusdorfian definition of autobiography.

Rejecting the theory that difference in autobiographical texts is traceable to the sex of the writer, one recent genre scholar examines instead the diversity of influences on a given text. In her treatment of texts written by female francophone autobiographers of color, Lionnet seeks to locate a multiplicity of meaning and experience based not just on gender but on culture, race, and sexual orientation as well.

Yet another approach to the reading of women's autobiographies is suggested by Miller. By studying both the fiction and the autobiographical text(s) of a given woman writer, states Miller, the reader will be in a better position to see how each genre "illuminates" the other. Miller calls this kind of reading an

²For a somewhat self-conscious example of a theorist who poses rather than answers the question of difference, see Stanton's "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?"

“intratextual practice of interpretation” (59). Considering Sarraute’s autobiography as just part of the puzzle may be the most effective way to approach my initial questions regarding Sarraute as feminist writer and Enfance as an example of women’s autobiography. Before I discuss Sarraute’s particular orientation to autobiography, therefore, I would like to sketch briefly the text’s story.

As its title suggests, Enfance is limited temporally to Sarraute’s childhood. Specifically, it offers glimpses of her life from the age of 5 or 6 to the age of 14. For the first few scenes or chapters, Sarraute spends time alternately with her mother and her father, who had divorced when she was 2. Although she had at one point lived with her mother in France, the period in the text when she lives with her mother and step-father, Kolia, takes place in Russia. The scenes from her mother’s house in St. Petersburg depict the young Nathalie as a fairly serious child, content to cut open the pages of a new book, or to be at her mother’s side. Enfance portrays Sarraute’s mother as somewhat childish, capricious, and selfish. Kolia is benevolent if often absent and ineffectual.

During the course of a routine visit with her father when she is 8, it becomes apparent that Sarraute’s mother is not coming to fetch her after the summer vacation. Sarraute lives for the remainder of the book in Paris with her father, who has by this time remarried. He and Véra, Sarraute’s step-mother, have a daughter, Lili, who is as finicky and mercurial as Nathalie is quiet and easy to please.

Much of the book centers on Nathalie’s adjustment to her new life with her father and to her mother’s abandonment. Both

adjustments are mediated by Sarraute's search for a home or safe place, and by her growing detachment from her mother and an increased identification with her father. She eventually finds a "safe place" in school and scholastic pursuits. The text ends when Véra walks Nathalie to the tram for her first day of class at the lycée.

But what were Nathalie Sarraute's intentions when she wrote Enfance? Had she, like other New Novelists, temporarily abandoned the realm of fiction in order to write the "story of her life?" Had she forsaken her unique study of tropisms? Was it a sign of her going soft or growing old, some sort of last attempt to deal with her biographical data before anyone else did?

In an interview granted to Carmen Licari around the time of the publication of the text, Sarraute describes her textual intentions as follows:

Je suis en train d'essayer d'écrire des
textes où je retrouverais, dans mes
propres souvenirs d'enfance, la même
substance que celle qui se trouve dans
mes livres....Ce qui est intéressant, ce
ne sont pas les événements, mais ce
qui les produit ou ce qu'ils produisent.

(4)

In her insistence on "la même substance..." and her careful steering away from the events of her childhood, one can infer that Sarraute intended to take the experience and articulation of certain tropisms

of her youth as the subject and form of Enfance. Indeed, she stated to Pierre Boncenne in 1983 that even if she wanted to treat something other than tropisms, she couldn't because it wouldn't interest her: "Je n'arrive pas à sortir de cet univers qui est le mien" (88).

A careful rendering of chosen tropisms, then, is once again the subject and the form of this Sarrautean text. Regardless of whether or not Sarraute could have "gotten out of her (tropistic) universe" in writing Enfance, the use of tropisms allows her familiarity and breathing room in a new genre. In addition to being strongly associated with Sarraute's entire oeuvre, the privileging of tropisms, "ces instants de violence cachée, ces réactions insolites à la source des sentiments" that swell just under the surface of words (Boncenne 87) can also be linked to Sarraute's attitude towards the writing of autobiography.

Sarraute doesn't hide the fact that she is uncomfortable with the genre of autobiography. As a writer associated with the New Novel, with its absence of plot, character, and chronological order, she is perhaps more aware than an ordinary novelist of her forays into the personalized universe of autobiography. One result of her privileging of tropisms, with its inherent ellipsis, internal dialogue, and silences, is that her autobiography reads as possibly more fragmented than another's.

This fragmentation is further underscored in Enfance as Sarraute was very particular in selecting which tropisms to include and which to leave out. Anything that insinuated "happy childhood"

or was too cliché-ridden does not appear in Enfance. Furthermore, she states, the chosen tropisms are “unattached to each other” (Boncenne 90).

Thus, by reworking only a select number of tropisms, Sarraute feels she was able to avoid what she considers certain “pitfalls” of autobiography, such as the mandatory recounting of a happy childhood. Moreover, the deliberate omission of some tropisms allowed Sarraute to sidestep two other autobiographical “traps.” Because of the implied pressure of the genre to offer the public an image of oneself, Sarraute believes, the writing of autobiography often leads to oversimplification and falseness (Boncenne 89-90). And by leaving the title page deliberately bereft of generic description, Sarraute insured that her “textes,” as she termed them, would be read not only as autobiography, but perhaps as something other as well.

Many critics remark Sarraute’s general unease with the autobiographical act. Minogue, for instance, notes both Sarraute’s pull towards and mistrust of the task of autobiography (“Fragments” 71). Several critics see the text’s initial uncertainty or self-consciousness as interrogative, as echoing the discomfort over the functioning of memory and the genre of autobiography. Smyth notes that by opening the text with a question: “You’re really going to do that? ...,” the entire writing project at hand is placed under quotation marks and the text fights against the category of

“childhood memories” (12)³. Moreover, this interrogative tone permits Sarraute to expose the traps inherent in autobiographical writing, such as “the indulgence in the facile and the banal, the plastering-over of gaps” (Eakin 134)⁴.

A number of critics have analyzed Enfance’s privileging of tropisms in terms of how this organizing scheme relates to or differs from traditional autobiography. Valerie Minogue views the use of tropisms as innovative, calling Enfance:

not an autobiography but a collection
of intensely-felt fragments of experience
...lost moments that have eluded banal-
ization and have been recaptured only
with difficulty, and with extreme care
not to damage their fragility by string-
ing them into an autobiographical
narrative. (“Nathalie Sarraute’s” 33)

Hewitt interprets the selection and articulation of tropisms as a method that intentionally probes or “deconstructs” the genre (90). This idea is echoed by Lejeune, who feels that an emphasis on tropisms broadens the scope of autobiography (“Paroles” 27).

Another critic also examines how Sarraute’s reliance on tropisms as her main textual procedure may also reflect her

³Smyth upholds Sarraute’s dislike of category, calling Enfance, “neither novel nor autobiography.” He views Sarraute’s growing generic discomfort as a trend, and recalls that Disent les imbéciles was her last text to be given an explicit generic designation.

⁴See also Vercier.

uneasiness with the genre of autobiography. After expressing initial shock over Sarraute's entry into the autobiographical realm, Besser recognizes that Sarraute applies her same "meticulous, microscopic method" to articulate tropisms as she has in her fiction. Furthermore, this unpredicted excursion into the personal is significantly moderated by the text's time frame and geo-political environment. By limiting her "life story" to her childhood and situating it in czarist Russia, Besser feels that Sarraute maintains her typical distance, or at least minimizes her exposure ("Sarraute on Childhood"156).

Readers of Enfance, too, quickly sense Sarraute's discomfort with autobiography as a genre, from the book's initial questioning of itself. And yet, I argue with other critics that Sarraute's reliance upon tropisms offers her a familiar backdrop against which to explore the new genre in which she writes. She may have ventured into the uncharted waters of autobiography, but she took along a trusty and comforting map.

Before elaborating my position in the debates around Sarraute as feminist writer/ novelist/ autobiographer, however, I will first survey the range of critical reception of her work, the better to chart the North American and French horizons within which Enfance takes its place.

IV. "Tu ne vas tout de même pas faire cela...." Dialogue and Voice in Enfance

My own approach to Sarraute and Enfance is shaped by a number of concurring and dissenting affinities with several different but overlapping groups of critics. The specific textual elements that I will discuss, the two narrating voices and their dialogue, were largely chosen because they figured prominently in the secondary critics' discussion of Enfance. They also reveal some of my own curiosities and favorite themes. I will argue that critics disclose their particular perspectives around analyses of these elements. In order to facilitate an easier reading of the various critics, it seems appropriate to introduce them briefly at this time.

The theorists come from differing but not necessarily distinct backgrounds and shape their arguments to emphasize the theories and concerns that they hold most dear. There are, for example, theorists whom I identify as textual/ intertextual critics, critics who demonstrate a fairly extensive knowledge of and familiarity with Sarraute and her work in their readings of Enfance¹. Scholars in this group, such as Minogue, Besser and Lejeune, tend to draw parallels between themes in Enfance and themes in Sarraute's earlier writings, focusing, for example, on Sarraute's sensitivity to the capacity of written language to reduce meaning to a single possibility. In addition, however, these critics also call upon the genre of autobiography to further inform their critique of the text.

¹Others may be equally familiar, but chose to write on a different subject.

A second set of theorists I group together because of their shared concern for and privileging of the reader. Textual scholars of a different sort, these critics illuminate what they see as an established relationship between a given Sarrautean narrator and the reader(s) of Sarraute's texts. In their articulation of this relationship, these "reader-oriented critics" look not only to Enfance but to the Sarrautean text that directly preceded it, L'Usage de la parole. Two such theorists are Eakin and Vercier.

Those who listen to Enfance with a feminist ear constitute another set of theorists. Critics like Hewitt, Brodzki and O'Callaghan are well-versed in current psychoanalytic theory and/ or the body of theory surrounding "women's writing" and "women's autobiography." These "feminist" theorists pay close attention to the attributes of the differently gendered narratorial voices in Enfance. They also examine the role that Sarraute's mother and father may have played in their daughter's writing.

A different group of theorists grounded in mythology, archetypes and psychology offers yet another take on Enfance. Theorists including Leroux and Vercier concentrate on character and plot more than the others, though like the textual/ intertextual critics and the feminists, they refer to both the genre of autobiography and Sarraute's oeuvre.

I have included the voice of Nathalie Sarraute as she speaks to interviewers such as Boncenne, Forrester, and Licari on the subjects of autobiography, the text's doubling of narratorial voice, and her reader(s). Additionally, I refer to her voice as it is transmitted via

the narrators of Enfance. I defer somewhat to Sarraute, and allow her to speak on the various elements before examining what the critics say on the same topics. This strategy serves two purposes. On the one hand, it acknowledges Sarraute as more familiar with and as perhaps having more authority on certain aspects of her literary creation. On the other hand, once I have included Sarraute's voice in a particular discussion, I am then free to probe it on my own or with other critics.

Having read Sarraute's oeuvre, I identify with the textual/ intertextual critics when they explore Enfance in terms of earlier Sarrautean texts. Rather paradoxically, and for reasons still elusive to me, I tend to side with both Sarraute's voice (i.e. Sarraute as reader-critic of her own text) and with the reader-oriented critics. It is in reading the criticisms of the latter that I find a place to put my own unease and suspicion regarding the relationship of Sarrautean narrator-Sarrautean reader. While I appreciate the breadth that their comments and conjectures add to a textual discussion of Enfance, I at times find myself resistant to the ways in which Enfance is co-opted by feminist theorists committed to identifying what they regard as feminist themes and concepts in order to construct feminist and/ or psychoanalytical arguments.

Obviously, no two critics or set of critics discuss each and every element of Sarraute's text. Some elements are even reviewed disproportionately, or from more theoretical perspectives than another element. Inasmuch as it privileges no single lens or theory, this method of analyzing various textual aspects of Enfance from

divergent perspectives seems the most apt for a writer like Sarraute, whom I have already described as "slippery or elusive" in her other works. It will perhaps prove to be the most fruitful here as well.

As has been already mentioned, Enfance opens on the question, "Alors, tu vas vraiment faire ça? 'Evoquer tes souvenirs d'enfance....'" The question is posed by one of the two voices that will continue to converse, argue, agree, and reminisce for the remainder of the book. This questioning voice is textually marked through the use of two masculine adjectives: "grandiloquent" and "outrecuidant" (8-9). It is easy to miss this conscious gender designation, particularly because the other voice is not clearly marked as feminine until the beginning of the next "text" or chapter, when she says: "...je suis attablée..."(14). It is at this point that a common identity between Sarraute, the child protagonist Natacha and the feminine narratorial voice is established.

The dialogue of the two voices in Enfance literally assures the text's existence. Speaking with Pierre Boncenne, Sarraute describes how the dialogue originated. She explains she felt it was odd to write in this new realm of autobiography. In querying her intentions to write about her own life, she found herself saying, "Tu ne vas tout de même pas faire cela...," and thus the dialogue and text of Enfance was begun (89). In this same interview, Sarraute elaborates on the differences between the voices and how these function in the text. The masculine voice is, in her opinion, the more rational of the two, the one that asks for proof or that reins in the feminine voice when it

strays toward exaggeration, falseness, or cliché. In doing so, this “rational” voice is also free to mock the genre of autobiography (Boncenne 90).

Autobiographical discomfort is thus once again at issue, and is inscribed several times over. Initially, this unease is introduced by the text’s self-conscious questioning of “childhood memories.” It is also inscribed textually by the deliberate restriction of these memories: nothing too sugar-sweet, nothing past the age of 14. This textual inscription is further reinforced by the masculine voice’s teasing about the writing project. After asking the feminine voice if it is really going to talk about her childhood memories, the masculine voice plays the devil’s advocate, suggesting that the urge to write about one’s childhood is either a sign of old age, proof of retiring from creative life, or destined to be nothing more than something “tout cuit” (7-9).

Different groups of critics approach the doubling of the narratorial voice and the ensuing dialogue in various ways. Some critics prefer to concentrate on the gender of the voices, and propose a dualist, and I feel, limited, interpretation of this textual aspect. While not ignoring the difference in gender, others, including feminist-oriented critics, read beyond it, suggesting that it serves to positively complicate the text. Reader-oriented critics focus on the functions of the two voices, and focus specifically on how these functions as well as the dialogue itself might severely hamper or restrict the reader’s involvement in the text.

Critics who perform a dualist reading of the narratorial voices typically pair each voice with characteristics that recall the traditional essentialist worldview of masculine/ feminine, analytical/ emotional, orderly/ chaotic, etc., even if these same critics later read past these dualisms. For example, in "Voice(s) in Nathalie Sarraute's Enfance," O'Callaghan interprets the second voice as more critical, analytical, and linear than the first, and as situated more concretely in time (via tense). In contrast, she views the first voice as more dominant, more poetic, more incomplete, and less truthful (452-3). This split is also noted by Hewitt and other critics. In her chapter on Enfance in Autobiographical Tightropes, Hewitt identifies the feminine-marked narratorial voice as closer to the child protagonist's voice, and as one primarily concerned with feeling. In contrast, the masculine-marked voice is seen by Hewitt as more critical, distant, concerned with reason and factual accuracy (75).

A number of critics comment that the two voices and their dialogue enrich the text. Vercier suggests that the procedure complicates, renders problematic and upholds the continuous movement of the text (165), while O'Callaghan underscores the lack of authority or authorial privilege of both voices, something she sees as positive ("Voices" 90)². Taking this idea one step further, Minogue suggests that "the doubling of the narrative voice effectively intensifies the sense of groping towards an undefined but 'felt' fragment of experience" ("Nathalie Sarraute's" 217). In an article comparing de Beauvoir and Sarraute, two writers of the same gender

²See also Hewitt (72-3); Minogue, "Nathalie Sarraute's" (209).

and generation but whose approach to literature/ literary creation differs widely, O'Callaghan posits that it is the very inability of the two voices to fill in the gaps (of memory, of language) and attain closure that makes Sarraute's text innovative:

Sarraute's lack of "knowing" of herself (and of her relationship to her mother) after a lifetime, and her involvement of her reader in the different modalities and limitations of what is currently considered knowing... may in the longer term be more revolutionary than all of Simone de Beauvoir's knowing.

("Reading" 461)

Certain theorists comment on the genders of the voices but do not fall back on dualist discussions. Rather, they echo the above critics and continue to read this technique as positive or innovative. O'Callaghan, for example, feels that the two narratorial voices "elide boundaries and categories," since it is at times difficult to differentiate clearly between the two. She also describes how she interprets the two voices as a team which acts in tandem to achieve new meanings and visions of reality:

One reminisces and the other works on the phonetic texture of language, its syntactical articulation of the theoretical conflicts of our time: one posits meaning, the other multiplies, pulverises and finally revives it...

("Voices" 91)

Van Roey-Roux believes that the use of two different voices is an effective way of combining the analytical and the expressive (281-2). Hewitt theorizes that Sarraute included gender marks for the voices to dispense with the gender issue "while simultaneously complicating it." (Hewitt 74-5). I am not surprised by Hewitt's assessment of the gender issue. First of all, it recalls Sarraute's ambivalence toward gender discussed in chapter two. She is aware of gender but prefers to dismiss its implications both in her personal life and in her creative endeavors. That Sarraute writes in French could also explain Hewitt's theory. French is, after all, a gendered language and requires that its writers and speakers pay attention to gender even if they would rather write or speak neutrally. For Sarraute to ignore or leave out the feminine in her narrators' voices in Enfance would be to remain in the masculine voice. This option, as also the alternative (two feminine narratorial voices), seems less suited to Sarraute than the masculine/ feminine procedure.

Several critics, however, take an ungendered approach to the two voices/ dialogue technique. They tend to be suspicious, and center their suspicion on the possibility that the technique limits the role of the reader and her/ his involvement with Enfance, and/ or earlier Sarraute texts. Lejeune starts out by saying that the dialogue technique was probably employed as a sort of critical ear or ideal reader, but then cautions that there are certain risks involved in using this procedure. Specifically, he states that maintaining the dialogue with all its counterassertions, corrections, interruptions could have become laborious or even artificial. He reminds us that

the voices are constructs and intimates that they succeed in protecting the author from her readers ("Paroles" 32-3). Developing this argument further, Sheringham suggests that the two voices device was designed to deliberately shut out the reader, "to forestall the reader's response, to shut us out of the action, to protect the writer from us" (30). Went-Daoust agrees, saying that the dialogue in Enfance isn't so much collaborative as it is "simulated" because "Nathalie Sarraute connaît d'avance les questions et les réponses. A travers le 'tu', elle essaie de prévenir les réactions présumées du lecteur " (344). Sarraute has been criticized for "leading the reader by the hand" (Licari 4), and for anticipating and thus limiting the reader's response (Smyth 12-13). One critic goes so far as to call the text "insaturable," and suggests that Enfance both "provokes and defies interpretation," and that in offering so many different meanings via the dialogue, it actually "exhausts the [text's] meaning" (Lejeune, "Paroles" 29-30).

My own reaction as a reader of Enfance both diverges from and corroborates these reader-oriented criticisms. Autobiography is an inherently knowledgeable mode of writing: the autobiographer is aware of his/ her past and cannot deny this familiarity. This does not imply that autobiographies are stale or foregone conclusions. Inasmuch as the writing of one's autobiography adds to one's self-knowledge, the writing remains alive, creative (Pascal 182). Enfance positions itself for the most part in this zone of exploration. Sarraute's open, fragmented style and the frequently uncertain tone surrounding a recalled tropism signal that she is learning as much

about these childhood memories as is her reader. Yet, I am troubled by certain passages in the text, moments where I think Sarraute could have probed more, gone further with her exploration of memory and meaning. Two such passages are found in texts 25 and 51. The first describes the train ride Sarraute took with her mother to Berlin en route to her father's. It will be two and one-half years before Sarraute will see her mother again, and the masculine narrator asks if the young Sarraute's unusually tearful mood during the trip wasn't based on the child's foreknowledge of her impending abandonment by her mother. When the feminine narrator rejects this idea, saying it is impossible that her mother's abandonment was premeditated, the masculine voice backs down, collaborates with the feminine voice, saying:

Ne nous suffit-il pas de constater que
nous étions en février et que tu savais
que la séparation serait plus longue que
d'ordinaire, puisque cette fois, tu devais
rester chez ton père plus de deux mois...
jusqu'à la fin de l'été. (108)

The second episode occurs when the feminine voice recounts how Sarraute's younger step-sister, Lili, destroyed Sarraute's favorite stuffed bear. The masculine voice sums up Sarraute's feelings for Lili a bit too neatly: "Jamais il ne t'est arrivé d'en vouloir à quelqu'un comme à ce moment-là tu en as voulu à Lili" (186). He ends the sentence not with an ellipsis but a period. When the feminine voice strings together six negatively-connoted adjectives and applies them

to Lili, the masculine voice implicitly upholds this adjectival packaging of a person by not questioning it. This packaging sticks out because Sarraute is habitually so careful about using adjectives. I do not see the list of adjectives as leaving me choices, but rather as authoritative, closed. They bolster and lock in the reader's growing negative image of Lili, and allows him/ her to dismiss her now that her nature is "known."

I am as suspicious about the reader's involvement in Enfance as some of the other critics, but because I never identified with either the masculine or the feminine voice, nor with any implied reader-in-the-text, I do not feel that I was "led by the hand." Indeed, far from being writerly, I find Enfance to be provocatively readerly, precisely because as was just demonstrated, I am able to question the narratorial voices' treatment and conclusions of the reported tropisms.

Moreover, I feel that Enfance is more penetrable than L'Usage de la parole. There Sarraute drew on a strategy used by Diderot and other 18th century writers of addressing one's audience directly. She explains that she needed a character who didn't understand or agree with the narrator to serve as a "foil" (Finch et al. 309-10, 314-15) or as an objective "ideal reader" (Vercier 163).

This may account for the anxious, uncertain tone of L'Usage³, and for Sarraute's heavy reliance on the reader's participation in

³Two examples of the narrator's reliance on the reader in L'Usage come to mind:

Mais vous perdez déjà patience, vous vous
apprêtez déjà à vous débarrasser de tout cela,
à jeter cela à la poubelle.... (23)

this text. Although as another textual/intertextual critic, I am privy to Sarraute's sometimes surprisingly ferocious statements regarding her perceived reader⁴, I give more credence to my own experience with one of her texts than to anything she might say about how she controls her readers or shows them "the rules of the game" (Licari 3-4).

In addition, one enjoys a certain power as a Sarrautean reader, because Sarraute badly needs her readers. Sarraute acknowledges there are readers who follow her (Bell 55), who have made the same journey so to speak, and on whose real or imagined existence she relies in order to be able to address herself more concretely to them (Finch et al. 309-10). The increasingly important participation of the reader might also be related to Sarraute's early literary isolation⁵

Maintenant, si vous avez encore quelques
instants à perdre, si tous ces drames ne vous
ont pas lassés, permettez-moi de vous convier
encore à celui-ci. (97)

⁴Speaking with Licari about L'Usage de la parole, for instance, she says: "Je force le lecteur à se mettre là où je suis, dans les mêmes conditions, les seules possibles pour découvrir quelque chose qui est là, caché," (4), and elaborates a little later:

Rien n'est sous-entendu, c'est là, on est
allé aussi loin qu'on le pouvait. Le lecteur
peut aller encore plus loin, mais il faut en
tout cas qu'il vienne jusqu'au point où j'es-
saye [sic] de l'amener. Mon langage emplit
les trous, je ne laisse pas ces vides dans les-
quels on peut s'ébattre à son aise. (13)

⁵Sarraute described to Boncenne her reason(s) for writing L'Ere du soupçon: "Avant le 'nouveau roman', il n'y avait rien pour me soutenir, puisque j'ai justement été amenée à écrire les articles de L'ère du soupçon pour me prouver à moi-même pourquoi j'étais amenée à écrire dans la voie que j'avais choisie." (Boncenne 88).

or to her affiliation with a group (New Novelists) that solicited reader participation.

I hope that it has become clear to what extent Sarraute and many of her critics take the doubling of the narratorial voice and the dialogue to be fundamental to the text's genesis. At the same time, of course, they reveal how ambivalent Sarraute is about the project of autobiography. In addition, the gender-marking of the voices underscores Sarraute's discomfort with gender.

The various perspectives of the critical groups (textual/ intertextual, gendered, dualist, reader-oriented, etc.) emerge most clearly in the discussion of narratorial voices and dialogue. In the following chapter, these critical perspectives will not always be as distinct. This is perhaps because the constellation of concerns I will discuss--Sarraute's sensitivity to the slipperiness of language and the power of words; the importance of writing; and the possible impact of her relationships with her mother and father on her writing--are as much thematic as textual and will thus receive more psychological interpretations from all the critics.

V. "Nein, das tust du nicht:" Language, Power and Writing in Enfance

In the introduction I spoke of Sarraute's careful use of words, her avoidance and dislike of labels and adjectives, and her distinction between language and the meaning(s) behind it. For the reader, grasping Sarraute's sense of the power of language is crucial to an understanding of her lifelong exploration of tropisms. One may be drawn to another person by something that she or he says, or repelled by a particular tone of voice, a manner of pausing, a hostile or pregnant silence. Most recently, Sarraute has communicated this sensitivity to language and its effects on others in L'Usage de la parole and her radio plays where the texts focus on a common utterance like "c'est beau" or the word "love."

Enfance reflects Sarraute's early awareness of and fascination with the power of words. Often, the "childhood memories" are triggered by a potent phrase that she hears or by some rebellious thought that she herself voices. Since young children first communicate by listening and speaking, and only later by writing, I will track Sarraute's linguistic sensibility along this same chronological path, focusing first on the spoken, and then on the written word.

Any reader new to Sarraute would wonder, upon finishing one of her plays or novels, if she has always been this "hyperaware" of speech. When one reads her autobiography, one gains new information about the origins of this hypersensitivity. Sarraute's

critics often start by stressing how Sarraute hears others' words. One posits a link between this aural sensitivity and Sarraute's French background. Some focus specifically on the words pronounced by Sarraute's mother. These critics believe her words introduce Sarraute to the notion that words can manipulate and order the world around her. Others probe Sarraute's verbal rebellion against her mother's often rigid use of speech.

Sarraute's initiation into the power of language is also signaled by many critics of Enfance. The spoken word is at first somewhat traumatic for Sarraute, but the act of writing school compositions brings a sense of calm, mastery and eventual independence. Freedom from the hold of (spoken) language allows Sarraute to explore the conventional uses of (written) language. This in turn encourages the development of what several critics call Sarraute's "personal idiom" or unique use of language, reflected in all of her works including Enfance.

Words and the sounds they make are described from the beginning of Enfance as living things with a will of their own. Upon hearing again her childhood governess's warning, "Nein, das tust du nicht"¹, Sarraute uses tropisms to articulate the past and present strength of the words:

"Non, tu ne feras pas ça"...les voici
de nouveau, ces paroles, elles se
sont ranimées, aussi vivantes, aussi
actives qu'à ce moment, il y a si

¹Translated in the text as "Non, tu ne feras pas ça."

longtemps, où elles ont pénétré en
 moi, elles appuient, elles pèsent de
 toute leur puissance, de tout leur
 énorme poids...[...] les paroles m'en-
 tourent, m'enserrent, me ligotent,
 je me débats... (10, 12)

This passage is commonly recognized as a metaphor for the autobiographical project at hand. Many critics equate slashing through the smooth, silky surface of the canapé to permit the grey matter to escape as a deliberate plunge into the unknown realm of the personal/ autobiographical. Brodzki, for instance, likens it to “spilling one’s guts” (250). In a different twist, Minogue interprets the vivid, tropistic recreation of the slashing as a timely and defiant act in response to the masculine narrator’s slightly intimidating and semantically similar question, “You’re really going to do that?....” (“Nathalie Sarraute’s” 212).

The first “text” of Enfance is thus precipitated by a remembered phrase uttered by an adult with the intent of controlling the child Natacha’s actions. The book draws one’s attention to words, their sound and force, as well as their ability to provoke. Language is not taken lightly or for granted. Two theorists explain the power of words in Enfance in terms of how language shapes the child Sarraute’s world by assigning arbitrary names to that which she senses and feels. Echoing one another, these critics elaborate:

Language is utter mystification for
Natacha...words have the singular
capacity to forge and sever the social
and natural relations between all things.

(Brodzki 250)

Minogue reiterates by saying that language is a scary venture for Sarraute: "...verbal packages...thus have to be unwrapped, the shell of certain phrases has to be cracked, words... have to be squeezed to press out their charge of meaning" ("Nathalie Sarraute's" 209).

One interpretation is that this mild terror in the face of adult language use is part of childhood, common to many. Children comprehend at an amazingly young age what their parents say, and consider their words as unquestionably truthful. Yet, adults sometimes lie to protect the child or to put off discussing some topic. It is not surprising then, that Sarraute's aural comprehension is accompanied by confusion, frustration or fear.

It could also be that Sarraute's bilingual heritage made her conscious of the gaps between meaning and words. Although she was born in Russia, Sarraute spoke French from the age of two (Forrester 21). Minogue presents a related view. She refers to a study on childhood autobiographies to support her opinion that Enfance is particularly obsessed with language. The study states that children who grow up speaking French are more concerned with language than any other group of children. Moreover, the French child's experience of reality is often indirect because the language

imposes itself first on this reality. For Nathalie, then, the world is known only after (and through) French ("Nathalie Sarraute's" 209)².

Numerous critics point in addition to the extent to which the young Sarraute is sensitive to the words of the mother (Benmussa 80; Leroux 388; Went-Daoust 345)³. The text itself underlines this awareness. Sarraute's mother often pronounces dictums or clichés such as "Tu n'as au monde qu'une seule maman" (104) or "Femme et mari sont un même parti" (74). Perhaps for a less linguistically sensitive child these words would be quickly forgotten. For Sarraute, they are experienced as ideological and are thus retained by her memory and transcribed in her autobiography. One scholar views these maternal phrases as words that "distribute precise roles and demand particular lines of conduct" (Minogue, "Nathalie Sarraute's" 214).

In a different manner, other critics read psychoanalytically into the words of Sarraute's mother. Some suggest, for example, that the "aussi liquide qu'une soupe" episode demonstrates just how much Natacha internalizes her mother's law (Hewitt 79; Minogue, "Sarraute, Auden" 334)⁴. It is as if Sarraute irrationally isolates this pronouncement, takes it too literally. The feminine narrator, speaking of another statement of Sarraute's mother admits simply

²For the original study, refer to Richard N. Coe, Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, Literary and Historical Section, Vol. XIX, Part VI (Leeds, December, 1984).

³See also O'Callaghan, "Reading" (451); Minogue, "Nathalie Sarraute's" (214).

⁴Upon delivering Sarraute to her father for a visit, Sarraute's mother instructs the child to chew everything until it is "as liquid as soup." This provokes a great deal of embarrassment for those around her and illustrates Natacha's stoic adherence to her mother's word (14-18).

that: "Jamais aucune parole, si puissamment lancée qu'elle fût, n'a eu en tombant en moi la force de percussion de certaines des siennes" (27).

Enfance recalls how Sarraute is disturbed by her mother's words. It also describes the paralyzing sense of betrayal that she feels when she voices her own strong thoughts. These "ideas," as the text terms them, ironically resemble in length and effect Sarraute's mother's one-liners. They are just as short and blunt, and are not received with much humor. At one point for example, Sarraute sees a hairdresser's doll in a shop window and announces that "Elle est plus belle que maman" (92). Another comically memorable idea is that "Maman a la peau d'un singe" (99). These moments are comic for the reader but not for the young Sarraute. Her ideas frighten her so much that she describes them as something external, as having a mind of their own. Minogue has said that Sarraute's first forays into the power of speech "border on the neurasthenic" ("Nathalie Sarraute's" 214), thus underscoring the nearly sickening fear of them. Speaking with Sonia Rykiel after the publication of Enfance, Sarraute reveals that part of her motivation in writing the book stemmed from a desire to share this terrifying sense of betrayal or "sacrilege"⁵:

Je voulais montrer l'installation d'une
obsession, l'effet presque physique de
l'obsession, cette idée du sacrilège qu'on

⁵Sarraute repeats this idea of sacrilege in an interview with Forrester.

éprouve quand tout l'esprit devient oc-
cupé par un corps étranger qui s'y
développe. (41)

It is important to note that these ideas only alarm Sarraute when they have to do with her mother. The text also contains examples of "ideas" about Sarraute's father⁶, but are there introduced after the panic engendered by her first "ideas" subsides.

The voicing of such sacrilegious thoughts represents the beginning of Sarraute's command of language. Sarraute's new understanding of the power of speech (her own and that of others) underscores to what degree language shapes the world, and perhaps limits its meaning and experience. The young Sarraute, like most children, questions the relationship between language and meaning. As an (adult) writer, she continues to challenge the uses of speech and language. It is perhaps because Sarraute's works are considered experimental that critics view her childish questioning as more than just that⁷. A number of readers of Enfance identify a direct link between Sarraute's early linguistic sensitivity as seen in the text and the development of Sarraute's unique brand of fiction.

Sarraute's writing style was no doubt influenced by her intense and vivid awareness of words, their sounds, and their effects. Inasmuch as it freed her from her fear of words, Sarraute's early scholastic efforts at mastering the conventions of spelling and style also contributed to her later "idiom." The path from linguistic fear to

⁶For example, "Papa a mauvais caractère. Papa se fâche pour rien" (136).

⁷See Brée, "Experimental Novels?"

linguistic liberty is analyzed differently by the groups of critics. Like the theme of linguistic sensitivity, the theme of writing in Enfance is generally read from more psychological perspectives. Several, for example, examine the relationship between school and Sarraute's home life to discover how it may have affected her mastery of the written word. Other critics probe the mother-daughter and father-daughter bonds for further clues to deciphering her budding personal writing style. Not surprisingly, Sarraute herself is more reserved about her mother's influence on her later approach toward writing than about either the role of school or her father. Instead of trying to determine which, if any of these relationships (to school, to her mother or her father) directly shaped Sarraute's creative style, I concur with the majority of Enfance's critics in leaving this cause-effect debate deliberately open, thereby implicitly recognizing its complexity.

The journey from being hurt by the words of others to commanding written language by acquiring its rules is traced explicitly by numerous critics and inscribed textually as well. Minogue puts it succinctly, saying that since speech in Enfance is often perceived as threatening, categorizing or reductive, the young Sarraute had to "learn the rules [of language] in order not to be ruled" ("Nathalie Sarraute's" 216-19). Thus, in order to arrive at her own use of speech and language, Sarraute had first to become adept at using the conventional patterns of discourse that are taught formally at school.

I have already described the satisfaction Sarraute got from writing school compositions and “pastiches” or imitations of classical writers. Yet the act of writing wasn’t the only source of her contentment. The school environment itself with its perceived fairness, stability, and order, also helped Sarraute overcome her initial terror of words. Within the solid confines of primary and middle school, Sarraute felt free to explore and alter language to suit her own needs⁸. At times, school provided a welcome relief from Sarraute’s life with Véra, her step-mother, and Lili, her coddled and colicky half-sister. The beneficial effects of Sarraute’s scholastic life are noticed by many critics. Minogue, for example, concludes that school was alternately a refuge or haven (“Fragments” 76)⁹, while Lejeune likens it to the “découverte du salut” (“Paroles” 30).

The protective and calming influences of school are clearly articulated in Enfance:

...je suis complètement à l’abri des caprices,
des fantaisies,.... Ici je suis en sécurité. Des
lois que tous doivent respecter me protègent.
Même là-bas, dehors, l’école me protège. On
passe derrière ma porte sans s’arrêter, on me
laisse travailler... (168-9)

Exercises are admired for the way they allow the young Sarraute to explore the written world on a limited scale¹⁰. She finds a certain

⁸See additionally Hewitt on this point (85-6).

⁹See also Minogue, “Nathalie Sarraute’s” (217).

¹⁰Three examples of the comforting aspect of the limited creative environment are found in Enfance (168-9; 212; 242).

sense of freedom in being able to manipulate written assignments to suit her taste and desire for privacy (208). School has become her “vraie vie” (166).

Together then, school compositions and the learning environment provided an important element of stability and served to modify Sarraute’s attitude toward language. Instead of being rendered immobile by the force of a thoughtless verbal remark, Sarraute considered written words as private playthings. She admired them for their beauty and respected them with a nearly religious reverence. An episode recalling a school dictation parallels the “Non, tu ne feras pas ça” scene in that it describes in loving detail the young Sarraute’s appreciation of words. Instead of evoking the sensation of weight and pressure (10-13) of spoken words, this time the text recreates Sarraute’s fascination with the grammar rules and verb conjugations of the written word:

...ce mot que j’écris est-il bien identique à celui que j’ai déjà vu, que je connais? Oui, je crois...mais faut-il le terminer par “ent”? Attention, c’est un verbe...souviens-toi de la règle... (167)

In a rather psychological/ archetypal reading, one critic goes so far as to posit that words restored to Sarraute a sense of the sacred that had been lost when she first encountered lies and verbal manipulations in the mouths of adults (Leroux 404). Another, focusing on the psychological aspect of words, says that for Sarraute,

words “ont le pouvoir de remplir le vide affectif” that was created by her mother’s abandonment. She traces Sarraute’s change in approach toward words, noting how words initially served as “amulets” before becoming the very protagonists of her novels (Went-Daoust 345).

The mother-daughter relationship in particular is probed by a few critics for lingering psychological scars and interpreted by numerous others as a potentially important element in the growth of Sarraute’s self-confidence and writing endeavors. In what I would call an interpretation informed by mythology or psychology, one critic states that the organization of Enfance centers on the absence of Sarraute’s mother. Sarraute’s growing independence and stability is threatened by her mother’s sporadic reappearances, her “demands and whims” (Vercier 166). In a sympathetic fashion, Leroux organizes her discussion of the text around the issue of maternal abandonment. In her opinion, it represents the mythological “fall” from which the child Natacha can and will rise, aided in part by the act of writing school compositions (393). Her theory differs in orientation from most, as it relies to a large extent on such anthropological/ mythological themes of fall and redemption, the sacred and its subsequent loss, figurative (or spiritual) death and rebirth. Nonetheless, her perspective brings new ideas to and broadens one’s understanding of the mother-daughter bond and the potential connection of this bond to Sarraute’s writing.

Critics also analyze the early emotional rapport between Sarraute and her mother in terms of how it affected Sarraute’s later

writing or the writing of her autobiography. King suggests that Sarraute's own "refusal to be identified by gender" is related to the fact that Sarraute's mother wrote under a masculine pseudonym, and was proud that her true gender was never discovered (105). Since Sarraute's mother often spoke in maxims, Sarraute's avoidance of the rigid use of language in her later writing could be seen as directly linked to her mother¹¹.

Focusing not on Sarraute's oeuvre but rather on Enfance, Brodzki further examines the role of the mother. She posits that the alternating presence and absence of Natacha's mother is similar to the way "language itself obscures and reveals, withholds and endows, prohibits and sanctions." Suggesting that the adult Sarraute desired or needed to communicate with a mother who was often geographically and emotionally distant, Brodzki implies that this need fueled the writing of Enfance. Speaking of the figure of the mother, Brodzki concludes, "...she is the pre-text for the daughter's autobiographical project" (245-6).

In addition to questioning the role of the mother-daughter relationship, critics also examine Sarraute's connections to her father. A number note the link between Sarraute's father and school, as he was a strong proponent of formal learning. Others look at her father's linguistic background or his attitudes about language. Hewitt notes the emphasis Enfance/ its narratorial voice places on school, books and languages. She notes that this orientation differs sharply from that of Sarraute's mother, who although a writer of children's

¹¹See Went-Daoust for a related view (345).

books, professed a proud disdain for school and formal learning (82).

Nathalie's identification with her father via school and formal knowledge is seen by Hewitt as being carried through both stylistically and thematically in her later writing (72). Hewitt concludes that this identification provided her later with the necessary strength to break from within the confines of ordinary speech (85-6). In doing so she posits a link between this identification and Nathalie's identity in a nice twist on the mirror phase: "It is as if the father provided the frame of the mirror in which Nathalie's self-image could be constituted" (84).

Other theorists focus on the possibility that Sarraute's father played a significant part in forming her adult writing style, but chose to do so from different perspectives. A few continue with the theme of paternal identification. Some of these same critics also underscore the parallels between her father's use of language and Sarraute's own linguistic orientation. As representatives of the first group of theorists, Vercier and Went-Daoust both cite the episode in Enfance where Sarraute realizes that she can no longer write legibly¹². Since her mother represents the Russian aspect of Sarraute's heritage, Sarraute's sudden inability to write and her subsequent need to relearn this skill is regarded as a distinct break with the Russian and the maternal (Went-Daoust 344). Similarly, Vercier interprets a later scene in Enfance (163-4) where Sarraute decides to stop writing her

¹²Enfance's feminine voice recalls: "...je ne parvenais plus à diriger ma main..." (133). The voice recalls that after a lot of practice and patience: "... je contrains ma main et elle m'obéit de mieux en mieux..." (134).

last name with a Russian (cyrillic) capital 'Т' as an additional preference for her paternal, French background¹³.

An additional perceived legacy of Sarraute's father has to do with his approach toward language. His dislike of "big words" such as "love" is included in Enfance¹⁴ and in certain critics' commentaries. Hewitt states further that Sarraute's father communicated his emotions through silences more often than through words (83). These silences are full of meaning for the young Sarraute and are the only ones that she is able to decipher accurately on a tropistic level (Went-Daoust 347). Sarraute herself makes ample use of silence in her works, and is keenly interested in exploring what runs underneath banal and overused words like "love."

It is easy to locate catalytic or formative influences for Sarraute's adult writing style in her past relationships to school and her parents. They are numerous and interrelated. As is obvious by the way some of the same critics find arguments supporting each and all of the purported influences, it is not so easy to choose one factor over another. As I mentioned before, Sarraute is reticent about openly admitting any negative or positive role her mother may have played in the shaping of her literary style. The closest she comes is

¹³Although both of her parents were Russian, her father chose to emigrate to France after he was implicated in an anticzarist terrorist act. Her mother remained in Russia (Saporta et al. 8).

¹⁴Natacha asks her father if he loves her, aware that "il déteste trop ce genre de mots" (57-8). This idea is repeated later in the text, during the "Quel malheur..." episode: "papa serait agacé, fâché...il déteste ces grand mots" (121).

when she explains her need to address in her autobiography the feeling of sacrilege associated with some of her childhood “ideas.”

In contrast, Sarraute communicates her love of books, of the school environment and of French compositions in numerous interviews and in her autobiography. There remains at least one other influence on Sarraute’s writing. Describing to Licari how her training in oral argumentation while in law school and as a lawyer helped transform the stylistically formal writing of her years in school into the sensory (sensual?) world of tropisms, Sarraute says:

Il avait donc fallu faire éclater tout
cela pour arriver à rendre des sen-
sations--et des sensations qui sont
hors la loi--alors que j’étais habituée
à tout ce qui était correct et approu-
vé¹⁵. (9)

In this chapter, I have attempted to describe how Sarraute has come to be the writer she is. I traced the path from her initially paralyzing linguistic sensitivity to her increasing command of the written word in order to underscore how integral this development is to Sarraute’s adult writing style. In the following chapter, I will review why Sarraute’s very use of language is sometimes described as “feminist,” and will return to the question of whether her literary style and linguistic/ philosophical concerns pose a difference.

¹⁵See also Besser, Nathalie Sarraute (15).

VI. Gender Revisited

The question of gender has surfaced throughout this work on Nathalie Sarraute and Enfance. In chapter one I spoke of my initial reaction to the text, how it left me hungry for more information. At the time I wondered if my dissatisfaction reflected Sarraute's personal style of writing, or if it were in some way related to the fact that she is a woman writer/ novelist/ autobiographer. In this same chapter I presented Sarraute's attitude toward her literary and feminist affiliations. I was curious about her refusal to call herself a feminist writer, and was interested in exploring further the critical ambiguity surrounding Sarraute's status as a feminist.

In chapter two I presented Sarraute's ambivalence about the importance of gender (her own and that of the voices in her texts). I determined that Sarraute's awareness of gender stereotypes and her efforts to move beyond them by deliberately scrambling their boundaries was not an unusual attitude to take toward gender-based or feminist concerns. At this time, I reviewed feminist interpretations of her fluid vocabulary and questioned whether Sarraute's dismissal of these readings, combined with her particular take on gender, might add something new to the discussions of difference.

In chapter three I posited that a feminist approach such as Miller's "intertextual reading" might offer the most informed interpretation of the gender/ difference issue in Enfance in that it would take into consideration Sarraute's earlier texts. In addressing

certain feminist questions about Sarraute, I found it necessary to broaden my discussion to works predating Enfance. By including chapter two as a background against which to later compare certain feminist examinations of Enfance, I thus performed an “intertextual reading” of Sarraute’s text(s).

Gender reappeared in chapter four in the form of narratorial voice. Sarraute’s deliberate gender-marking of the two voices that comprise the dialogue in Enfance was viewed alternately as innovative and as positively blended or complex. I offered explanations as to why Sarraute chose to include both genders in her autobiography. As a French writer, she could not avoid the issue as easily as she might have had she written in a language which doesn’t gender-mark its adjectives and past participles.

In chapter five, gender resurfaced as both feminist and “neutral” critics speculated on the role of Sarraute’s mother in her childhood and in her autobiographical project. Examining her mother’s blunt way of speaking, some critics found evidence of a maternal legacy in Sarraute’s clear dislike of clichés. I would counter that Sarraute actually relies upon clichés. Much of her work with tropisms begins with a seemingly innocuous or banal phrase or word. Looking again for traces of a maternal legacy, King found it significant that Sarraute’s mother proudly used a masculine pseudonym for her writing, and posited that Sarraute’s attitude toward the gender of writers (herself included) reflects her mother’s own denial of the (feminine) gender. Others spoke of the importance of her mother’s abandonment on Sarraute’s orientation toward words

or writing. Went-Daoust demonstrated to this end that words acted as a sort of emotional replacement for her mother while Brodzki argued that her mother's absence in Sarraute's childhood inspired her to write Enfance.

I believe that gender remains a relevant issue for Sarraute and her critics. My own insistence on this topic discloses as well a personal belief that there is a place in Sarraute's writing to pose feminist questions. I would charge that Sarraute is a feminist writer with a difference: she denies the feminist associations and connotations which attach to her work. By not cooperating with those feminists who would co-opt her literary creation for their arguments, Sarraute defies typical expectations/ stereotypes of women writers/ novelists/ autobiographers. At the same time, she challenges her critics and readers to meet her on the philosophical level that she holds most dear, in the pre-linguistic space of tropisms.

To Sarraute's challenge, other critics and I raise a few pertinent questions of our own. If tropisms precede language (even as they require the tools of language to be communicated) is one to assume that pre-linguistic equals pre-theoretical or pre-political as well? Does her shift in focus away from the gender of her fictional characters or autobiographical narrators or her blurring of gender stereotypes do feminism more good than harm? Is her discomfort with gender and her slippery treatment of it in her oeuvre enough to further debates around difference? Can those of us familiar with feminist psychoanalytical interpretations of the fluid read Sarraute's liquid metaphors untainted by theory? To all these questions I

would respond that to the degree that Sarraute and her writing provoke her readers to re-evaluate their ways of approaching feminist issues and female writers, she furthers feminist causes and theories of difference.

My persistent probing of gender/ feminist concerns illuminated my own biased tendency to look for difference and feminist consciousness when working on a female writer. This knee-jerk application of feminism to a woman novelist/ autobiographer belongs more with feminist scholarship of earlier eras which focused primarily on gender than with current research which encompasses a broader constellation of influences on a woman's writing, like race, ethnic background, class, or sexual orientation. Yet Bella Brodzki and Leah Hewitt both read Enfance from fairly strict feminist/ psychoanalytical perspectives and Marcelle Marini is currently working on "the question of 'the neuter' in Nathalie Sarraute¹."

While some critics privileged gender in their reception of Enfance, the spectrum of criticism in chapters three, four and five illustrated how often Sarraute and Enfance were read from ungendered critical positions--textual/ intertextual, psychological, and reader-oriented. These critics, like the feminists, called upon the genre of autobiography and their knowledge of Sarraute's earlier works to inform their analyses of her latest text. I included these critical groups because I felt their reactions added positively to my own dialogue with Enfance.

¹See Shifting Scenes (145).

Admittedly, my analysis of the various groups studying Enfance could have been developed along more rigorous theoretical lines. I chose to view Sarraute and Enfance from many different perspectives as much out of a desire to treat honestly and thoroughly the critical literature surrounding the text as out of a personal interest in the new and challenging areas of literary criticism that presented themselves to me. The result has been a broad if somewhat inexhaustive study. For example, I termed one group of critics "reader-oriented" without situating their concerns within the work of reception theorists Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss². Both focus on the relationship between a given text and reader and belong to the trend in contemporary literary criticism that grants as much (or more) space to the "addressee" or "consumer" of literary texts as to either the text or the author. Jauss's "horizon of expectations" would have provided a pertinent theoretical backdrop for an analysis of Sarraute's autobiographical discomfort and her avoidance of generic conventions as his concept looks at how a "system of references" (generic conventions, styles, forms) are first evoked by a text and then subsequently shattered. And, Iser's belief that the meaning of a text is not inherent but arises out of the text-reader rapport would have certainly strengthened the position of those critics who felt "shut out" of Enfance or unimportant in the production of its meaning(s). Furthermore, my intertextual readings of gender issues in chapter two and of Sarraute's attitude toward her

²For an overview of these scholars, see Robert C. Holub's Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction.

readers/ reading public in chapter four might have benefited from an elaboration or application of Tony Bennett's concept of a "reading formation." He argues that texts are "productively activated," not consumed, and that meaning is produced when texts are read alongside one another and the relationships of texts to each other are revealed (3-5).

Mythological readings of Enfance were adequately completed by Leroux and Vercier; Lejeune undertook the task of situating Enfance within the genre of autobiography in his article, "Paroles d'enfance." I chose not to rework these critical perspectives since I felt they had already been adequately discussed. None of the critics surveyed sought to position their reception of Enfance against the backdrops of a sexually-focused or Marxist critical model. Sarraute's upper-class intellectual background provokes relatively little interest compared to her tropisms or her take on autobiography. But is this a reflection of the critics' biases or Sarraute's or some combination of the two?

To critics' assertions that she either "conspicuously avoids explicit references to the body and to sexuality" (Hewitt 67), or that her work embodies a "secret eroticism," Sarraute counters that her articulation of tropisms allows her to explore uncharted territory. Sexuality is, in her opinion, overstudied, and eroticism exists both within and without the act of sex (Besser, "Colloque" 287-8).

Yet, although neither I nor other critics discuss Enfance from every possible optic, it has been viewed through several different critical lenses, some of which, if developed further, would be useful

in a longer textual/ critical study of Sarraute's autobiography. And, since Sarraute situates her text so deliberately in her childhood, Enfance would also lend itself to an analysis grounded in theories of the subgenre of childhood autobiographies. Sarraute's bilingual and Eastern/ Western European heritages might be interpreted from the angles of a theory which looks at the possible impact of these heritages on a child's linguistic development and identity formation.

The range of critical reception of Enfance has introduced me to several areas of literary theory and criticism such as traditional and feminist models of autobiography, and reader-oriented criticism. I have also challenged my own and feminist critics' appropriation of Sarraute/ Enfance for feminism. The realization that literary criticism is a rich, complex, and changing realm of study is perhaps the largest lesson I have gained from viewing Sarraute and her autobiography through different optics.

I have also become profoundly familiar with Sarraute's concept of tropisms throughout my research of her oeuvre. Moreover, the additional information in Enfance regarding Sarraute's early awareness of the power of words have rendered her novels more accessible. From my reading of the secondary/ critical texts and interviews on Sarraute, I can appreciate how difficult it is to grasp the concept of tropistic movement without imposing on it pre-conceived notions or theories. As a result, now, even more than when I began, I am convinced that Sarraute's lifelong dedication to the often violent, always fertile underbelly of conversation remains an important and valid pursuit.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Becker, Lucille Frackman. "Toward a New Language and a New Vision: Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Duras." Twentieth Century French Women Novelists. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989. 110-135.
- Besser, Gretchen R. "Colloque avec Nathalie Sarraute 22 avril 1976." The French Review 50 (1976): 284-289.
- . "Sarraute on Childhood-Her Own." French Literature Series 12 (1985): 154-161.
- Benmussa, Simone. "Les Paroles Vives." L'Arc 95 (1984): 76-82.
- Bennett, Tony. "Texts, Readers, Reading Formations." Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Languages Association. 16 (1983): 3-17.
- Boncenne, Pierre. "Nathalie Sarraute: interview avec Pierre Boncenne." Lire juin 1983, 87-92.
- Brée, Germaine. "Autogynography." Studies in Autobiography. Ed. James Olney. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 171-9.
- . "Experimental Novels? Yes, But Perhaps "Otherwise": Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig." Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction. Ed. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989. 267-83.
- . "Interviews with Two French Novelists." Nathalie Sarraute section. Trans. Cyril Doherty. Contemporary Literature 14 (1973): 137-146.
- Britton, Celia. "The Self and Language in the Novels of Nathalie Sarraute." Modern Language Review 77 (1982): 577-84.
- Brodzki, Bella. "Mothers, Displacement, and Language in the

- Autobiographies of Nathalie Sarraute and Christa Wolf.”
Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography. Ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenk. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988. 243- 259.
- Brulotte, Gaëtan. “Tropismes et sous-conversation.” Arc 95 (1984): 39-54.
- Bruss, Elizabeth W. Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- Eakin, Paul John. “The Referential Aesthetic of Autobiography.” Studies In The Literary Imagination 23 (1990): 129-44.
- Finas, Lucette. “Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres.” Etudes Littéraires 12 (1979): 393-401.
- Finch, Alison, David Kelley, Nathalie Sarraute. “Propos sur la technique du roman: Nathalie Sarraute interviewée par Alison Finch et David Kelley.” French Studies 39 (1985): 305-15.
- Forrester, Viviane. “Portrait de Nathalie.” Magazine littéraire 196 (1983): 18-21.
- Gusdorf, Georges. “Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie.” 1956. Rpt. as “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography.” Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. Trans. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. 28-48.
- Hewitt, Leah D. “Family Scenarios: Transcriptions of Gender and Transgressions of Genre: Nathalie Sarraute's Childhood.” Autobiographical Tighotropes: Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig and Maryse Condé. Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1990. 55-91.

- Holub, Robert C. Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction New Accents. London: Routledge, 1984.
- Kaiser, Grant E. "Interview de Nathalie Sarraute." Romans 20/50: Revue d'Etude du Roman du XXe Siècle. 4 (1987): 117-127.
- King, Adele. French Women Novelists: Defining a Female Style. London: MacMillan, 1989.
- Knapp, Bettina L. "Document--Interview avec Nathalie Sarraute." Kentucky Romance Quarterly. 14 (1967): 283-295.
- . "Nathalie Sarraute." Off-Stage Voices: Interviews with Modern French Dramatists. Ed. Alba Amoia. Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Co., 1975. 160-74.
- Lejeune, Philippe. L'Autobiographie en France. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1971.
- . De l'Autobiographie. 1973. Rpt. as On Autobiography. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. Theory and History of Literature 52. Minneapolis: Univ. of MN Press, 1989.
- Le Pacte Autobiographique. Paris: Seuil, 1975.
- . "Paroles d'enfance." Revue des Sciences Humaines 93 (1990): 23-38.
- Léonard, Martine. "Nathalie Sarraute: un itinéraire féminin au sein du Nouveau Roman?" In Féminité, Subversion, Ecriture. Eds. Suzanne Lamy and Irène Pagès. Montréal: les éditions du remue-ménage, 1983. 151-160.
- Leroux, Catherine. "La perte du sacré: Enfance de Sarraute."

- Mythe, rite, symbole: vingt essais littéraires sur des textes du Romantisme Angevin au XIXe siècle, de l'Anthologie des chansons populaires grecques (de G. Spyridakis), d'auteurs français et étrangers, Fournier... 15 (1986): 384-409.
- Licari, Carmen. "'Qu'est-ce qu'il y a, qu'est-ce qui s'est passé? Mais Rien': Entretiens avec Nathalie Sarraute." Francofonia 9 (1985): 3-16.
- Lionnet, Françoise. Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.
- "Marcelle Marini." Shifting Scenes: Interviews on Women, Writing, and Politics in Post-68 France. Eds. Alice A. Jardine and Anne M. Menke. *Gender and Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. 139-163.
- Miller, Nancy K. "Writing Fictions: Women's Autobiography in France." Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography. Ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. New York: Cornell UP, 1988. 45-61.
- Minogue, Valerie. "Fragments of a Childhood: Nathalie Sarraute's Enfance." Romance Studies 9 (1986): 71-83.
- . "Nathalie Sarraute's Enfance: from experience of language to the language of experience." Studies in French Fiction: Essays in Honour of Vivienne Mylne. Ed. Robert Gibson. London: Grant and Cutler, 1988. 209-24.
- Munley, Ellen W. "I'm Dying But It's Only Your Story: Sarraute's Reader on Stage." Contemporary Literature 24 (1983): 233-58.

- O'Callaghan, Raylene L. "Reading Nathalie Sarraute's Enfance: Reflections on Critical Validity." Romanic Review 80 (1989): 445-61.
- . "Voice(s) in Nathalie Sarraute's Enfance." New Zealand Journal of French Studies 9 (1988): 83-94.
- Olney, James, ed. Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.
- Oppenheim, Lois. Three Decades of the French New Novel. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Ricardou, Jean. Nouveau Roman: Hier, Aujourd'hui. Vol. 2. Paris: Union Générale d'éditions, 1972.
- Rousseau, François Olivier. "Une Enfance." Magazine Littéraire 196 (1983): 25-6.
- Rykiel, Sonia. "Nathalie Sarraute." Les nouvelles littéraires des arts, des sciences et de la société. 9-15 février 1984: 40-41.
- Saporta, Marc et Nathalie Sarraute. "Portrait d'une inconnue." Arc 95 (1984): 5-23.
- Sarraute, Nathalie. Enfance. Paris: Gallimard, 1983.
- . Entre la Vie et la mort. Paris: Gallimard, 1968.
- . "Le Gant Retourné." Cahiers Renaud Barrault 89 (1975): 70-9.
- . Martereau. Paris: Gallimard, 1953.
- . Le Planétarium. Paris: Gallimard, 1959.
- . Portrait d'un Inconnu. 1948. Rpt. Paris: Union Générale d'édition, 1956.
- . Vous les entendez? Paris: Gallimard, 1972.

- Sheringham, Michael. "'Ego Redux'? Strategies in New French Autobiography." Dalhousie French Studies 17 (1989): 27-35.
- Smyth, Edmund J. "Sarraute's Enfance and the Rhetoric of the 'Ressenti'." French Studies Bulletin: A Quarterly Supplement 18 (1986): 11-13.
- Spengemann, William C. The Forms of Autobiography. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980. xi-xvii.
- Stanton, Domna C. "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" The Female Autograph Eds. Domna C. Stanton and Jeanine Parisier Plattel. New York Literary Forum 12-13. New York: NY Literary Forum, 1984. 5-22.
- Van Roey-Roux, Françoise. "Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute ou de la fiction à l'autobiographie." Etudes Littéraires 17 (1984): 273-82.
- Vercier, Bruno. "(Nouveau) Roman et Autobiographie: Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute." French Literature Series 12 (1985): 162-70.
- Went-Daoust, Yvette. "Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute ou le pouvoir de la parole." Les Lettres Romanes 41 (1987): 337-50.

VITA

Michelle Rae LeGault was born in Minnesota on June 10, 1966. She attended Roseville Area Schools (near St. Paul, MN) and graduated from Frank B. Kellogg High School in June 1984. She attended Luther College in Decorah, Iowa from September 1984 to May 1988, where she earned a B.A. cum laude in French and Anthropology. The academic year 1986-87 she spent attending classes at the Université de Montpellier III and living with a French family in Montpellier, France. In the fall of 1988 she moved to Knoxville, TN where she began an M.A. in French in January 1990. She received her Master of Arts degree in December 1992.

She is currently residing in Knoxville. She hopes to find work in business or teaching for a few years before approaching the question of a doctorate in French.