

writer in society, of the perilous interaction of literature and politics, and of the immense complexities of the responsibility of the writer to serve society, *Literature of the Hundred Flowers* is a remarkable document in the annals of creative expression.

Robert E. Hegel
Washington University, St. Louis

How Does One Handle Sarraute's Fiction?

A Note on Valerie Minogue, *Nathalie Sarraute and the War of the Words*

As a consequence of the leading position that was hers in the fifties with respect to other, mostly younger, "new novelists," Nathalie Sarraute was later drawn into a wrong-headed controversy; critics as well as some fellow novelists wondered if her ideas on the novel, not to speak of her writing practice, were congruent with those of Robbe-Grillet, Ricardou, and others. As if fiction or poetry should ever conform to a preestablished theory. For a while, in France, it seemed as though people were reliving the neoclassical arguments involving Corneille's plays and pedants' definitions of tragedy. Theories should of course emerge from studies based on the practices of writers, not the other way around, and they often need to be modified after having been confronted with evolving practices. Postwar literary theories did first arise in precisely that fashion, and they are of crucial importance to our understanding of the writing process. They are ancillary to sound scholarship; they do not, however, make up a set of laws. Criteria for the evaluation of poetry and fiction lie elsewhere.

The difference between Sarraute's writing and that of writers originally associated with her by critics may be what has affected the number and quality of book-length studies devoted to her work, especially in English-speaking countries. Those unsympathetic to contemporary trends have been attracted to her work, but they found themselves illprepared to analyze it; those interested in current theory have been inclined to pass her by. Valerie Minogue's book (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1981) is thus only the second one to appear. Hence, to say that it is the better of the two (and I think it is), is both somewhat meaningless insofar as Minogue's essay is concerned and unfair to Gretchen Besser's *Nathalie Sarraute* (Boston: Twayne, 1979). The latter is more academic, attempts to be all-encompassing, and is subject to constraints laid down by the editors of Twayne's "World Authors" series. The former concentrates on five novels, which are analyzed in some detail, and displays greater originality in style and presentation. Minogue accurately describes Besser's book as "useful" (p. v); I should term hers both useful and engaging.

Her title, *Nathalie Sarraute and the War of the Words*, in its obvious takeoff on H. G. Wells's classic, places the discussion on proper grounds, "the war between the petrifying power of words and the fluidity of experience" (p. 1). The implicit allusion to Mallarmé's "mots de la tribu," hence to a poetic presence in the

fiction, is followed up at appropriate moments. Even more so, as the subtitle to her introductory chapter on *Tropismes*, "The Theme of Creation," makes clear, she also stresses what Sarraute's fiction reveals about the creative process: "The act of creation is always at the center of her work, and the generation and ordering of words her constant theme" (p. 20). It is thus fitting that her analyses lead up to the chapter on *Entre la vie et la mort*, Sarraute's fifth novel, which is most obviously centered in the creative process and has already been the object of fine essays by Stephen Heath in *The Nouveau Roman* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972) and Mary McCarthy in *The Writing on the Wall* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970)—and both are of course acknowledged by Minogue. It is to her credit that she has ably traced the emergence of that theme back to Sarraute's earliest writings. In most instances, she points to the writer's poetic language, laying stress on "the physical properties of language" or, in a felicitous phrase, "the carnal weight of words" (p. 182).

Her point of view is what I should call exclusively literary, and she conducts her investigation with the competence and sensitivity of a person who is not only well-read, but subjectively attracted to the object of her study. Praiseworthy as her book is, however, it could have been better (although perhaps less engaging) had her implicit notion of the literary domain been less narrow. She does, for instance, provide several brief analyses of short excerpts from *Tropismes*, *Portrait d'un inconnu*, and *Martereau*; these are perceptive, as far as they go—but they are really impressionistic and do not go far enough. They do not draw on the knowledge that might have been gained from linguistics (Benveniste *et al.*), or from the phonetic research of, say, Ivan Fonagy. And when she writes, "No language can take possession of reality" (p. 54), she seems so close and at the same time so far from the mark that I can merely conclude that she has not given much thought to the actual nature of the relationships involving language, reality, and the real. Or take her implicit rejection of any reliance on psychoanalytic theory, a rejection that appears to be based on a rather naive statement by Sarraute herself (p. 198, n. 17)—and Besser had dismissed a psychoanalytic approach for an even more misguided reason. What she does not seem to realize is that the insights we have gained from Freud and Lacan, to mention but two leading theorists, are not meant to engage us in a psychoanalysis of the writer; rather, they are meant to help us reach a better understanding of the text, its elaboration and its effects—and eventually of ourselves. The latter aim, Valerie Minogue would surely agree, is shared by Nathalie Sarraute.

In the case of *Le Planetarium*, the obviously middle-class nature of the incidents that serve as props for the more significant processes forming the core of the fiction are probably not intended as social satire or irony; Minogue is right to criticize Henri Peyre on that score (p. 93), but they assume an essential role just the same. They are what makes the novel's final statement, "Nous sommes bien tous un peu comme ça," acceptable to the intended readers. They were part and parcel of the daily lives of the postwar Parisian upper bourgeoisie—the class to which Sarraute and the majority of her readers belong. They are quite predictable in such a context and their role corresponds to Jakobson's phatic function; it is only the alienated critic who notices them, thus justifying his own existence, in a way. And since they are units of the mechanism that allows the literary work to function, such matters need to be accounted for.

A full understanding of texts requires that criticism or scholarship be integrated rather than treated exclusively as either "literary" or "psychoanalytical," or what have you. This does not mean that partial criticism, such as Valerie Minogue's, is invalid. The latter represents an auspicious beginning, but it needs to be rounded out. The qualities of her work become rather obvious when

compared to the most recent French-language study on Sarraute's novels, André Allemand's *L'OEuvre romanesque de Nathalie Sarraute* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1980), which overlong, less sensitive, and somewhat pedantic. As an introduction to Sarraute's fiction, it is too forbidding; as a scholarly investigation, it is no more thorough than Minogue's. Perhaps scholars exaggerate the difficulty inherent in Sarraute's novels; granted, they are not easy to analyze, but is it really that arduous a task to read them? Is it not possible to enjoy them without having an official guide on how to proceed? This opens the question of the diverse functions of criticism versus academic scholarship and the problems that arise when one straddles the two, as Valerie Minogue and many others are wont to do. She believes that Sarraute "makes considerable, and even at times excessive, demands on the reader" (p. 168). That may or may not be true, but for my part I should prefer to repeat what she herself says at the end of a mock debate on Sarraute's works between prosecution and defense: "I call the works themselves to the witness-box. Examine them for yourself" (p. 179). Also, forget your prejudices about what a novel should or should not be, and do not repress your imaginative responses to the text.

Leon S. Roudiez
Columbia University

(Auto)biography: Bernard Malamud's *Dubin's Lives*

"'When you write biography you want to write about people who will make you strain to understand them.' Dubin said it was like chasing a runner you would never catch up with. 'But the game is, I suppose, to make the reader think that's exactly what you have done, and maybe in a blaze of illumination even have out-distanced him. It's an illusionary farce that holds me by the tail.'" What more elusive (auto)biographical subject is there than self? So Bernard Malamud proves in his (non)fictional, (auto)biographical account of the life of (auto)biographer, William B. Dubin. *Dubin's Lives* is an example of autobiography by indirection. While presenting the life of another person, Malamud provides—perhaps inevitably—a version of himself. Although he states in a *New York Times* interview that the novel is "not basically autobiographical,"² his interviewer describes the book as "intimately connected to him [Malamud], nerve end to nerve end" (*NYT*, p. 31). Malamud calls it "his attempt at bigness, at summing up what he has learned over the long haul" (*NYT*, p. 31). In a journal he kept while working on the novel, Malamud writes: "One must transcend the autobiographical detail by inventing it after it is remembered" (*NYT*, p. 31).

Although Malamud invents and transcends, the reader can, without straining, detect biographical similarities shared by Malamud and his fictional protagonist. His biographer-hero is fifty-six in 1973 when the novel begins. He has "a bulge of a disciplined belly—thus far and no farther" (*DL*, p. 4), "grizzled" (*DL*, p. 4) gray hair, and a "head perhaps a half-size small for his height" (*DL*, p. 4). He

¹Bernard Malamud, *Dubin's Lives* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979) p. 14. Subsequent references to this text will be marked *DL* and will appear parenthetically following quoted material.

²Ralph Tyler, "A Talk with the Novelist," *The New York Book Review* (February 18, 1979), p. 31. All other references to this article will be marked *NYT* and will appear parenthetically after the quoted text.