

# Microtexts: An Aspect of the Work of Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute

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I shall attempt to establish some relationship between Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, by examining a sample of their short texts. Nathalie Sarraute's *Tropismes*, 1939, preceded the publication of all her fictional works. The 24 brief texts are generally considered to be preliminary exercises for her important novels. The subject and technique of all of Sarraute's works involve "tropismes"; in her first book she scrutinizes briefer movements and concentrates on an isolated tension or group of tensions, while in her subsequent books the time span is expanded, the point of view more complex, and conflicts or tensions form a wider but always precarious network. The word "tropisme" permits us to stress three major characteristics of Sarraute's fiction (1) the concentration of slight, imperceptible changes, (2) the detection of psychological impulses paralleling those of the animal or vegetable world, (3) the implication of some sort of stimulus. Each "tropisme" is a self-sufficient little study, showing an interrelation between people who remain anonymous outside these offensive and defensive gestures.

It is more difficult to claim that Robbe-Grillet's *Instantanés* (*Snapshots* in English) can throw light on his novels. These texts, composed between 1954-62 are supposed to be experiments in fictional techniques. Their brevity does not express, as it did in *Tropismes*, the short span of a psychological encounter, rather, it refers to the limited time required for an exposure or a series of exposures to give a photographic account of a scene. The scene, whether in motion or not, is viewed as an object: a room containing a dressmaker's dummy and a coffee-pot; a growing accumulation of people behind a closed door in a subway; the sacrificial murder of a woman in the manner of a painting by Gustave Moreau present different obstacles and problems involved in the purely fictional relationships between the eye and the object.

Beckett, in his short texts, imposes or accepts the same type of limitation. As the title implies *Textes pour rien* are not meant for anything; they do not fulfill any function. Beckett wrote this series shortly after completing the *Unnamable*. Published together with three short stories, the thirteen texts provide, no less than much of Sollers', Deguy's and Leiris' writings, examples of genreless literature. *Textes pour rien* possesses a feature partially lacking in *Tropismes* and almost completely in *Instantanés*: unity. From the first to the last page recognizable fictional elements are gradually reduced; for example: the account of an itinerary, the clear distinction between then and now, the naming of peripheral characters, human relations, the distinction between the narrative I and the narrative he, and perceptible changes in the outer world. Convergence increases steadily in spite of the fact that the syntax moves away from recognizable structures or word patterns, thus precluding any form of affirmation or certainty. The narrator gropes in vain to ascertain a relationship between the feeble but essential awareness that is left to him and the language which manifests it.

Each of the three writers in these short texts is in search of a different relation: between man and man, between man and object, between man and language, relationships by which one could also characterize their major writings. These introductory remarks have indicated that, by imposing a certain type of limitation, they manage to focus on a time experience restricted to the present. Even if the time viewed is limited, the three explorations are fraught with difficulties or obstacles; and the encounter with obstacles, whether stated or not, accounts for fragmentation and discontinuity. No global view is ever achieved for between one embryonic action and the next, a break becomes apparent. Roland Barthes in his essay on Butor's *Mobiles* stresses the novelty, so disquieting to the reader, of a book which defies one of the basic requirements of literature, continuity: "Le Livre (traditionnel) est un objet qui enchaîne, développe, file et coule, bref a la plus profonde horreur du vide." And Barthes adds "écrire, c'est couler des mots à l'intérieur de cette grande catégorie du connu, qui est le récit."<sup>1</sup> These comments on *Mobiles* appear pertinent to the three microtexts I am endeavoring to explain; the title of Barthes' essay "Littérature et Discontinu" suggests that discontinuity or fragmentation is now no longer dissociated from literature and that the presence of the void, emptiness, nothingness is accepted as a necessity. The void, if and where it appears in these microtexts does not stem from metaphysical anguish or fascination. Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute, even when their inquiries infringe upon such territories as the metaphysical, the aesthetic and the psychological, do not abandon the world of the immediate, the everyday from which their questions stem. These writers proceed by refusals rather than adherence, and in their world a question generates a problem and not an answer. The void thus tends to result in a renewed contestation of continuity in perception and in expression of self as well as of the world.

In "Tropisme XXIV" Nathalie Sarraute examines the relation of the group to one person, of a so-called brotherhood towards one who does not belong. The one and the many remain impersonal, anonymous. In almost all of *Tropismes* characters are referred to as *il* or *elle*, indefinite singular or plural; imperceptible movements take place between these barely delineated characters. Sarraute gives an account of their inaudible speeches, their invisible gestures, their elusive tensions, their unaccountable forces of attraction and repulsion. This hidden world is recorded, without embellishments in a style which, as Yvon Belaval says, "adheres" or "sticks" to the sensation.<sup>2</sup> We can no more identify the persons than the action they might carry out, we can barely account for their stress or tendencies. Sarraute who refuses to be distracted by the outer, tangible signs detects constant hidden movement. Change, progression or retraction, remain fragmentary or discontinuous, never develop into a full-fledged stage or into a persistent movement. We witness recurring birth, even its embryonic manifestations, without ever attaining an *aim*, an equilibrium.

"Tropisme XXIV" is divided into sections corresponding to different degrees of intensity, different instants of the movement. Verbs abound, suggesting ceaseless activity, minute actions and an alertness which excludes relaxation. The members of the group, underground like animals, shelter themselves in the furthest, safest corner. These little mammals squat, crawl, and watch for their attackers. Instinctive reactions, erratic, ephemeral gestures link man to animals. As none of these stages begins and ends anywhere, time, destitute of progress and continuity, annihilates itself and space remains

empty. The text begins with: "Ils se montraient rarement."<sup>3</sup> Invisible, incapable of venturing out in daylight, incapable of standing up, they reduce themselves to nothing. Their faces "à demi-effacés et ternis" (p. 139), are a half-visible, almost inscrutable mask. The only adjectives and adverbs which carry any emotional or moral overtones: "humble," "honteusement," also suggest a form of reduction, a desire to hide. Yet, the repetitious, insignificant gestures of the group form a chain, alluded to three times: "un rond bien tendu, ils l'entouraient," "se tenaient autour du lui encerclés" and "leurs mains enlacées" (pp. 139-40), thus a circle is traced around a void. Alert to danger signals or provocation, the group becomes a storehouse of energy all the more frightening as empty glares hold sway above the tight chain of arms. Whether these cruel games, reminiscent of childhood, pertain to adoration or persecution might be irrelevant, for positive and negative fascination are equivalent. Since waiting and performing have become synonymous, it does not matter whether one is within the circle: fear, defensive gestures as well as potential aggression exist on both sides. The reader cannot move out of the tight network to another instant in time to discover what may have distinguished once upon a time the one from the many.

Contrary to Beckett who reduces interrelations by searching for the fundamental, Nathalie Sarraute strips them of everything but habit and contingency. When Beckett's characters threaten to part they are, merely, unable to formulate tangible reasons for staying together. In Nathalie Sarraute's universe useless tensions and nagging constitute the only level. In Beckett, contradictions express a fundamental uncertainty of human beings, in Nathalie Sarraute contradictions such as: "En avant: Ah non, ce n'est pas cela! En arrière" (p. 28), show that our relations amount to a senseless game of hide and seek. In "Tropisme IV," as in XXIV opponents ("elles" and "il") are again accomplices participating in the same game. "He" is like the director of a ballet or an orchestra leading an invisible troupe in an aimless repetition of insignificant steps: "En avant" and "en arrière" are repeated in various, arbitrary successions. The identity of who provokes and who seduces raises unanswerable questions, not only because of complicity but also because any answer would introduce the notion of origin and give the illusion of a time sequence.

Everyone plays with his own image and with other people's, thus creating narcissistic reflections of already distorted portraits. "Elles baragouinaient des choses à demi-exprimées; le regard perdu et comme suivant intérieurement un sentiment subtil et délicat qu'elles semblaient ne pouvoir traduire" (p. 27). This introductory sentence points towards the insignificant, the inarticulate, towards reduction of thought, of speech, of identity. What is said merely expresses stagnation. Anonymous creatures feign to look for reality but grope for nothing. Yet their game never exceeds certain limits, the laws of self-preservation governing the instinctive would never let sources of vitality die out. Nathalie Sarraute suggests the sensuality of this interrelation, stripped of outer manifestations. The poetic qualities of these texts, which show the vibration of a life in which gesture and word, self and others interfere, yet remain invisible, are fairly obvious.

In "Le Mannequin" Robbe-Grillet sets out to make the inventory of an ordinary room: a table with a coffeepot, a window, a mirror over the chimney, a wardrobe, a dummy. He begins with a simple sentence: "La cafetière est sur la table."<sup>4</sup> Here and elsewhere he uses the static verbs

such as “être,” letting the reader know merely that the things are there. The objects on which attention is focused reappear frequently in cubist and surrealist paintings; but Robbe-Grillet uses neither the cubist principle of searching a visual unity synthesizing a variety of objects into a single perspective, nor the Surrealist trick of bringing together distant realities. Olga Bernal has shown in the introductory chapter of her *Alain Robbe-Grillet* that the novelist, in his method, comes close to the pursuits of contemporary painters. After quoting statements from Braque, Miró, Bazaine, Masson, Giacometti, she says: “Ce qui est frappant ici, c’est la réduction graduelle qui tend vers l’effacement total des formes connues intimes. Le peintre n’est pas tranquille avant qu’il ait désencombré son tableau de toutes les images de sa mémoire.”<sup>5</sup>

In “Le Mannequin” Robbe-Grillet reveals what can be seen in the room and even alludes to what cannot be seen. The author remains strictly within the limits of the self-imposed frame, mentioning first the centrally situated object, then what is to its right, then what is behind or above it. Information is first provided about the color and shape of the coffeepot. Yet the recurring S shapes, the spout, the handle, the roundness of the pot surmounted by the mushroom-shaped lid point already towards the growing complexity of the exploration. Robbe-Grillet, although he remains within a limited space, and looks at plain, simple objects without going beyond their surface, never reaches a coherent, overall view. Why? In conformity with the title of the volume, the author presents but a series of snapshots. Such two-dimensional, photographic renderings occur also in the novels, e.g. the outline of the gull in *Le Voyeur* and the progressions of the shadow in *La Jalousie*. Moreover, the notion of “instantanés,” by restricting perception to an instant, excludes time exposure or the unfolding of a time sequence. The room is seen for an isolated moment; a slight rearrangement of the mannequin’s position separates this vision completely from all previous perceptions.

The dressmaker’s room is endowed with two mirrors, shiny rectangular surfaces apparently devoid of the complexities of the coffeepot. The one above the chimney constitutes a focal point: it repeats, reechoes, reflects, reverses, fragments, enlarges, brings nearer or makes distant most other objects in the room. It becomes the screen on which all can be seen at a single glance and on which all can be confined to a two dimensional vision. The camera assembles into an image the objects standing before the mirror and those seen in the mirror. The verbal inventory does not attempt to unite the visible elements by any meaning; in other words, the sum total of details does not add up to anything. Careful accounting of details meets with resistance; one statement sometimes merely corrects the previous one: “L’anse a, si l’on veut, la forme d’une oreille ou plutôt de l’ourlet extérieur d’une oreille, mais ce serait une oreille mal faite trop arrondie et sans lobe” (p. 10). Simple, everyday objects, or fragments of reality cannot be automatically translated into language. A language corresponding to the objective eye of the camera has to be created or rediscovered.

The mirror above the chimney reflects one side of the window and also the wardrobe mirror in which both sides of the window are reflected. Robbe-Grillet does not merely express an encounter of the eye and the object, he includes on more than one occasion the reflection, or even the reflection of the reflection, of an object. The window as rectangular transparency seems abolished and is replaced by an image implying multiplication and fragmentation of the object’s real contours. Thus the curtains in becoming a dividing line,

have lost their function of hiding and covering up; and for the strip of wood, separating the sides of the window, a wooden latch belonging to the wardrobe can be substituted. Robbe-Grillet does not separate or isolate objects, whose existence he has presupposed. He makes no attempt to recreate them, to grant them unity, plenitude or self-sufficiency.

The title refers to a single mannequin. Before mentioning what can be seen in the mirror, Robbe-Grillet has stated that the mannequin stands to the right of the table. However, later, he accounts for three mannequins, different in size, but aligned, forming a cortège. The dummy with its human shape reflected, we presume, by a mechanism even more complex than the window, becomes an ironic substitute for reality. When finally attention returns to the coffeepot, we detect no longer a brown and yellow shiny porcelain contour, but a mirror reflecting once more the window and shadow of the dummy. As these reflections are more warped and distorted than the previous ones, unreality and illusion alone remain. The vision provided by the camera, which excludes literary, pictorial and personal memories, is held together by nothing more than the instantaneous exposure which will not be repeated.

In the final paragraph, Robbe-Grillet destroys any mysteries that may have survived; the room is light, we have seen all there is. The tile on which the coffeepot stands represents an owl. Due to its enforced blindness, the painted animal cannot enter the game of reflection. The frightful quality of its look has deliberately been made irrelevant. Instantaneous contact with a scene characterizes Rimbaud's *Illuminations*; spatial exploration on a limited scale characterizes Reverdy's *Poèmes en prose* and *Etoiles peintes*. Robbe-Grillet searches for a unity quite different from the Rimbaudian flash or the Reverdyian spatial order: he conveys only the image of a moment thus pointing to our divorce from reality.

The first "Texte pour rien" opens as an inquiry. The word "suddenly" and the historical past indicate that a change has taken place. The second sentence promises a possible explanation, as it refers to orders received by the narrator. But in reality it presents a shift rather than a continuity, a shift from a moment to a habitual action, from a change to a state, thus constituting the meaningful nucleus of the text: a manifold postponement of answers. The narrator who postpones the answer to the real question concentrates on "now" and "here," on the present moment and place. As he is unsure of his identity, his knowledge, his memory, he essentially discovers the discrepancy between his inadequate thought and even more inadequate language. He utters statements which he negates even before they are fully formulated; uses verbless clauses, long alignments of words, answers which twist themselves into questions. Beckett's syntax, barely punctuated, generates its own type of discontinuity, interruption and fragmentation.

The narrator is unable to account for his present station. Since he cannot delineate his own existence as an entity, he addresses himself to his head and to his body, thus suggesting a division or a rupture rather than a conflict of forces or dialectics. He lies on the ground, his face touching the damp earth, unable to move. This unchanging present, an endless repetition of contourless moments, extends into timelessness. Although the narrator knows that the day is drawing to an end, he cannot relate to time; he cannot tell how long he has remained at the same spot. He is oblivious of almost everything but his birth and his parents. Nightfall and fog cloud his view so

that his birthplace, probably within reach, is nevertheless obliterated; and the reader wonders whether the tomblike earth on which he lies is his birthplace, as no discernable path leads anywhere else. Although the narrator has ascended a mountain, he lies in a hollow surrounded by shrubbery — at once a tomb and a womb.

Gérard Genette, in his "Frontières du récit," distinguishes "discours" from "récit": "Dans le discours, quelqu'un parle, et sa situation dans l'acte même de parler est le foyer des significations les plus importantes; dans le récit, comme Benveniste le dit avec force, *personne ne parle*, en ce sens qu'à aucun moment nous n'avons à nous demander *qui parle*, où et *quand* etc. pour recevoir la signification du Texte."<sup>6</sup> Although the narrator of "Texte pour rien I" is almost reduced to nothing, he does not provide a "récit," for we still ask the question: who speaks? He himself suggests that he narrates, but he infinitely fragments his récit by introducing elements of discourse: hypothetical and self-denying statements. Yet due to uncertainty about his temporal and physical boundaries, the narrator is unable to provide a discourse in his own name. Thus his life is evoked at best as a series of echoes, reflections and shadows. He retells disconnected bits of stories inherited or created by him, yet never understood; when finally he wraps his arms around himself, he becomes the sole listener of his fragmented, meaningless tales. Incarnating simultaneously death and birth, he remains the creator of the void within his own discourse.

Recurrent patterns recording monotony, yet revealing also imperceptible modifications, point towards the presence of poetic qualities. To suggest the formulations of a mind which no longer functions according to a tangible, organic continuum, Beckett gives birth to a new type of syntax. He gives each word an autonomy, which usually it only acquires in poetry. The words do not assume poetic connotations, but become entities that can animate or interrupt thought, accelerate or deaden rhythm. A word can postpone its own emergence or expression within a sentence and thus produce a void, a silence, in regard to meaning as well as sound. In "Texte pour rien I" this new language, here and there revives a tradition, that of a lullaby. The question raised: where did I come from becomes similar to: why was I born. The narrator, as he rocks himself to sleep, is at once the father and the son: "Dormons, comme sous cette lointaine lampe, emmêlés, d'avoir tant parlé, tant écouté, tant peiné, tant joué."<sup>7</sup> But nobody listens to the incomplete, recurrent century old sounds.

In the twelfth "Texte pour rien" events are further obliterated and the narrator becomes still more elusive. The starless barren winter night is grey enough to keep death at a distance. In the first sentence, "je serai" follows "je fus," that is a future follows a completed action; "imaginé" follows "remémoré": the recapitulation of a past event or its shadow precedes the forecasting of a future occurrence. Thus the present is encompassed as the monologue goes around in circles. The question: "Comment fera-t-il demain pour supporter demain" is answered by: "il fera comme hier, comme il le fit hier" (p. 212). Future and past repeat one another, time distinctions are eliminated, and nothing prevents the confusion of event, dream, echo, recollection. Life is a meaningless, weak gesture, a decrepit voice: "les vieux non-sens, le menton sur le coeur, les bras ballants, cassé aux genoux, dans la nuit" (p. 212). Words evoking distance and dimness in regard to time and space, recur, suggesting distance and dimness in awareness. More than in

the first text, the narrator, constantly shifting from first to third person, is threatened by the impossibility of joining the world within to the world without. Although Ruby Cohn distinguishes the narrator who speaks from the one who listens, and from the "one without person or number,"<sup>8</sup> although there is a reference to a "joli trio," it would be risky for the reader to accept any clear cut division. Away, in a sense, from himself, from his words and his voice, the narrator utters long sentences composed of fragments pulling away from each other rather than complementing their efforts. Capital letters emerge in the middle of sentences, reminding the reader that there never was a beginning, and renew, for a brief instant, effort and stress. Present participles and indefinite words, promising continuity, are followed by negations that strangle not only the flow, but the meaning, and turn the voice into a stutter. The physical and mental condition of this fragmented being who calls himself "mémoire et rêve de moi," changes direction even before we know where he is going. Words alternate with murmurs and with inaudible breaths. Direct and indirect discourse, alternating under the guise of continuity and remoteness, punctuate one another. By an involuntary effort, the narrator gives birth to dying words.

Although the three authors lead us to ironic, if not negative discoveries, they arouse in the reader unrelaxed attention. We thus approach these texts as fiction in which the novelist plays the game of renewing again and again our expectations, our hopes. Robbe-Grillet has referred to his texts as stories. Sarraute calls *Tropismes* merely short texts and Beckett has, for all we know, contested by his silence any attempt at classification. These attempts have repeatedly been made by critics. Ludovic Janvier calls *Textes pour rien* "des récits — méditation."<sup>9</sup> Olga Bernal refers to *Instantanés* as prose-poems.<sup>10</sup> Ruth Temple feels that *Tropismes* belongs to the same genre.<sup>11</sup> Yvon Belaval has included a discussion of *Tropismes* in his *Poèmes d'aujourd'hui* without raising any doubt about its poetic nature.<sup>12</sup> The three writers who have written prose-fiction in conscious opposition to tradition have probably never thought of introducing a poetic dimension. We have mentioned that, in their universe, explorations focus on the ordinary, that time sequences disintegrate, that words regain their autonomy, that the void and discontinuity emerge again and again. Baudelaire in his *Petits poèmes en prose* had shunned the lyrical in order to recognize the everyday world, Rimbaud tried to retain the flash of the instant, Reverdy, unable to feel sure of his own existence, erred through empty structures to gain belief. Michaux uses each word as a weapon against the unrelievable tension which separates us from the void. Ponge, who has restricted his search to everyday objects, suggests doubt about his ability to approach them. We might agree with Jacques Garelli who in his *Gravitation poétique* bridges the distance between poetry and other genres in various ways: "Désormais, par l'écriture romanesque, comme par l'écriture poétique, renouvelée par l'entreprise de Ponge en particulier, l'oeuvre d'art n'est plus "miroir du monde." Par elle et à travers elle, le monde se constitue."<sup>13</sup> We cannot deny that even the most recent of the prose-poets mentioned evokes mystery transcending, be it to a limited degree, our reality, whereas Nathalie Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and Beckett only arouse our imagination so that the void within their creation reflects our shadows.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques*, Paris, 1964, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup>Yvon Belaval, *Poèmes d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, 1964, p. 91.

<sup>3</sup>Nathalie Sarraute, *Tropismes*, Paris, 1957, p. 139. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition.

<sup>4</sup>Alain Robbe-Guillet, *Instantanés*, Paris, 1962, p. 9. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition.

<sup>5</sup>Olga Bernal, *Alain Robbe-Grillet, le roman de l'absence*, Paris, 1964, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup>Gérard Genette, *Figures II*, Paris, 1969, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup>Samuel Beckett, *Nouvelles et textes pour rien*, Paris, 1958, p. 135. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition.

<sup>8</sup>Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett, the comic gamute*, New Brunswick, 1962, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup>Ludovic Janvier, *Pour Samuel Beckett*, Paris, 1966, p. 86.

<sup>10</sup>Olga Bernal, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup>Ruth Temple, *Nathalie Sarraute*, New York, 1968.

<sup>12</sup>Yvon Belaval, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup>Jacques Garelli, *La Gravitation poétique*, 1966, p. 85.