

substantial improvements in social justice and living standards? Such an interpretation of his message would be short-sighted. Konrád views the fact of the human condition in broader terms and shows little faith in progress.

György Konrád's first novel is, without doubt, one of the finest written in Hungary in the last twenty-five years. The various translations, scheduled to appear shortly, can hardly be expected to do justice to the linguistic wealth of the original prose-poem. (The English translation will be published in the United States by Brace-Harcourt early in 1974.)

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NATALIE SARRAUTE
Vous les entendez?
Paris: Gallimard, 1972. Pp. 223.

In her latest novel, *Vous les entendez?*, Nathalie Sarraute draws us down, once more, into the depths of the human mind, which she has explored so intensively now for over thirty years. The continuity of her work is remarkable, yet so is its variety, for each new novel explores a fresh aspect of those ever-changing, ambiguous relationships with others, which are as much the substance of our lives as of her novels. Technically, *Vous les entendez?* moves further in the direction which has become gradually more apparent in her last three novels. The narrative thread, never very strong and always subordinate, is here reduced to a single sequence, which is repeated time after time through the novel, and its variations reveal to us the characters and the changes in their relationships.

Two men sit quietly smoking after dinner, when, from upstairs, the sound of laughter floats down to them. For the guest it is the innocent laughter of carefree youth, but for the host it is the mocking laughter of his own children, provoked by an incident earlier in the evening when the guest took from the mantelpiece, a pre-columbian statue of a mythical beast and placing it on the table, began to examine and admire. Their father knows that the children are now laughing at him and his guest and at their idea of Art and good taste.

This sequence is the starting point for an exploration of the relationships between the protagonists. Each repetition of the incident brings a change of mood and a varying of attitudes, for here, as in all her novels, Nathalie Sarraute sees human relationships as a perpetual flux and reflux where characters act, react, counteract in the unending movements which she calls *tropismes* and which she plots so remorselessly, so intimately. Between father and children there is a deep antagonism, produced by the generation gap and by their resistance to his efforts to transmit to them his own esthetic sense, and yet there is a bond between them also, stemming from a desire for reconciliation and an awareness that even their strife is a private, intimate affair in which blows are struck by the flicker of an eyelid or a certain tone of voice that pass unnoticed by outsiders. The children's laughter mocks, but it also bewitches and lures the father, like the singing of the *Lorelei*, tempting him into a warm complicity with them in their hostility to the guest.

The struggle between father and children which centres around a certain definition of Art, marks the continuation of a theme which, always present in Nathalie Sarraute's work, has become more dominant in her latest novels. *Les Fruits d'Or* (1963) which describes reactions to a best-selling novel, and *Entre la vie et la mort* (1968) which follows the writing of a novel from genesis to publication, both explore the almost intangible qualities which make one novel a success with the public and another a failure. *Vous les entendez?* widens the field to take in other art forms and continues the debate which Nathalie Sarraute presents, not in terms of a search for esthetic absolutes, but as a perpetual to-and-fro of fashion and of an elusive thing called "good taste," as father and children present their differing views of the pre-columbian sculpture.

For the father, Art is catalogued, classified, and sanctified. Paintings and sculptures are cult-objects placed in museum-temples to be visited by respectful worshippers. On the chosen few, a work of art will bestow its favors in the form of a beneficent illumination which brings a mystical sense of peace. For him the sculpture is a household god, handed on by his own father, to be cherished and revered, and then bequeathed to his children. For the children its power is that of a dead past holding the present in shackles. Theirs is the realm of the free, the spontaneous, and the transient. Their cult-objects are the juke-box, the thriller, comics, glossy magazines, advertizing. The division is presented on all levels, from the superficial (this snobbish display of his knowledge of the contents of the "best" museums and their passion for "babyfoot"), to the most fundamental (his universe, like his art, is static and particularised, theirs is collective and dynamic).

Nathalie Sarraute invites the reader into the private world in which the two attitudes attempt self-justification, not to explain or classify emotions, but to seize them at their root in all their violence through a kaleidoscope of vivid movement, before the veneer of civilization tones down their passion. In this world there can be no reconciliation, since for each side in the struggle the process of self-justification involves the condemnation of the other. If the father is to prove the superiority of his esthetic values, he must discredit the attitude of his children: if they are to assert their freedom, they must break away from his tyranny. No compromise is possible, for in this world conflict is life itself as each seeks his own identity in a continual confrontation with the Other.

But at the same time there is no Self and no Other. The protagonists have no physical identity in the novel. They are characterized by their words and by the cult-objects with which they surround themselves, but the link between these two, traditionally constituted by appearance and personality, is totally lacking. We do not know, for example, how many children there are, nor how old they are: they are presented as one collective consciousness from which only occasionally a single element is detached, an "elle," who is a spokeswoman and a leader. This concept of character presents to the reader only basic movements of sympathy, hostility, complicity, abnegation, and always self-justification, but these remain currents of emotion which never freeze into fixed personality traits. In the words of the cover note "une même substance circule librement . . . entre des consciences sans frontières." Such currents imply tension and mutual dependence even in antagonism. The artistic unity of the novel lies, thus, in its necessary polarity of father against children, or father and children against guest and social worker, etc. The social structure changes constantly but is always binary.

Such, however, is Madame Sarraute's insistence on the dynamic principle, that even those "poles" which represent father or children are shown as centres of consciousness with no fixed awareness of self. Father is both "je" and "il": the children speak as both "nous" and "ils." These differences in person represent no difference in the degree of our intimacy with "je/nous" on the one hand and "il(s)" on the other. We are not "inside" or "outside" a character in any conventional sense but rather brought by the author to that point of awareness where, in constituting itself, the consciousness is still hovering with uncertainty between "je" and "il," hesitating to acknowledge the existence of self and other, of subject and object. In this context it is interesting to note Madame Sarraute's frequent use of imagery borrowed from the nursery tales of the revelation of Otherness (the three little pigs and the big bad wolf, Little Red Riding Hood, etc.) in the light of Sartre's treatment of the dawn of Self/Other awareness as a critical point of childhood experience.

Father and children communicate on the level of "sous-conversation" or "prédialogue," interpreting the significance of the apparently banal and trivial in terms of their conflicts. In contrast to Madame Sarraute's earliest novels and following the trend of her most recent work, the surface level of conversation and dialogue has almost disappeared from *Vous les entendez?* and increasingly in her novels there is a questioning of the validity of words themselves on any level of expression. They begin to lose their air of certainty and become no more than approximate labels for indefinable experiences. The father's experiences of Art, for example, in their moments of ecstasy are beyond description ("... pas 'infini,' pas 'emplit,' pas 'cela.' Même 'cela,' il ne faut pas . . . c'est déjà trop . . . Rien. Aucun mot.") (p. 131). Words serve only to disguise and to protect what cannot be expressed and, perhaps, the at times almost desperate mood of attempted self-justification in the novel comes from the feeling conveyed by the author that the text itself is no more than an approximate translation into a crude, inadequate medium of something infinitely more subtle and delicate that is beyond the grasp of language.

Vous les entendez? touches the limits of consciousness and the boundaries of language as communication, yet, at the same time, it emphasizes the necessity for consciousness to affirm its Self and its need for communication with the Other. Father and children are locked in a bitter conflict but neither can exist without that conflict. When at the close of the novel their

relationship comes to an end, the children's laughter is "pour personne. Des rires dans le vide" (p. 223). In this vacuum it cannot continue and silence descends at last.

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Non-Functional Contradictions in Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*

With its small but nonetheless labyrinthine setting, minute descriptions, notations of spatial relationships, numerous and sudden shifts from one time period to another, incremental repetitions, transformations and mergings of events, and series of contradictory time markers, Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* demands to be read with nearly the same obsessive attention to detail with which the narrator studies the objects and persons within his range of vision. In this elaborately, carefully, and cleverly constructed novel, a few purposeless contradictions seem to have escaped the watchful eye of its creator.¹ These tiny lapses probably would go unnoticed in a novel focusing less on minutiae and requiring less exact visualization.

A reader of *Jealousy* soon becomes aware that the narrator views A . . . through three bedroom windows, two facing south (toward the central portion of the veranda and the valley) and one west. These windows, however, are numbered in an inconsistent way. Shortly after the novel commences, the narrator indicates that A . . . 's "little work table" is "near the second window, against the partition separating the bedroom from the hallway" (p. 41), and within the same sequence he refers to the window on "the west gable-end of the house" as the "third window" (p. 42). In part three again the narrator identifies the windows by number. While sitting at her dressing table, which is located in front of the west window, A . . . 's gaze is reflected "behind her, toward the bedroom's third window, the central portion of the veranda and the slope of the valley" (p. 67) — toward, in other words, the window close to the "little work table" and nearest the partition separating the bedroom from the hallway. The next paragraph of the text indicates that "the second window, which looks south like this third one, is nearer the southwest corner of the house . . ." (p. 67). Later on the same page the narrator calls "the first window, that of the gable-end" (that is, facing west). Thus, the window originally called the "second" becomes the "third," the window (west) originally called the "third" becomes the "first," and the window originally unnumbered but presumably the first becomes the "second." By p. 93, near the conclusion of part five, the confusion becomes even worse. The window near the "little work table" is now the "first window" (p. 93), not the "second" or "third" as in the previous cases; and the window which "overlooks the west gable-end"