

# The Emergence of a Feminist Voice: Nathalie Sarraute's *Le Planétarium*

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Even though *L'Ere du Soupçon (Essais sur le roman)* did not appear until 1956, Nathalie Sarraute has been writing theory ever since her first published work *Tropismes* (1939). In *Le Planétarium* (1959),<sup>1</sup> she posits the signifying process in and between speaking subjects in specific situations. Like the French feminist and theoretician Julia Kristeva, Nathalie Sarraute works on language, laboring in the *materiality* of that which society regards as a means of contact and understanding.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Sarraute's use of the word establishes a rhythm in her text indicative of Kristeva's appropriation of the Platonic concept of the *chora*: "... a wholly provisional articulation that is essentially mobile and constituted of movements and their ephemeral stases . . . Neither model nor copy, it is anterior to and underlies figuration and therefore also specularization, and only admits analogy with vocal or kinetic rhythm."<sup>3</sup>

What I propose in this essay is a demonstration of how a feminist voice emerges out of the New Novel *Le Planétarium*. In 1967, W.M. Frohock asserted that the most apparent consequence of the New Novel was the need for a fresh critical term that would designate "a source of words that sets distances, defines relationships, and establishes what we were once satisfied to call point of view."<sup>4</sup> He labeled that term "voice."

What is precisely most notable in *Le Planétarium* is the level of discourse that Nathalie Sarraute inserts into her text, pushing the symbolic order of language to its limits. Whether it be in conversation between characters or in their interior monologues, Sarraute's semantic and syntactic use of the image vocalizes a discourse that can be qualified as "corporeal," conscious of its own materiality: "... on dirait qu'un fluide sort de vous qui agit à distance sur les choses et sur les gens" (11). In order to do so, Nathalie Sarraute draws on the bank of images particular to specific situations conditioned by gender. Although it can be said that Sarraute impersonalizes point of view by its constant repositioning as a plurality of voices, she does much to refute the notion of a monolithic "feminine" point of view. By attending to a chorus of voices, she resists imprisoning woman, and also man, for that matter, behind a static image. It is this inclusion of persona and attitude in a subtle examination of point of view that Frohock sensed as crucial to our

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<sup>1</sup> All page numbers used in this essay shall refer to the 1959 Gallimard edition of *Le Planétarium*.

<sup>2</sup> In "Nathalie Sarraute: *Le Planétarium*," *Yale French Studies* (Summer 1959), Anne Minor observes that "Nathalie Sarraute tries to make emotions in their earliest and changing stages perceptible to the reader even when the person who experiences them is by definition incapable of expressing them since they haven't yet passed into the realm of his consciousness" (97). Likewise, in *Une Parole exigeante: Le Nouveau Roman* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1964), Ludovic Janvier asserts that Nathalie Sarraute's entire work should be read as a problematic of intimacy (75). He cites Sarraute's own remarks about the thirst for human contact made apparent in *la sous-conversation* (74).

<sup>3</sup> This reference to Julia Kristeva's appropriation of the Platonic concept of the *chora* in *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974) 24, is cited and translated by Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Methuen, 1985) 161.

<sup>4</sup> W.M. Frohock, *Style and Temper: Studies in French Fiction 1925-1960* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 121-22.

understanding of the new novel and, I would add, crucial to our understanding of feminist literature and its scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

My analysis of voice in *Le Planétarium* shall focus on the three female principals: tante Berthe, Gisèle, and Germaine Lemaire. In each case, Sarraute's semantic and syntactic use of a particular image structures the web of relationships between the principal speaking subject and the other characters in the text.<sup>6</sup> *Le Planétarium* opens with tante Berthe's indecision over the new door that she has just had installed in her apartment. Gisèle's future rests in the choice between *la bergère* and the two English club chairs that her mother proposes as a gift to the newlywed couple. The last chapter of the novel begins with the amphora that Germaine Lemaire offers to Alain who now resides with Gisèle in tante Berthe's apartment in Passy. All of the above objects--the door, the chairs, and the amphora--permit each character to position herself with respect to the values of the others. The endless shifting of positions as evinced by narrative tense and level, and asserted in a plurality of grammatical persona, suggests that the taking of a position in *Le Planétarium* is akin to the process of signification in Kristeva: *significance* is a question of positioning.

In the long interior monologue that establishes a vocal rhythm in chapter one, tante Berthe listens to her own voice critically: ". . . Elle est faite ainsi, elle le sait, qu'elle ne peut regarder avec attention, avec amour que ce qu'elle pourrait s'appropriier, que ce qu'elle pourrait posséder . . . C'est comme la porte . . ." (8). Distance is established between Berthe as narrator and the narrative, i.e., her monologue and the sequence of its events, by use of the third-person singular point of view: elle. Elsewhere, the shift in the main verb tenses from the present to the past indicates a distance between the narrator and her story even though she remains an integral part of its fiction. Narrative distance, in both instances, designates the gap between sign and meaning that Sarraute materializes as an elliptical state--witness the preponderance of ellipses in the punctuation of the text--that precedes definitive verbal expression.<sup>7</sup>

The resonance created by the repetition of the term *la porte* functions on both a semantic and syntactic level, thus permitting Sarraute to construct a constellation of relationships out of what can be likened to Kristeva's notion of Plato's *chora*. In each subsequent episode involving *la porte*, tante Berthe's narrative becomes an interpolated fiction embedded in another character's representation of the initial occurrence: Alain introduces himself into the *la porte* story to amuse his in-laws, Alain's mother-in-law speaks of Alain's version of the *la porte* story to influence others' opinions about Alain, etc. Although the term *la porte* acquires a resonance whereas tante Berthe's voice is provisionally usurped, Sarraute's narrative technique can be considered feminist insofar as she demystifies the notion of a feminine essence by deconstructing domestic images, e.g., *la porte*, that have been culturally associated with women in their traditional role as homemaker.<sup>8</sup>

The episodes involving *la bergère* function in much the same way as the *la porte* episodes. In chapter two, Gisèle's voice is set off in quotes by her mother who vocalizes the implications of her own relationship to the purchase of a Louis XV chair by her daughter and son-in-law (43, 46). When Gisèle becomes the principal speaking subject in chapter

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<sup>5</sup> See Gérard Genette's *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) for a cogent presentation of voice as persona and attitude, i.e., grammatical person and narrative tense and level (227).

<sup>6</sup> I owe this insight to my colleague Doris Y. Kadish with whom I taught a seminar on French Feminism at Kent State University (Spring 1987).

<sup>7</sup> See Nathalie Sarraute's essay "Conversation et sous-conversation," in *L'Ere du Soupçon* for her own observations about a state of pre-language.

<sup>8</sup> In an interview with Gretchen R. Besser "Colloque avec Nathalie Sarraute 22 avril 1976," *The French Review* 50 (1976): 284-89, Sarraute situates herself as a feminist in her daily life and an observer of women in her writing (286-87).

three, distance is now established between Gisèle's voice and the narrative by use of quotation marks as well as the third-person singular point of view. As in chapter one, there is a shift in the main verb tenses from a dramatic use of the present, to a discursive use of the past, especially when flashbacks are introduced into the narrative, indicating a distance between the narrator and the events in the story despite her remaining an integral part of its fiction. Similarly, the repetition of the term *la bergère* creates a resonance that functions on both a semantic and syntactic level. However, the incidents involving *la bergère* are different from the secondary *la porte* episodes in which tante Berthe's voice is seemingly absorbed by the object to the extent that they metaphorize Gisèle's relationships with the other characters. For Gisèle's mother, the object, i.e., "la chose," *la bergère* provides an occasion for invoking proverbial wisdom and telling her daughter: "Il faut regarder les choses en face" (53). If Gisèle were to follow her mother's advice, *la bergère* would permit Gisèle to protect her little lamb of a husband Alain by playing *une bergère*. Indeed, Alain protests that it is not Gisèle who is the victim (i.e., the sacrificial lamb) of the situation; but, rather, that it is he (71). Once again, it is Sarraute's narrative technique with its emphasis on materiality and distance that must be understood as the locus of an incipient feminist voice. Likewise, the female principals in the novel are only partial representatives of a speaking subject who listens to her own voice critically, and they must be read as a plurality of voices whose positions are provisionally valid.

We find the most vivid emergence of a feminist voice in Sarraute's treatment of Germaine Lemaire's relationship to objects in *Le Planétarium*. Whereas the episodes that involve tante Berthe and *la porte*, as well as those that include Gisèle and *la bergère*, are used to demonstrate how language is a means of contact and understanding; Germaine Lemaire's relationship to objects is allegorical insofar as she uses and works on objects in much the same way a writer does language. Expressions particular to woman's situation are used with double meaning: style in writing is equated with style in dress and Sarraute tells us, with some irony, that Lemaire knows how to make language stylishly fashionable: "Placé là crânement, comme ce petit noeud de ruban, cette plume que sait planter sur un chapeau d'un geste rapide, désinvolte, audacieux une modiste de génie et qui donne à tout ce qui sort de ses mains cet air incomparable, cette allure, ce chic" (158).

In the final chapter of *Le Planétarium*, the perfection of the amphora that Germaine Lemaire gives to Alain contrasts with Alain's inability to articulate his pleasure and gratitude over the artistic worth of the vase. In keeping with the New Novelists who had rejected the psychological grids that had been inherited from their predecessors, Sarraute's scriptural practice exemplifies Alain's naive notions about the writer's drawing upon life's raw materials: "Vous savez, je vais vous dire, cette matière brute--les objets, les gens, quand on les appréhende comme ça directement quand on colle à eux de si près, sans prendre de recul, sans poser de grilles eh bien, tout ça . . ." (248-49). But it is precisely the narrative distance noted in the dramatic vocalization of the repository of images drawn from women's particular situations that permits us to see how Sarraute's own voice is feminist in its mastery over *les choses* even as she has Germaine mock Alain's pretentious statements.

It can be argued that Sarraute is not a feminist writer by intention. Indeed, Stephen Heath regrets the lack of historical awareness in *Le Planétarium*.<sup>9</sup> If it is not the explicit desire to expose that which oppresses women, what is it then that constitutes feminist writing? As we have attempted to demonstrate throughout this essay, it is Sarraute's use of language to cast suspicion on the traditional conception and reception of the novel that makes her writing radical. On a material level, language is used as a means of contact and understanding between the characters; on a rhetorical level, language is used to indicate the changing distances that define the shifts in relationships. In both instances, Sarraute's use of the word focuses on the source of figuration and specularization to which Kristeva alludes in *Révolution du langage poétique*. The images that Sarraute chooses to represent

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London: Elek Books, 1972) 57-58.

the space that her writing explores do have a particular social reality, as noted by Heath. Sarraute's rhetorical gesture is radical, however, by the very fact that she has opened up a space, heretofore unarticulated, and hence presents the reader with the possibility of inventing new images that would generate a different story or perhaps a similar story but told in different voices.