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NATHALIE SARRAUTE: THE NOVELIST AS SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST

by

Robert Megna

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Doctor of Philosophy

THESIS DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE:

Houston, Texas
May, 1978
The following editions and abbreviations are used throughout this study:

E. for *Entre la Vie et la Mort* (Gallimard, 1968)

E.S. for *L'Ere du soupçon* (Gallimard, 1956)

F. for *Les Fruits d'Or* (Gallimard, 1963)

M. for *Martereau* (Gallimard, 1953)

P. for *Le Planétarium* (Gallimard, 1959)

P.I. for *Portrait d'un Inconnu* (Gallimard, 1956)

T. for *Tropismes* (Les Editions de Minuit, 1957)

V. for *Vous les entendez?* (Gallimard, 1972)
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INTRODUCTION

A Brief Look at Previous Research

Although Nathalie Sarraute's literary career dates back as far as 1939, the year in which Tropismes was published, her rise to international recognition did not begin until almost twenty years later when her name was linked to an emerging group of controversial writers known as the New Novelists. This avant-garde group included, among others, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, and Claude Simon. The issues which caused these writers to band together were mostly negative in character: they were united in their opposition to many of the established conventions of the mainstream novel, especially the traditional approach to narration, characterization, plot development, and chronology. The bulk of the studies devoted to the works of Nathalie Sarraute view them in the context of the literary movement with which they had become identified.

One of the first significant assessments of Nathalie Sarraute's approach to literature was made by Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Portrait d'un Inconnu in 1948. Sartre referred to that work as an "anti-roman," and in so doing helped establish Sarraute's reputation as a literary iconoclast. Her novels became the subject of
much debate and heated controversy. She was obliged to defend her views on the novel in numerous interviews, articles in literary periodicals, some of which were in a volume entitled *L’Ere du soupçon* in 1956.

A glance at the "Selected Bibliography" at the end of this work will give the reader some idea of the range and variety of critical studies devoted to the works of Nathalie Sarraute. Although there are many articles, and a few lengthy studies on this author, most of the available material is repetitive in nature and tends to avoid the most baffling issue of all: Nathalie Sarraute's psychological concepts in relationship to "scientific" psychology. On the other hand, those studies of a more traditional nature do contain much that is of value on the following: narrative technique, point of view, characterization, imagery, thematic content, and literary influences.

Some significant work rooted in the concepts of Sartrian existentialism has also appeared in one form or another. Of particular interest is Micheline Tison-Braun's *Nathalie Sarraute ou la Recherche de l'Authenticité*, which is perhaps the most comprehensive of these philosophically-oriented studies. This approach has value in terms of the literary influence of existential writers and philosophers. It should be noted, however, that the pursuit of
authenticity in Madame Sarraute's works rarely leads to that existential activity known as "commitment."

Returning once again to the issue of psychology, a word which Madame Sarraute once said should make any modern author blush (E.S., p. 83), it remains virtually impossible for one to discuss these novels without mentioning this term. A recent doctoral dissertation employs the concepts of Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis in order to shed light on the patterns of interpersonal relationship within these novels. The direction taken by the aforementioned study is indicative of the most profitable way of discussing these novels, that is to say from a dynamic point of view. Sarraute emphasizes processes as opposed to fixed states. The following section states the main reasons for attempting a social-psychological study of her novels.

In Support of a Social-
Psychological Approach

A number of critics appear to be in essential agreement as to what the basic subject matter of Nathalie Sarraute's novels seems to be. One of these writers notes: "As a novelist, she is intent upon perceiving the relationship between human beings, and the relationship between a human being and the world he inhabits..."¹ Another comments: "Elle est attirée par toutes les situations humaines où un psychisme très subtil et caché
entre en jeu."² A third says that she seeks to capture
"the ill-defined amorphous attitudes and emotions" of her
characters.³ One other sees her work in these terms: "Il
y est question, presque uniquement, de rapports humains
et des sensations que ses personnages éprouvent au contact
des autres."⁴ In brief, all of these critics stress the
importance of social interaction and its psychological
effects.

The reader might be inclined to question the
uniqueness of such concerns in the novel, especially in
what has come to be known as the "psychological novel."
It would seem reasonable to say that all novels study
human relationships in one way or another. The answer to
this question is not hard to find. What makes Nathalie
Sarraute's novels unique in this respect is the exclusive
emphasis they place on characters as they relate to each
other in direct social interaction. She studies human
beings in the act of encounter as their attitudes are acti-
vated and assume outward expression in the form of spoken
words, facial expressions, gestures, etc. All of these
things, as this study will attempt to demonstrate, are
identical with the problems with which social psychologists
are concerned.

At this point, then, a few comments on social
psychology itself are in order. One definition of this
sub-discipline of the general field of psychology reads
as follows: "Social psychology is the study of the effects of social interaction and the sociocultural environment on psychological behavior and processes."

It is sometimes referred to as "micro-sociology." While sociologists study the larger social organization (i.e., social classes, ethnic groups, occupational groups, etc.), social psychologists limit themselves to small groups and the more subtle aspects of person to person relationships. The major issues in social psychology are 1) socialization, 2) the perception and judgment of social events, 3) attitudes, their acquisition, and how they are changed, and 4) the individual in group settings. In varying degrees, all of these issues find expression in Sarraute's works.

For all the reasons mentioned so far, and many others which will become apparent later on, this critic's speculation seems altogether reasonable: "Nathalie Sarraute would have made a fine social psychologist had she not become a novelist."

A Summary Look at the Life and Works of Nathalie Sarraute

Nathalie Sarraute was born on July 18, 1902 in a small city called Ivanovo-Voznessensk, now known as Ivanovo, about 300 kilometers northeast of Moscow. Her father was in charge of a chemical factory which produced
dyes. Her paternal grandfather was a wood merchant at Smolensk, while her maternal grandfather was a lawyer in Kiev. Her parents met while studying abroad, in Geneva, after 1894 when Nicholas II succeeded Alexander III as the czar of Russia. Since they were Jewish, Sarrasute's parents were not welcome at the Russian universities of that period. The first two years of Sarrasute's life were spent in Ivanovo, but her parents were divorced soon afterwards and her childhood years were a period in which she lived, at one time or another, in Switzerland, France and Russia. She was thus able to learn both French and Russian in early life.9

From the age of eight onwards, Sarrasute lived in Paris with her father and stepmother. She saw very little of her mother, a writer of popular novels, during those years. Her stepmother's mother lived with the family for about two years, and taught her to speak German and play the piano. Sarrasute also began to study English and soon learned to speak it fluently. She attended the Lycée Fénelon where the curriculum included Latin, and she demonstrated a keen interest in physics.

After receiving her "baccalauréat," Sarrasute obtained a "licence d'anglais" from the Sorbonne. She then spent a year at Oxford, from 1920 - 1921, with the intention of obtaining a B.A. degree in history. In the
winter of 1921 - 1922, Sarraute studied sociology at the University of Berlin with the German phenomenological sociologist, Werner Sombart. In 1922, she began to study law at the University of Paris. She met her future husband, Raymond Sarraute, also a lawyer, in 1923 and they were married two years later. For about twelve years, Sarraute practiced law, but without enthusiasm. Encouraged by her husband, Nathalie Sarraute began her career as a writer by composing her first work, two short texts included later on in _Tropismes_ (II, and IX, in the Editions de Minuit), sometime in 1932.

The origins of Nathalie Sarraute's literary vocation can be traced back to the age of seven when she wrote a novel in Russian. A writer who was a friend of the family leafed through it and advised her to learn to spell before attempting to write novels! She was quite discouraged by this experience and did not try to write books again until much later in life. In 1937, she presented her first work, _Tropismes_, a collection of short texts, to several publishers. It was rejected by all of them except for Robert Denoël who published it in February of 1939. Sarraute began to write her next book, _Portait d'un Inconnu_ in 1941. Disguised as the governess of her three daughters, Sarraute lived in hiding during the German occupation of France at the home of a
courageous friend. By 1946, this book was completed and eventually published, with a preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, by Robert Marin in 1948. Only four hundred copies of this edition were sold. This book was re-issued in 1956 by the distinguished publishing house of Gallimard. Sarraute began to write a number of literary essays for various periodicals, four of which were later published under the title L'Ere du soupçon (Gallimard, 1956). Her next novel was Martereau, her first book to be published by Gallimard in 1953. Her subsequent novels, all of which have been published by Gallimard, include Le Planétarium (1959), Les Fruits d'Or (1963)—for which she received Le Prix International de Littérature in 1964—, Entre la Vie et Mort (1968), Vous les entendez? (1972), and Disent les Imbéciles (1976), a work which, unfortunately, was not available in time for inclusion in this study. Her other works include three radio plays: Le Silence, Le Mensonge, and Isma. The first of these was broadcast in a German translation in Stuttgart, Bremen, and Munich in 1964. The second play was broadcast simultaneously in both French and German on March 2, 1966. The last play was first broadcast in German on January 7, 1970.

Nathalie Sarraute has traveled throughout the world and her works have been translated into English (by Maria Jolas), German, Italian, Russian, and many other languages.
She came to Rice University to give a lecture in the spring of 1967. It was at that time that this writer had the rare opportunity of making her acquaintance and first became interested in her work, an interest which has culminated in this dissertation.

Capsule Summaries of the Works to be Discussed

Nathalie Sarraute's first work is a collection of twenty-four short texts called *Tropismes*. It is not a novel in the strict sense of the word; however, it does have a certain unity based on the concept of "tropism." A detailed discussion of this psychological reaction can be found in Chapter I. One commentator describes the work in the following manner:

*Tropismes, qui échappe aux classifications courantes...* est fait de poèmes en prose, ou de projets de romans, ou de fragments d'une critique romanesque, ou d'approximations visant à la fois l'existence et le discours: en somme, de plusieurs modes de langage aptes à saisir la réalité humaine dans ce qu'elle a d'insaisissable.

These texts concentrate on the little dramas of everyday life in a fresh and startling manner. These brief sketches are about family situations, social encounters, and other related subjects drawn from Sarraute's sharp observations of middle-class life. Eight of these texts are descriptions suggestive of La Bruyère's *Caractères,*
written with irony, sympathy, and sometimes a combination of these feelings. A recurrent theme is the psychological violence inflicted on children by their parents and other adults. Many of these texts contain descriptions of the streets and squares of Paris and its suburbs. Taken together, they appear to contain, in style and content, numerous indications of the direction of Sarraute's later work: the emphasis on the tropism and the imagery by means of which it is conveyed to the reader, the relative anonymity of character, and the substitution of loosely-connected scenes of social interaction for plot.

Sarraute's first full-length novel, *Portrait d'un Inconnu*, concerns the relationship between a hypersensitive narrator, and a father-daughter couple: an old man and his spinster daughter. By means of his own deeper psychological reactions to them, as well as his observations of their behavior toward each other, the nameless narrator tries to fathom the underlying psychical reality of the daughter's relationship to her father and *vice versa*. This quest fills eleven unnumbered chapters of varying lengths. The narrator, not satisfied with the common-sense view of this pair's identity (namely, that he is a miser and she is a crank), and undaunted by the advice of a psychiatrist that he give up his obsession, continues to search for this elusive level of interpersonal reality, particularly as it
is manifested in the behavior of this couple. The reader follows the narrator as he visits, and, at times, spies on, the father and daughter. When the narrator cannot be present at a certain scene between them, or when each is alone, he constructs the scene in his imagination, using whatever he has ascertained so far as a point of departure. The daughter's financial dependency on her father, and all its repercussions, finally come to an end when she announces her impending marriage to a successful middle-class gentleman, M. Louis Dumontet, the only character to possess an actual name. It is at this point that the action of the novel reaches its conclusion with an ironic note that has since become a hallmark of Nathalie Sarraute's novels.

Like its predecessor, Martereau takes place in Paris (as all of Sarraute's novels do), and is written in the first person. The narrator here is a hypersensitive young man, recovering from tuberculosis, who observes family relationships. He lives with a wealthy aunt and uncle and their teenage daughter. Somewhat younger than his counterpart in the earlier novel, and unavoidably engulfed in the family's psychological life, he does not appear as odd to the reader, in his sensitivity to moods and atmospheres, as the narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu. The story centers on the purchase of a country home near
Paris. Martereau, a somewhat unsuccessful contractor and a friend of the nephew, agrees to buy the house in his own name so that the narrator's uncle will not have to pay taxes on the investment. The nephew and his young cousin are entrusted with the task of taking the money to Martereau while the uncle is away on a business trip to Brussels. When the latter returns, he is perturbed over the fact that Martereau did not provide a receipt for the money, and subsequently begins to suspect Martereau's personal integrity. The remainder of the novel centers about the question of Martereau's honesty. Although Martereau does not answer a letter from the uncle, seems to avoid the nephew, and moves into the house with his wife (ostensibly to supervise repairs), he does turn over the house to the narrator's uncle, in the end. The reader is never completely reassured that Martereau's character is above reproach, despite the eventual outcome, and closes the book with a sense of doubt over whether or not it is possible to ever know the real intentions of others.

Other aspects of this complex and intriguing book include the narrator's relationship to his uncle and the latter's feelings toward the members of his immediate family. The uncle despises the nephew for his sensitivity and lack of practicality. He is manipulated by his wife, who is younger than he and from a better family background.
Their daughter is a pawn in the psychological warfare that goes on between them throughout the book. The relationship between Martereau and his wife is also the subject of numerous speculations on the part of the narrator. In general, it can be said that the real subject matter of this book is interpersonal relationships in all of their complexity.

*Le Planétarium* is perhaps the most popular and the most well-known of Sarraute's works. Perhaps this is so because it is the only one to contain more named characters than nameless ones. The central figure, Alain Guimiez, an aspiring young writer, is caught between the bourgeois aspirations of his own family, and that of his wife, Gisèle, and his desire to become a writer and be part of the literary coterie of an established older woman writer, Germaine Lemaire, with whom he eventually becomes disillusioned. The action of the novel begins one evening and ends several months later, after Alain has gotten his aunt Berthe to make good her promise and let him have her five-room apartment in a fashionable part of Paris. Scenes of family life alternate with those of literary circles, but once again the overriding concern is human relationships as they unfold in social interaction.

A major aspect of this work, and one which is to become characteristic of Sarraute's later novels, is the
point of view: first person narration is replaced by third person stream-of-consciousness, a technique whereby the inner life of each character is presented in the third person form. The beginnings of this technique can be seen in *Tropismes*:

Quand il était avec des êtres frais et jeunes, des êtres innocents, il éprouvait le besoin douloureux, irrésistible, de les manipuler de ses doigts inquiets, de les palper, de les rapprocher de soi le plus près possible, de se les approprier.

(p. 51)

As can be seen from this example, this technique involves a mixture of identification with the character as well as detachment from him. The determining factor, as far as the reader's reaction is concerned, is the degree to which the author sympathizes with the character in question. In the example given, a considerable amount of sympathy can be detected, but there is also a corresponding measure of detachment as reflected, for example, in the word "inquiets." A greater measure of detachment can be seen in this example from the same book: "Elle était accroupie sur un coin du fauteuil, se tortillait, le cou tendu, les yeux protubérants..." (p. 57) Sarraute displays a mastery of this difficult technique in *Le Planétarium* where the point of view of the character, in all its subjectivity, remains the paramount concern, as this example shows:
Elle se sent soulevée, poussée par quelque chose de puissant et de doux—une sensation comme celle qu'on éprouve quand, couché sur le sable de la plage on se laisse pousser, rouler doucement par les vagues. . . .

(p. 256)

The advantage of this technique, for Sarraute's literary objectives, resides in the fact that it makes it possible for the author to describe sensations in the character of which he is only dimly aware, and often, sensations which occur too rapidly to be expressed in an interior monologue.

Les Fruits d'Or, Sarraute's next novel, concerns the rise and fall of a novel whose title is identical with that of the book in which it is described. Once again, there are no proper names except for the names of literary critics, such as Parrot, Mettetal, Bernier (all obviously intended to be satirical) and a certain Jacques, mentioned in two scenes. The novel is composed entirely of scenes of social interaction in literary circles. The upshot of the story seems to be the way in which certain opinion makers, here the literary critics, are able to trigger off a fad for a certain book, and, just as easily, put an end to the book's popularity. Except for one character, who appears at the end of the book, and who establishes direct contact between the work and his inner feelings, most of the other characters are swayed in their opinions by the
Like the preceding novel, *Entre la Vie et la Mort* is about the world of literary circles; however, the emphasis here is on the experience of the novelist rather than on the vicissitudes of the work. The novel traces the career of a writer through various stages of its early development. The first memories of the future novelist are presented at the start of the book. His fascination with words and their many meanings, and his efforts to elude his mother's attempts to impose her sentimental ideas on him, fill the first forty pages of this book. The writer is seen displaying his ability for mimicry, and finally coming to accept his literary vocation. After his first work is published, and after he has achieved a certain measure of popularity, he withdraws once again into himself in order to establish contact with the source of his creativity, and the novel comes to a close as he begins his second work. The title Nathalie Sarraute chose for her novel, *Entre la Vie et la Mort*, is intended to underscore the central issue of this novel, and, incidentally, a central theme of Sarraute's work in general: the precariousness of the creative process whereby living experience is transformed into words.

Sarraute's ensuing novel, *Vous les entendez?*, is a work in which the tropisms threaten to overwhelm both the
dialogue and the reader. This work has a very simple surface plot: a middle-class gentleman and a friend, both older men, are discussing the merits of a pre-Columbian statue, which belongs to the former, in the presence of the owner's children. The latter do not share their father's enthusiasm for the statue, and they, sensing his own doubts concerning its real value as well as his ability to make aesthetic judgments in general, take advantage of the opportunity to irritate him by means of their insistent laughter after they have excused themselves and gone upstairs to bed. The tropisms move up and down the stairs as the family friend tries to calmly arbitrate the covert dispute in which he unwittingly has become involved. In the end, it seems, the father will donate the statue to a museum.

This apparently simple situation covers all kinds of subtle undercurrents which form the basic substance of the novel. Much more than a gap in generations is involved. Here, as in the previous novels, Sarrasute demonstrates her ability to translate the most delicate inner movements into a fabric of words and images of dazzling complexity.
The Scope and Limitations of this Study

This study attempts to show that social-psychological issues are the basic subject matter of Nathalie Sarraute's prose fiction. Six full-length novels and the short texts contained in *Tropismes* are discussed. The working concepts, findings, and stated opinions of social psychologists, and others, are frequently cited in support of this interpretation.

The terms and concepts used in this study will be defined at appropriate points in the discussion. The following are especially important: attitude, social stimulus, tropism, social interaction, self-concept, and social role. A consensus of opinion has been sought to define these terms. No particular school of social-psychological thought is emphasized; instead, the position of Nathalie Sarraute, social-psychologist, is consistently explored and elaborated upon.

A brief outline of the format of this dissertation will hopefully guide the reader through the complexities of social psychology as manifested in the works of Nathalie Sarraute. The central concept--attitude--is presented in the first chapter. It is of pivotal importance to this entire study, and is generally considered to be the major issue in the field of social psychology.
The relationship of attitude and social stimuli is then presented. A survey of the different kinds of social stimuli and their underlying attitudes follows. At this point it becomes possible to present a detailed study of the tropism, a concept of inestimable importance in any study of the writings of Nathalie Sarraute. A brief sketch of Sarraute's concept of man concludes the first chapter.

The second chapter focuses on the actual process of social interaction as it is presented in the various scenes which make up Sarraute's novels. The formal aspect of these works is examined at this point. Three main aspects of the social interaction process are studied after considering the various participants in Sarrautian social interaction. A few representative scenes are scrutinized from the point of view of the development of Sarraute's technique as well as its inherent interest. The writer is of the opinion that an understanding of just a few scenes in these novels can provide a key to a fuller comprehension and appreciation of all aspects of Sarraute's work and objectives in writing.

A third chapter sets out to explore the particular problems of a social-psychological presentation of character. Sarraute's particular method of characterization is linked to social-psychological concerns. An assessment
of this approach to character concludes this chapter.

In the concluding chapter of this study the main points are re-stated prior to an assessment of Nathalie Sarraute's contributions to literary social psychology.

This format was chosen after carefully considering a number of problems that were likely to arise. Foremost among these was the way in which social-psychological issues tend to overlap. Many things are occurring at once in social interaction, some more complex than others. It was then clear that the best approach would be one in which a discussion of basic social-psychological mechanisms preceded all else. From there a discussion of social interaction processes as they developed through time, seemed appropriate. The study of the person, the most complex issue, was left for last. This format, making it possible for this writer to build up on what came before, reduced unnecessary repetition while giving an overall coherence to the arguments presented in support of the central thesis.

One last point concerning quoted material. The novels of Nathalie Sarraute--the term "novel" includes Troisismes throughout this study--are almost organic in their unity. It is often rather difficult to isolate a part of the text from the general flow of the material.
A quotation may sometimes give the appearance of incompleteness. This effect, however, is unavoidable if quotations are to be limited to the relevant issues arising at a particular point in the discussion. The best that can be said is that every effort has been made to minimize it whenever possible.
CHAPTER I

THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

The study of social psychology is synonymous with the study of social interaction in all of its forms. Social interaction can be direct (i.e., occurring in the actual presence of other persons) or indirect (i.e., occurring in the presence of sociocultural products). A central concept in the study of social interaction is attitude. This concept is the pivotal issue upon which this study is based.

The Importance of Attitude

Social psychologists uniformly stress the importance of attitude in social psychology. It is considered by many to be the single most important concept in this field. Because of its significance it is far and away the most extensively treated topic in social psychology.

The popular usage of this term bears resemblance to the social psychologist's definition. The term is also used in the theatre to denote a certain bodily posture assumed by an actor: "to strike an attitude." By analogy, then, an attitude may be viewed as a posture of the mind. The terms "attitude" and "tropism" are linked together by the idea of movement to assume a certain posture. This idea
will be explored in depth in a later section of this chapter. A closer study of attitude is first necessary.

When social psychologists speak of attitude they mean something which cannot be observed directly, that is to say, a hypothesis of some kind. One writer notes that attitude is

.. .a predisposition to respond toward a particular person or a group of persons, a particular object or group of objects, in a favorable or unfavorable manner. Attitudes are relatively enduring predispositions which give continuity to behavior over time, but they are learned rather than innate. .. .15

From this definition the following items are to be emphasized, namely:

1) An attitude is rooted in the past of the individual; it is learned;

2) It is directed toward an object of some kind;

3) It includes a favorable, unfavorable, and sometimes ambivalent evaluation of the object expressed in positive or negative feelings;

4) It has a tendency to endure through time; and

5) It may lead to a certain response in the form of observable behavior.

It should be added that, since an attitude is a
predisposition to respond, it must be elicited or activated in some way for its existence to be confirmed. People are constantly making inferences about the attitudes of others on the basis of their behavior. There is much to be said for this for it has been shown that there is often little consistency between the attitudes which a person professes to hold and those to which his outward behavior points. Many of Sarraute's characters, it will be shown, are adept at seeing this incongruity.

The concept of attitude should not be confused with "opinion," "belief," or "value." These concepts are related to "attitude" in the following way. An "opinion" is the verbal expression of an underlying belief, value, or attitude. A belief expresses a relationship between concepts where neither defines the other, as, for example, in this statement: "Snakes are dangerous." A value expresses a positive or negative evaluation toward a cognition, e.g.: "Stealing is wrong." Attitudes are founded on both beliefs and values; however, a cluster of attitudes may be found around a given value.

The novels of Nathalie Sarraute explore these complex psychological processes known as "attitudes" as they are expressed outwardly and felt inwardly. Let us first consider their outward expression in the form of "social stimuli."
The Range and Variety of 
Social Stimuli

Social stimuli "are those which stem from other people in a very broad sense." These include, in actual social interaction, the various aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication. Inferences concerning the internal states of others are made on the basis of observable social stimuli of one kind or another. Although a great deal of communication goes on without awareness, social psychologists are not in agreement as to how it is to be interpreted. Nathalie Sarraute's various hypersensitive protagonists, as well as other characters, tend to focus on the most problematical of these social stimuli which occur in the course of a social encounter:

Toujours fixés sur elle, comme fascinés, ils surveillaient avec effroi chaque mot, la plus légère intonation, la nuance la plus subtile, chaque geste, chaque regard; (...) (T., p. 87)

Apart from direct social interaction, there also are a number of indirect "social stimuli." These also communicate attitudes, but they are experienced indirectly: the other person is not physically present. This category includes such everyday matters like handwriting, and extends to include the complex and ambiguous social stimuli which we call works of art.

The various social stimuli appearing in the face-to-
face situation in Sarraute's novels are the first to be examined here. They will be presented in the following order: conversation; vocal signals, which includes everything from intonation and tone of voice to laughter, and, at times, even silence; facial expressions, including looks and smiles; gestures and body language; and, ultimately, social stimuli so subtle they elude description and can only be sensed.

We naturally expect a writer to be particularly sensitive to the nuances of language in all of its various forms. In this area, Nathalie Sarraute displays unusual virtuosity in noting the various hidden meanings which can be contained in the spoken word, the most conventional social stimulus and the major catalyst in social interaction. In the innocuous flow of polite conversation, in the form of dialogue, which makes up a considerable portion of Sarraute's novels, a word, on the surface as harmless as any other, takes on a special meaning, often menacing in character. Sarraute says the following about "les paroles":

Aussi, pourvu qu'elles présentent une apparence à peu près anodine et banale, elles peuvent être et elles sont souvent en effet, sans que personne y trouve à redire, sans que la victime elle-même ose clairement se l'avouer, l'arme quotidienne, insidieuse et très efficace, d'innombrables petits crimes.

(E.S., p. 103)
Words, because of the actions and reactions which they initiate, are, says Sarraute, the most precious of instruments for the novelist (E.S., p. 104). They convey aggressive impulses and, conversely, form a barrier against the aggressive impulses of others. They are the principal means of coming into contact with another person. The right word at the right moment can have an almost automatic effect on the part of the person who receives it:

J'ai prononcé les mots qui arrêtent chez elle tout net les plaisanteries, les ricanements, les airs cyniques et dégoutés, et qui lui font baisser la tête religieusement comme le son de la clochette pendant la messe fait baisser la tête aux croyants.

(PI, p. 58)

An automatic response to the spoken word, one with less lofty overtones, is contained in this character's remark to a flattering comment:

Il voudrait se détourner, se renfrogner, mais les mots qu'elle vient de prononcer, le son de ces mots -- comme le fameux tintement de la clochette qui faisait saliver les chiens de Pavlov -- fait luire ses yeux, étire ses lèvres en un sourire flatté, il ouvre la bouche, il hésite une seconde... "Oui, j'aime mieux ça, travailler le nez au mur... c'est plus... ." (...) "Commode."

(P., pp. 206-207)

A catalogue of the various connotations of the spoken word as presented in the works of Nathalie Sarraute would cover a considerable amount of material. In fact, it
would be an awesome task since the major part of the reactions described are reactions to words spoken in conversation. Any number of emotional overtones, including every variety of hesitancy and ambivalence of feeling can be found in such a list. A useful approach to this survey of the word as social stimulus should include mentioning the fact that words contain more meaning for those who know the speaker well. The narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu makes the following observation concerning the daughter's peculiarities of vocabulary:

"Je crois qu'il est très tard, je suis un peu en retard, je crois que je dois filer" (ce mot 'filer' qu'elle emploie toujours: un mot qui rampe et mord, mais je n'ai pas le temps de m'arrêter à cela, non, pas maintenant), je sens une angoisse intolérable, un froid, comme un trou béant qui s'ouvre en moi, je dois faire un effort pour ne pas courir derrière elle, la rappeler, lui parler encore, me démener, la supplier: tout n'est peut-être pas encore perdu, tout peut encore être réparé... Mais elle a filé."

(P.I., pp. 33-34)

The narrator in Martereau compares a conversation to a tennis match. He wonders whether or not his uncle's words will have their intended effect on Martereau:

De l'un vers l'autre sans cesse je tourne mon regard, m'efforçant avec cette attention fascinée avec laquelle les spectateurs d'un tournoi de tennis suivent le trajet de la balle de suivre la trace de leurs mots: de ses mots à lui surtout... vont-ils rebondir encore ce coup-ci, ricocher contre Martereau, ou bien, cette fois, lancés avec
trop de violence, ne vont-ils pas pénétrer, s'enfoncer. . .

(M., p. 125)

Of all social stimuli, words have the most lasting conscious effect on the person to whom they are addressed. They can continue to cause a painful reaction each time they are remembered. They are like a harmful substance which has been absorbed into a person's very being:

(...). 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, cela circule dans ses veines, charrié par son sang, des caillots se forment, des engorgements, des poches, des tumeurs qui enflent, pèsent, tirent. . . .

Et avec l'obstination des maniaques il cherche à découvrir d'où viennent les élancements, il palpe les endroits dououreux pour trouver leur place exacte, délimiter leurs contours. . . .

(E., pp. 69-70)

After a time, even a single word can be connected in unseen ways with so many experiences that its mere appearance in conversation brings to mind every nuance and implication which it contained when used on former occasions. The narrator's uncle utters the word "vous" and a psychological reaction occurs which is seemingly, but not really out of proportion. Here is that remarkable passage:

Qu'on se moque de moi si l'on veut, le "vous", -- et il le sait aussitôt, sans même avoir le temps de le penser, et nous le savons tous -- le "vous" signifie tout cela et bien plus encore: "Vous", les bêtes viles, vous dont le contact est
dégradant, vous toute la bêtise du monde, vous toutes les concessions qui lui ont été imposées, tous les obstacles, toutes les entraves qui ont brisé son essor, les impuretés qui ont sali son âme, qui lui ont fait perdre sa fraîcheur juvénile, son ardeur, oublier les rêves que dans sa folie, dans sa joie — sa seule, la seule vraie joie — il avait faits quand il avait marché en chantant, seul sous le ciel étoilé, sac au dos, dormant dans le foin, maître du monde, bardé, prophète, conquérant, autrefois quand il avait vingt ans... Le "vous" leur dit tout cela. Le "vous" marque les moments où tout de même il se ressaisit, les repousse pour pouvoir souffler un peu, les rappelle à l'ordre -- elles vont parfois un peu loin --, les force à garder leurs distances. Tout cela nous le savons -- pas in so many words, bien sûr, mais d'une façon autrement plus rapide, subtile, complexe, et évidente. Nous savons, assis maintenant tous les quatre, attentifs autour de la table, d'autres choses encore: son air confiant et tendre, presque un peu humble, ces intonations mouillées quand il prononce comme en les dorlotant, comme en les cajolant avec la langue et le palais ces mots: fifille, ma fille, le "vous" leur donne toute leur valeur, leur relief, leur sert de toile de fond. Sur lui sa tendresse actuelle se découpe. Le "vous" forme la mélodie douce et un peu molle de ces mots un accompagnement tragique, lourd et dur. Ou, pour employer encore une autre comparaison, sous le mot fifille si tendrement étiré, le "vous" est le caractère secret écrit à l'encre sympathique. Experts comme nous le sommes, nous le faisons apparaître aussitôt, énorme, couvrant tout: de là sans doute chez nous cette gêne, ce léger dégoût, cette envie dont j'ai déjà parlé, qui nous prend aussitôt au moment de ses tendres épanchements, de l'écarter, de le rabrouer... . . .

(M., pp. 151-152)

Sarraute's novels are filled with passages in which certain words open up onto vistas of human experience. The
reader starts to be suspicious (a characteristically Sarrautian word) of ordinary conversation, and begins to look for the crack in the smooth surface of a word or phrase, and is surprised to find himself drawn into a whirlpool of feelings and thoughts which rarely find direct expression, but whose effects can bring varying degrees of awareness.

The question that arises at this point refers to the spoken word as well as all of the other social stimuli to be discussed. It concerns the issue of conscious intention. One is inclined to ask how much of the content of a social stimulus is intentionally communicated, and how much has merely escaped a person's awareness. Social psychologists generally agree that people do communicate without awareness, however, there is very little agreement about how this form of communication is to be interpreted. A social stimulus may not be correctly perceived or understood, regardless of the level of consciousness from which it springs. Misunderstandings of this kind are a part of everyday experience. The central characters of Sarraute's novels -- the narrators of Portrait d'un Inconnu and Martereau, Alain Guimiez in Le Planétarium, the writer in Entre la Vie et la Mort, and the father in Vous les entendez? (Tropismes and Les Fruits d'Or are similar in not having an easily recognizable
protagonist) -- appear to be reliable interpreters of social stimuli, if only for the fact that they provide, in doubtful situations, several possible interpretations. Some additional interpretation is provided in the later novels, beginning with *Le Planétarium*, by shifts in the point of view -- an advantage which the novel has over everyday experience.

Numerous indications of attitude are contained in the next group of social stimuli to be considered: vocal signals which are non-verbal in character. This category includes everything from tone of voice to laughter. Sarrasite records these social stimuli in all of their complexity.

Tone of voice can convey a number of attitudes. It can be loud and full of assurance: "La voix forte, assurée, résonne à leurs oreilles comme un de ces haut-parleurs qui avertissent les voyageurs dans les gares." (P., pp. 242-243) It can be contrived to sound assured: "Sa voix s'élève claire, ferme... plus un vacillement... il lit lentement, articulant chaque mot comme pour le rendre plus dense, plus pesant (...)" (F., p. 163). The tone can convey cold confirmation: "Le ton impassible est celui de la froide constatation" (E., p. 47). At times it can be more or less neutral in tone: "(...) sa voix est atone, toute molle..." (V., p. 32). A touch of
sweetness may be included: "Elle parle d'une voix très douce, sur un ton neutre. . ." (E., pp. 7-8). A jesting tone may be suggested: "Mais que signifie ce ton, cette pointe de raillerie dans sa voix (...)" (P., p. 234).
More powerful emotions may also be communicated:
"L'indignation, la rage font trembler sa voix" (P., 230-231).

The peculiarity of a person's voice is described in various ways. A raucous voice is described in this manner: "Une voix un peu éraillée, enfin lentement comme avec difficulté s'ébranle. . ." (F., p. 180). Another character's voice is dry: "(...) la voix sèche claquent (...)" (F., p. 67). A certain voice resembles a blowpipe: "(...) sa voix sifflé comme un chalumeau qui essaie de forer un épais mur d'acier (...)" (P., p. 230).
One voice resembles the sound a mouse makes: "(...) petite voix pointue comme un cri de souris (...)" (P., pp. 236-237). Another voice yelps: "Une voix de femme glapit (...)" (P., p. 142).

There are a number of distinctive vocal sounds which are uttered without words: "(...) ses lèvres font un bruit répugnant, son baiser claquent sur le bout de ses doigts. . ." (V., p. 136); "(...) il pousse de faibles cris, comme des couinements de souris. . ." (F., pp. 142-143); "Ils poussent de petits cris horrifiés, joyeux
(...)

A sound made through the nose appears from time to time: "Il siffle à travers les narines d'un petit coup sec qui repousse les autres, les tient à distance... hn... hn... ." (F., p. 53).

A change in tone of voice is especially revealing of a change in attitude. The father in Portrait d'un Inconnu is aware of his daughter's various voices:

Il se dresse tout de suite dès qu'il entend, venant de l'entrée, sa voix trop douce, la voix qu'elle a toujours quand elle parle à la bonne, la même qu'avec moi tout à l'heure, une petite voix sans timbre, tout étranglée.

(P.I., p. 35)

Betrayal can be conveyed by a change in the tone of voice:

Une trahison, un embryon de trahison dans le ton soudain léger, insouciant et naturel sur lequel elle le prévient: "Regarde qui est venu nous voir...." (M., p. 199)

A failure to control the tone of voice sets off all kinds of undesirable reactions with irreversible effects: "Mais c'est sa voix sans doute, quelque chose dans le ton, dans le son de sa voix, une hésitation, une gêne, un manque de confiance en soi qui a dû tout déclencher" (P., p. 50). The doubts which are then aroused may last for quite a while: "Je ne sais pas... il y avait quelque chose dans son ton... . Pas dans ce
qu'elle disait. . . . Au contraire, elle m'a dit qu'elle même l'aurait fait (...) mais il y avait comme du mépris . . . " (P., pp. 116-117). Alain Guimiez is speaking about Germaine Lemaire in the preceding example. Her failure to control her tone of voice on another occasion reveals a feeling which all of the people present are trying to keep hidden:

Mais là, tout à coup elle l'a senti, cela vient de passer dans le ton sur lequel elle a dit ces mots et ils l'ont tous perçu, cela a pénétré en eux sans que jamais aucun d'eux ne veuille, n'ose se l'avouer -- ou peut-être ose-t-il, mais entre eux jamais un mot, c'est pour cacher cela, probablement, qu'ils prennent ces airs écoeurés -- cela s'est montré. . . juste une trace, une ombre, comme l'ombre des poils fins au bout de l'oreille d'un petit démon: une satisfaction secrète. . . . (P., p. 198)

At other times the tone of voice used may betray a certain facet of a character's overall personality, as in this example: "(...) sa voix onctueuse de domestique dévouée. . . " (P.I., p. 153). The character may automatically cover up the slip as Tante Berthe does in this scene from Le Planétarium:

(...) il passe une main inquiète dans ses cheveux, il rajuste vite sa cravate, tandis que la chaîne derrière la porte cliquette, qu'une voix cassée, hésitante . . . la voix craintive des vieilles solitaires, la voix méfiante, hostile des vieilles rentières avaries que
guettent dans les escaliers silencieux
les assassins sournois, faux camelots
venant leur proposer des brosses, des
machines à laver, faux inspecteurs venant
faire le relève de leurs compteurs à gaz

. . . une voix toute changée, qu'il
reconnaît à peine, demande "Qui est là?
-- C'est moi ton frère, c'est Pierre

. . . . " Il entend comme une pépiement,
un remue-ménage heureux, un déclic
rapide, un bruit de chaîne léger, joyeux,
la porte s'ouvre. . . . Ah, c'est toi

. . . . . "

(P., pp. 170-171)

The daughter's voice in Portrait d'un Inconnu expresses a
cmpulsively childish dependency: "(...) il entend les voyelles

mièvres. . . paa-paa. . . où perce une exigence têtue,

infantile. . . " (P.I., p. 129). Another voice suggests

a similar quality, but one which betrays a different in-
tention: "Pour un peu elle zozoterait comme on fait quand
on parle à un enfant. . . " (F., p. 28).

Since all of the social stimuli discussed here are

ambiguous in some way or another, they are, of course,

open to various interpretations. These aspects of human
behavior have yet to be clearly identified or classified

in any way. Together they make up an area of psychological

material in which the novelist moves about more confidently

than the professional psychologist. As this discussion of

social stimuli progresses into areas of increasing sub-

jectivity, this difference will become even more striking.

Another complex and intriguing social stimulus is
laughter. Sarraute devotes many pages to the peculiarity of a character's laugh, to the many messages a laugh may convey. As a matter of fact, Vous les entendez? is centered upon the issue of laughter and the intentions behind it. Throughout the book the children's laughter sets off all kinds of reactions:

Se pencher vers l'autre, en train tranquillement de bourrer sa pipe, repousser la bête de pierre sur le côté de la table, près des bouteilles et des verres, levez un doigt et dire: Vous les entendez? et ensemble écouter . . . scruter. . . . Suis-je fou? Mais il me semble. . . . L'autre s'immobilise, l'autre tend l'oreille. . . . Qu'y a-t-il? -- Vous ne trouvez pas que ces rires. . . un peu trop insistants. . . .

(V., p. 36)

The father is in doubt as to the true meaning of his children's laughter. He knows that they know that to be effective their outbursts of laughter must appear innocuous and natural (V., pp. 35-36). He is suspicious of the real intention behind them, but, at the same time, he does not know whether or not his fears are the product of an overly-distrustful disposition which makes him see only the negative side of things. He seeks reassurance (V., pp. 27-28).

In Sarraute's novels the many varieties of laughter are often described in arresting ways. It can convey purity and innocence: "(...) son rire est comme le
ruissellement de gouttes de rosée, comme une pluie tiède, parfumée, de printemps. . ." (P., p. 114). A character may take advantage of laughter's contagiousness to draw others into it: "(...) elle rit . . . son rire déferle en cascades légères comme pour les entraîner . . . ah, ah, c'est tordant . . ." (P., pp. 180-181). It may not be an expression of real pleasure as in the case of the narrator's young cousin in Martereau:

Le rire de ma cousine, un peu faux, mal posé, ne s'emboîte pas exactement dans la place en nous, l'espace prêt à le recevoir que la petite chanson a creusé. Un accord final attendu, nécessaire, mais pas très habilement plaqué.

(M., p. 166)

At times laughter may be everything from teasing to contemptuous. The narrator's uncle in Martereau laughs in this manner: "(...) il avait ri de son rire indéfinissable, admiratif et méprisant" (p. 178). Another character has a similar laugh: "Elle rit doucement. Il y a dans ce rire quelque chose d'à peine perceptible, juste une nuance . . . une à peine perceptible intonation par où il lui semble que la dérision prudemment s'insinue . . ." (E., p. 156).

Another character's laugh is contemptuous in the extreme:

Ce rire là, sur ses arrières, il le reconnaît: rien de commun avec les roucoulements heureux, les tendres gloussements . . . un rire lourd qui se vautre, un gras rire épais qui se roule partout, puis tout à coup s'enfonce dans la gorge,
disparaît presque, réduit à une sorte de chuintement, chemine longtemps, quelque part en dessous... et personne ne bouge, on attend--et puis reparaît, enroué, grinçant, long... il vous écorche... (F., p. 33)

Other laughs can be frightening in character: "Il rit d'un de ces rires dont on dit--et l'expression est juste--qu'ils vous font froid dans le dos,..." (M., p. 131). A laugh may even suggest insanity: "Il rit d'un rire de dément..." (F., p. 142).

Up until this point, the discussion has centered around those social stimuli which can be heard in one form or another. The absence of sound, however, can also be a powerful social stimulus. Silence can also convey a great deal about a character's attitude. The narrator's uncle reacts in this manner, in Martereau, to his nephew's suggestion that he look about him at the beauty of the countryside. The uncle has been discussing business matters and resents his nephew's suggestion:

Le répit que cet acte de bravoure me vaut est très bref. Il tourne la tête, il plisse les yeux, il jette un regard impatiemt, furieux vers le ruisselet, il se tait: un silence épais et lourd qui écrase rapidement le tintement des clochettes et le gazouillis des sources. (p. 40)

The narrator's aunt, in the same novel, uses silence to convey her disapproval and inflict a punishment of a certain duration:
Le silence une fois déclenché se maintient avec la régularité et l'inéluctabilité d'un système pénitentiaire bien organisé. Le coupable y est soumis pour une durée qu'elle apprécie suivant l'importance de la faute commise et les signes qu'elle décèle chez lui de souffrance et de repentir.

(p. 143)

In most instances, silence is linked to some kind of negative attitude. A character withdraws from communication and isolates himself: "(... elle avait mis entre elle et lui les vastes espaces infranchissables de son silence, (....)" (M., p. 148). Two literary critics in Les Fruits d'Or keep others at a distance by means of their aloof silence:

Entre eux et les groupes, toujours plus nombreux de ceux qui attendent derrière les grilles, espérant les voir enfin se montrer, descendre peut-être un jour, sortir, et -- ô gratitude, ô bonheur -- venir se mêler quelques instants à la foule, ils étendent, pareilles aux solennelles cours blanches devant les palais des rois, les vastes étendues infranchissables de leur silence.

( pp. 103-104)

The issue of silence leads into the area of social stimuli which are never heard, only seen. The first of these to be considered is the complex collection of social stimuli referred to as "facial expression." One social psychologist, citing a study based on more than one culture, notes six basic expressions: 1) love, happiness, or mirth; 2) surprise; 3) fear or suffering; 4) anger or
determination; 5) disgust; and 6) contempt. Sarraute's study of these social stimuli emphasizes the more subtle variations on these basic expressions. There are three aspects of this issue to be considered: 1) overall facial expression; 2) the expression of the eyes; and 3) the expression of the mouth.

A character's facial expression in general gives a great deal of information concerning internal states of mind. It may convey a number of things at once: "Sur sa face obtuse s'étale une désapprobation mêlée de pitié . . ." (E., p. 150). It may suggest something which is hidden: "Ils ont perçu dans son air attentif, pénétré, quelque chose d'un peu louche. . ." (V., pp. 56-57); "Il sent qu'il serait dangereux de s'attarder, de mendier encore quelques instants, il y a quelque chose de menaçant dans son amabilité un peu mondaine, distante. . ." (P., p. 108). Alain Guimiez and his father gauge each other's reactions to the sudden appearance of Germaine Lemaire in a Paris bookstore as this reaction is expressed on their faces. Alain betrays his fear and confusion, while his father's attitude toward the situation is shown in this manner:

Et aussitôt, ce qu'il avait prévu, ce petit sourire en coin, cette lueur féroce dans les yeux étroits, entre les lourdes paupières, ce mouvement qu'il perçoit chez son père, un déplacement rapide et silencieux, comme si quelque chose se défaisait, puis se recomposait autrement,
prenait une autre forme: "Ah c'était donc ça .. ."
(P., pp. 150-151)

The eyes alone can express a great deal about a character's attitude. An entire spectrum of feeling is revealed in them: tenderness -- "son regard attené" (P., p. 195); confidence -- "(...) l'estime qu'ils ont pour lui jaillit du regard qu'ils lui plongent dans les yeux . . ." (P., p. 214); surprise -- "(...) son regard surpris, légèrement apitoyé. . . ." (F., p. 154); mockery -- "(...) l'œil narquois, presque amusé (...)" (P., p. 231); greed -- "(...) une convoitise sournoise luit dans leurs yeux . . ." (F., p. 63); anger -- "Je n'ai pas peur de ce qui sort entre les paupières rapprochées et pique sa pointe droit dans mes yeux" (F., p. 37) -- "Les petites vagues furieuses de leurs regards (...)" (P., p. 55); reproach -- "(...) elle a fait peser sur lui un regard qu'elle a alourdi d'une charge énorme de réprobation, de mépris (...)" (P., p. 246); shock -- "Le pauvre insensé sent, braqué sur son visage, un regard stupéfait (...)" (P., p. 187); fear -- "(...) son regard traqué" (...) (P.I., p. 54); boredom -- "Ils ont ces regards blasés, nonchalants (...)" (E., p. 191) -- "(...) leurs yeux élegantement inexpressifs de carpe (...)" (P.I., p. 42); and many other feelings too numerous to mention.

The mouth, although not as expressive as the eyes, communicates a great many attitudes as well. Smiles and
frowns are of many shades as these examples show: "Ils m'accueillent avec leur sourire toujours légèrement ironique et un peu trop sympathisant (...)" (P.I., p. 19); "Il a un sourire un peu gêné (...)" (F., p. 145); "(...) ce sourire tendu, inquiet, obséquieux. . ." (P., p. 211); "(...) elle avait senti errer sur son visage un fin sourire pensif (...)" (P., p. 189); "Elle avance sa face plate sur laquelle s'étire un sourire d'idiotie. . ." (E., p. 9).

Gestures and what has come to be called "body language" together compose another aspect of social stimuli, one which has recently received a great deal of attention from social psychologists. The hands are particularly expressive: "L'autre lève la main pour protester. . ." (F., p. 36); "Elle l'arrête d'un petit mouvement impatient de la main (...)" (P., p. 209); "(...) une bonne grosse tape condescendante. . ." (M., p. 178). An attitude which a character has been trying to hide may appear in the form of body movement: "(...) il se dresse avec un air -- l'ont-ils perçu? -- de soulagement. . ." (P., p. 214); "(...) il rejette légèrement le torse en arrière, comme effrayé -- un mouvement qu'il regrette aussitôt de n'avoir pu réprimer, c'est une séquelle de son humiliation passée. . ." (E., p. 19); "Cet air de compoction, de réverence avec lequel tu t'es inclinée" (F., pp. 9-10).
The last area of social stimuli to be studied is one in which Sarraute\'s powers of observation and innate sensitivity must certainly be outstanding. This is the area of subliminal social stimuli, that is to say those stimuli which are registered below the threshold of awareness.²¹ Quite understandably, they are the most elusive of all, and their appearance in Nathalie Sarraute\'s novels constitutes a major facet of her originality. Here is one example from the early work, *Tropismes*: "Une quiétude étrange, une sorte de satisfaction désespérée émanait d'eux" (p. 11). In *Portrait d'un Inconnu*, the hypersensitive narrator gives this description of a certain category of women:

> Quelque chose d'épais et d'âcre filtrait d'elles comme une sueur, comme un suint. Toutes sortes de petits désirs rampants, mordants, se déroulaient en elles comme des petits serpents, des noeuds de vipères, des vers: des désirs secrets et corrosifs, un peu dans le genre de ceux de la Bovary. (pp. 41-42)

The narrator in *Marianne* tries to capture the essence of this most subtle form of communication:

> Tout cela, et bien plus encore, exprimé non avec des mots, bien sûr, comme je suis obligé de faire maintenant faute d'avoir d'autres moyens, pas avec de vrais mots pareils à ceux qu'on articule distinctement à voix haute ou en pensée, mais évoqué plutôt par des sortes de signes très rapides contenant tout cela, le résumant -- telle une brève formule qui couronne une longue construction
algébrique, qui exprime une série de combinaisons chimiques compliquées -- des signes si brefs et qui glissent en lui, en moi si vite que je ne pourrais jamais parvenir à bien les comprendre, à les saisir (...)

(p. 34)

Numerous examples of subliminal social stimuli can be found throughout the novels of Nathalie Sarraute. These, of course, are usually perceived by the most sensitive characters. In this scene from *Le Planétarium*, Alain Guimiez is visiting the famous author Germaine Lemaire. An impression he does not fully understand causes him to give up all ideas of further intimacy:

(...) il a l'impression tout à coup -- c'est très rapide -- qu'en elle un long bras avide aux doigts prenants se tend, il ne sait pas très bien, il n'a pas le temps de savoir comment il a décelé en elle ce mouvement... et aussitôt chez lui, avec le sentiment du danger qui revient, cette rapidité d'adaptation -- il en est lui-même surpris...

(p. 102)

This example is taken from *Les Fruits d'Or*:

Ils sont un peu figés, ils sont comme resserrés... on dirait qu'ils sont gonflés à éclater de quelque chose qu'ils cherchent à retenir, à contenir... Qu'est-ce que c'est? Une compréhension? Une hostilité? C'est quelque chose en lui sûrement, quelque chose qui filtre de lui, qui se dépase en eux et fait germer, se développer...

(p. 31)

The attitudes which subliminal social stimuli convey are often difficult to capture in words. Sarraute often
describes them in terms of the reaction which they cause in her characters. The distinguished psychoanalyst and author, Dr. Theodor Reik had this pertinent comment to make on conscious and unconscious sense perceptions:

Psychical data are not uniform. We have, of course, in the first place the considerable portion that we seize upon through conscious hearing, sight, touch, and smell. A further portion is what we observe unconsciously. It is permissible to declare that this second portion is more extensive than the first, and that far greater importance must be ascribed to it in the matter of psychological comprehension than to what we consciously hear, see, etc.\textsuperscript{22}

This concludes the section on social stimuli in the face-to-face situation. Dr. Reik refers to this class of phenomena as "neurodynamic stimuli."\textsuperscript{23} The social stimuli which are not perceived in direct social interaction are the next subject to be considered. They, too, are ultimately traceable to other people. This category includes such indirect social stimuli as handwriting, photographs, and even works of art.

The narrator in Portrait d'un Inconnu has a problematical reaction to the daughter's handwriting:

(...) -- le papier, l'enveloppe, l'élément de preuve que j'ai gardé et où s'étale sa marque (comme la trace que laisse sur la neige la griffe de l'animal furtif): le M immense tracé d'abord avec une désinvolture molle, quelque chose de déjeté, de volontairement vulgaire et comme vautré, où je la reconnais, et puis l'énorme hampe raide et dure qui descend, atrocement
agressive, coupe l'adresse, traverse presque toute l'enveloppe comme une intolérable provocation, s'attaque à moi, me fait mal... .
(P.I., pp. 19-20)

Photographs also communicate a great deal concerning the attitudes of the subjects. In *Le Planétarium*, Gisèle's mother has a constant reminder of Alain's attitude toward her, in the form of a photograph:

Cette expression de fureur, de violence rentrée tout à coup quand le photographe avait voulu les faire poser, quand elle avait insisté -- c'est toujours un peu ridicule, on le sait bien, les poses qu'ils vous font prendre dans ces cas-là, se regardant dans le blanc des yeux, se tenant la main, il faut bien faire des concessions, mais de là à éprouver tant de haine, de fureur: on en voit encore des traces dans cette expression froide, crispée, fixée pour toujours sur la photo qu'elle a gardée -- elle n'en a pas d'autre -- sur la cheminée.
(P., pp. 58-59)

The photographs of strangers are no less revealing than those of familiar people: "Cela montait vers elle des images de magazines, de revues de mode... .des portraits des duchesses, des princesses, des reines... ." (F., p. 57). One character recalls the complex of attitudes contained in a literary revue and her reactions to them (F., p. 120). The possessions of others are also indirect social stimuli when they bring these people to mind:

"Et puis je me suis aperçu que les choses n'y étaient pour rien ou pour très peu. Des complices tout au plus, de
vagues comparses, des domestiques fidèles qui se con-
forment au genre des maîtres de la maison" (M., pp. 25-26).

Of all social stimuli, works of art are perhaps the
most ambiguous. The narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu
finds a complex and intriguing attitude expressed in an
unsigned portrait of an anonymous man displayed in a
museum in Amsterdam:

On aurait dit qu'ici l'effort, le doute, le
tourment avaient été surpris par une
catastrophe soudaine et qu'ils étaient
demeurés là, fixés en plein mouvement,
comme ces cadavres qui restent pétrifiés
dans l'attitude où la mort les a frappés.
Ses yeux seuls semblaient avoir échappé
au cataclysme et avoir atteint le but,
l'achèvement: ils paraissaient avoir tiré
à eux et concentré en eux toute l'intensité,
la vie qui manquaient à ses traits encore
informes et disloqués. Ils semblaient ne
pas appartenir tout à fait à ce visage et
faisaient penser aux yeux que doivent avoir
ces êtres enchantés dans le corps desquels
un charme retient captifs les princes et
les princesses des contes de fées. L'appel
qu'ils lançaient, pathétique, insistant,
faisait sentir, d'une manière étrange et
rendait tragique son silence.

(P.I., p. 86)

Sarraute devotes an entire novel to the different
reactions provoked by an esthetic stimulus, namely the
novel of the same title in Les Fruits d'Or. In general,
her characters spend a great deal of time discussing works
of art, especially painting and literature, and comparing
reactions to these complex social stimuli.
For the most part, Sarraute's novels deal with the social stimuli which are experienced in direct encounter with another person. Although these various stimuli were discussed separately earlier, for the sake of analysis, it must be understood that they usually occur in combination. One or another of these social stimuli may stand out against the background of the others. This usually occurs when the stimulus somehow does not fit in with the others and suggests a different attitude than that which is contained in the others. In this example taken from Martereau, the sensitive young narrator describes the complex of social stimuli which communicate Martereau's attitude toward him:

Quand j'ai vu apparaître Martereau, j'ai eu tout de même un soubresaut d'espoir, un bref élan aussitôt réprimé. Martereau avançait vers moi sur le passage clouté, son feutre sombre rejeté en arrière, un gros paquet dans les bras; il avait un visage fermé, un regard fixe et vide; il me semblait que de l'interpeller ou de le toucher le ferait tomber à la renverse. Au moment de nous croiser, les yeux rivés à lui, une ébauche de sourire sur mon visage, j'ai esquissé un mouvement vers lui, je n'ai pas pu m'en empêcher: son visage s'est pétrifié encore plus, s'est vidé entièrement -- une tête vide de poupée -- et ses yeux, au moment où il est passé près de moi, ont bougé très légèrement, se sont détournés d'un angle infime, tandis que je sentais comme de toutes ses forces ramassées il me repoussait.

(p. 176)

This little example, in which not a single word is spoken,
contains a great deal of information concerning attitudes expressed in the form of social stimuli. However interesting social stimuli may be in Sarraute's work, they are not studied for their own sake. They are inseparably linked to the tropism, the central concept of Sarraute's work. It is the purpose of the next section of this chapter to examine in detail the psychical phenomena to which this term refers.

The Tropism

If one were to look for the core of Nathalie Sarraute's works, it would surely be found in the concept of the "tropism." Sarraute herself has repeatedly underscored the pivotal importance of this puzzling concept. The tropism has been the center of her work since her first book, Tropismes, until the recent, and also very tropistic work, Vous les entendez?. The following concerning the tropism was written in 1956 and appears in the preface to l'Ere du Souff: "Mon premier livre contenait en germe tout ce que, dans mes ouvrages suivants, je n'ai cessé de développer. Les tropismes ont continué à être la substance vivante de tous mes livres" (p. 9). Five years after the preceding comment was made, Sarraute, in an interview, stated the following:

The tropism as such was the centre and the driving power of my works. But, while I
worked, I became aware that the tropism could become more complex, could be richer, if it were prepared by many other tropisms. It was difficult, in writing these small one- or two-page stories, each of them containing one tropism, to start each time all over again as if I had to write an entirely new story. I wanted to follow the tropisms while they developed slowly in different scenes and then expand in all their richness and complexity in one final scene.  

The general direction of Sarraute's work has not changed over the years. The expanding role of the tropism is a major part of this development. She has slowly mastered a difficult technique and rendered into words what words, it seemed, could not express. This work as a whole is characterized by the precarious balance of dialogue and tropisms. *Le Planétarium* is probably the most balanced of her works in this respect. The ensuing novels have seen the scales tip more or less in the direction of the tropism. *Vous les entendez?* contains a limited amount of dialogue and a great amount of tropisms; it probably represents, in this sense, a major realization of her literary ambition, although it may not be her best overall novel.

Before attempting to probe into the complexities of the tropism itself, a word or two does not seem out of place in reply to a question which must have crossed the minds of more than one of Sarraute's readers, namely: Why did she choose to devote her life to the description of
the tropism in the form of the novel? In answer to this question, Sarraute points to her disposition:

When I started writing in 1933, it was not to apply theories but to express a strong emotion caused by certain things which had aroused my curiosity and my desire to communicate them to others. Here I must be frank. I do not pretend that I started writing this particular text and no other as, on some lovely morning, a young bird starts singing. My attention was roused and my curiosity attracted by this particular thing and no other; first, of course, because it was in my nature to be sensitive to a certain kind of inner movement, to certain human behavior and relationships.25

Elsewhere she states that this interest in what she calls the "tropism" dates back to her childhood (E.S., p. 8). The combination of curiosity and innate sensitivity must of course be joined with a special talent to have produced such unique works as Le Planétarium.

It may be stated, without hesitation, that to understand the tropism is to understand the work of Nathalie Sarraute. The contrary is also true; for a reader with little or no idea of what Sarraute means by "tropism" will find himself hopelessly lost in the complex movements of the text which traces these "tropisms." The "tropism," it should be stated at the outset, refers to more than one thing. Confusion can be avoided by keeping these meanings apart. On the one hand, it is meant to describe a certain psychological reaction. On the other hand, it refers to the part of the text in which these movements are
expressed. In keeping with the social-psychological orientation of this study, the first meaning will be analyzed in terms of attitude and social stimuli. The second meaning will be the subject of a brief discussion of the verbal translation of the tropisms.

The tropism has been defined by Sarraute and many critics who have studied her works. A careful consideration of these many definitions leads to the conclusion that the tropism refers to a process of some kind:

Un tropisme ne saurait être fixe. Il est: ce qui est en train de se produire.
Liquide en fusion, apte à être coulé dans toutes sortes de moules, et qui ne prend forme que lorsqu'il est refroidi; or son unique qualité est d'être à l'état de fusion.²⁷

This definition suggests what modern writers are inclined to call the "stream-of-consciousness." Nonetheless, the tropism is not, strictly speaking, a part of wholly conscious experience. It refers to a level of mental activity which runs deeper than the stream-of-consciousness: "These movements glide quickly round the border of our consciousness. . . ."²⁸ Consequently, they cannot be expressed in the conscious thoughts of the character who experiences them: "They are seldom expressed in interior monologues by the person who experiences them."²⁹ It was for this reason that Sarraute adopted the point of view called third-person-stream-of-consciousness as a replacement for first-person-narration (i.e., the interior
monologue). At this point, the question which comes to mind, in this post-Freudian age, is this: Do the tropisms have anything to do with the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious? If such a part of the psyche exists, as psychoanalysts are wont to admit, the tropism is not entirely a part of it, for the simple reason that it is experienced, if only pre-verbally. Besides, there are some thinkers who do not clearly distinguish these two levels of experience: "Conscious and unconscious experiences do not belong to different compartments of the mind: they form a continuous scale of gradations, of degrees of awareness."30 The tropism, then, is a phenomenon on the fringes of conscious experience and unconscious mental processes: it is a biophysic phenomenon.

Having established with some measure of accuracy the level of consciousness at which the tropism occurs, it is now possible to examine it in terms of its more specific characteristics. The obvious starting point would seem to be the term itself. The word "tropism" is a term used in biology: "Biologists call such built-in kinds of usable data tropisms. Tropisms, they say, are reflexes that automatically cause their owners to respond to environment in ways suitable for them."31 In response to critics who accused her of comparing human beings to plants, Nathalie Sarraute made the following reply: "I called it
"Tropisms." But it was an analogy which was meant to be quite general. Human beings are not plants. Their reactions to each other are so complex. It is a childish simplification to take that analogy literally."\(^{32}\) What then is this analogy intended to convey? The answer to this question is -- psychological adjustment:

It is difficult to explain what these movements are. I thought they might be called 'tropisms' after the biological term, because they are purely instinctive and are caused in us by other people or by the outer world and resemble the movements called tropisms by which living organisms expand or contract under certain influences, such as light, heat, and so on.\(^{33}\)

This discussion of stimulus and response brings to mind the concept of social stimulus, discussed in detail earlier, and, as it will be shown shortly, essential to an explanation of the tropism. The latter term -- in the sense in which it is used by Sarrante -- resembles its scientific counterpart in that it is a response to an outside stimulus, as, for example, in the tendency of a plant to turn in the direction of the sun -- the stimulus being light -- which is referred to as "heliotropism." The stimuli which trigger off tropisms in the case of people are the social stimuli.

A return to the concept of attitude is necessary in order to best describe what the tropism represents. In the case of the plant, discussed above, the "usable data"
are a basic part of its inherited structure. Human beings adjust by means of attitudes—which, as it was stated earlier, are learned. With this in mind, the following definition of the tropism is offered for the purposes of this study: The tropism is a psychological reaction process which is a function of the overall social stimulus situation and the attitudes which it elicits from one moment to the next in the mind of the individual, a process which occurs entirely outside of conscious control, but whose effects may be experienced at different levels of awareness.

Sarrasute compares these subtle inner movements to the phenomena of modern physics: "Ces états, en effet, sont comme ces phénomènes de la physique moderne, si délicats et infimes qu'un rayon de lumière ne peut les éclairer, sans qu'il les trouble et les déforme" (E.S., p. 68). The ray of light in the previous quotation brings to mind the problems regarding the transformation of the tropisms into the language of a literary text. These problems are bound up with a discussion of the other meaning of the tropism—its literary form.

The literary form of the tropism is a subject which is, properly speaking, outside of the scope of this study. It has been studied elsewhere. It is mentioned here as part of the literary transformation of social-psychological processes. The problem for Sarrasute was to find the right
technique:

Il est donc permis de rêver -- sans se dissimuler tout ce qui sépare ce rêve de sa réalisation -- d'une technique qui parviendrait à plonger le lecteur dans le flot de ces drames souterrains. . .une technique qui donnerait au lecteur l'illusion de refaire lui-même ces actions avec une conscience plus lucide, avec plus d'ordre, de netteté et de force qu'il ne peut le faire dans la vie, sans qu'elles perdent cette part d'indétermination, cette opacité et ce mystère qu'ont toujours ces actions pour celui qui les vit.

(E.S., pp. 117-118)

The tropisms had to be captured in all their subtlety and their immediacy. The writer who is the central character in Entre la Vie et la Mort surely speaks for Sarraute herself when these thoughts pass through his mind as he attempts to write:

C'est une image et puis une autre. . . ce sont des bribes de conversation, ou bien juste une intonation, un accent qu'un mouvement rapide traverse, qui sont comme parcourus, secoués par une brève convulsion.

Il faut capter cela, ce mouvement, l'isoler, chercher plus de netteté et se développer de créer des conditions plus favorables?. . . le faire passer ailleurs, dans d'autres images mieux assemblées, d'autres paroles ou intonations, comme on transplante une pousse sauvage dans un terrain amélioré, enrichi de terreau, nourri d'engrais, dans un lieu bien clos, une serre où sera maintenue constamment une température appropriée?. . . Ici peut-être, dans ces images composées tout exprès avec des éléments pris partout, choisis et rassemblés, qui mieux que d'autres se laisseront traverser. Tout inspecter. . . ne pas laisser par inadvertance, par un souci frivole d'élégance, de beauté, se glisser ici rien d'inutile, aucun futile ornement. . .
Hence, the author of *Tropismes* is somewhat like a scientist in her approach to fiction. Each part of the text is carefully scrutinized for the right word in the right place in order to communicate the desired effect: a particular tropistic movement and the transformations which it undergoes in the consciousness of the character who experiences it. The objective is a direct rendering of a social-psychological process exactly as it is occurring, with a minimum of distancing.

Distancing—in the sense of a loss in the immediacy of the impression she is trying to convey—is the main problem Sarraute has had to grapple with when selecting the words with which to express the tropisms. Since this experience is primarily pre-verbal in character, words, being conventional symbols, reduce these movements to the limitations of a general category. As a result, the elusive feelings and sensations which are activated in subtle and kaleidoscopic patterns on the mental horizon—as one attitude and then another is brought into play—lose their unique character. One critic who has examined the manuscripts of Nathalie Sarraute explains the purpose behind the revisions contained in them:
J'ai vu des manuscrits de Nathalie Sarraute: les corrections tendaient toujours au même but: effacer ce qui pouvait séduire. Il faut que les tropismes se meuvent sous nos yeux; comme, au travers d'un cristal, des flammes de couleur, une pluie de neige. S'il nous vient un vertige, c'est de cette immédiatêté même, qui nous lie au mouvement.35

The texts of Nathalie Sarraute are marked by a struggle between language and the tropisms. The author makes use of several techniques in order to keep the tropisms in motion. All of these techniques are aimed at heightening the reader's awareness of the tropisms as they unfold and transform themselves from one moment to the next. Paramount among these are the following: 1) the use of imagery; 2) alteration in the temporal aspect of the narrative; and 3) deviations from standard punctuation.

The inadequacy of language for articulating feelings is often pointed out, as in the following remarks of the noted philosopher and esthetician Susanne K. Langer:

Everybody knows that language is a very poor medium for expressing our emotional nature. It merely names certain vaguely and crudely conceived states, but fails miserably in any attempt to convey the ever-moving patterns, the ambivalences and intricacies of inner experience, the interplay of feelings with thoughts and impressions, memories and echoes of memories, transient fantasy, or its mere runic traces, all turned into nameless, emotional stuff.36

The latter part of the above citation could easily be a description of what Nathalie Sarraute attempts to do in her novels. The elusive and complex feelings, however, would
be presented in terms of imagery designed to elicit an analogous sensation in the mind of the reader. Sarraute feels that it is possible to communicate the tropisms in the form of analogous images because of a fundamental similarity in the human race—what she refers to as the "fond commun" (E.S., p. 36). One writer has given these images considerable attention and grouped them into three general categories: 1) recurrent images; 2) the development of an initial image; and 3) image sequences. This critic has also given a detailed account of the sources from which Sarraute draws her imagery, such as animal imagery, military imagery, medical imagery, etc. The images are not intended to embellish the text. Assuming that the reader is caught up in the movement of the tropisms, the images, which are presented most often as a series of approximations, should not attract undue attention to themselves at the expense of the feeling which Sarraute is trying to convey.

The second important technical device for communicating the tropisms to the reader is a general alteration in the temporal element of the narrative:

Il fallait aussi décomposer ces mouvements et les faire se déployer dans la conscience du lecteur à la manière d'un film au ralenti. Le temps n'était plus celui de la vie réelle, mais celui d'un présent démesurément agrandi.

(E.S., p. 9)
A dialogue which might occupy but a few minutes in real life may fill any number of pages as the author allows the tropisms to unfold in slow motion. The exclusive use of the present tense which characterizes most of Sarraute's writing, is another narrative technique which we associate with the cinema, an influence which Sarraute has acknowledged on more than one occasion, as in this reference to a camera technique: The movements "have to be shown while they are going on by a process which resembles what, in the cinema, is called travelling, when the camera is moving at the same time as the object the operator wants to photograph." The use of an expanded present tense narration is another of the methods used to convey the tropisms to the reader.

The third technique--deviations from standard punctuation--is perhaps most problematical from the perspective of the reader. In the later works quotation marks are abandoned completely and the reader is left to his own devices when trying to distinguish a character's thoughts from the spoken dialogue. Sarraute's justification for this is based on the argument that punctuation must not be allowed to congeal the flow of the tropisms (E.S., pp. 104-105). She says that it is possible to distinguish thoughts from dialogue despite the absence of the appropriate punctuation: "C'est insensiblement, par un changement de
rythme ou de forme, qui épouserait en l'accentuant sa propre sensation, que le lecteur reconnaîtrait que l'action est passée du dedans au dehors" (E.S., p. 118).

An attentive reader generally has little difficulty distinguishing the various characters' conversation from their sub-conversation and tropisms.

Another outstanding characteristic of Sarraute's punctuation is the ubiquitous presence of the ellipsis. Its repeated use gives the text a greater flow in its linear movement and makes the period seem like a rather abrupt stop. Jean-Paul Sartre found much to admire in the style of Nathalie Sarraute:

Le meilleur de Nathalie Sarraute, c'est son style trébuchant, tâtonnant, si honnête, si plein de repentir, qui approche de l'objet avec des précautions pieuses, s'en écarte soudain par une sorte de pudeur ou par timidité devant la complexité des choses et qui, en fin de compte, nous livre le monstre tout baveux, mais presque sans y toucher, par la vertu magique d’une image.

(P.I., Préface, p. 14)

Each of these techniques has been studied separately in much greater detail in the critical literature on Nathalie Sarraute. These techniques are the means whereby Sarraute is able to bring the social-psychological phenomena, which science has not succeeded in classifying, to the attention of her readers in a form which closely conforms to their true nature.
A few examples of tropisms taken from Sarraute's novels will serve to round out this discussion of this phenomenon. This first example is taken from Tropismes (IX) and describes the feelings of a male character in the presence of a certain woman. The effect she has on him is at the origin of his tropistic movements in which a shifting series of attitudes is actuated:

Il se mettait à parler, à parler sans arrêt, de n'importe qui, de n'importe quoi, à se démener (comme le serpent devant la musique? comme les oiseaux devant le boa? il ne savait plus) vite, vite, pendant qu'il en est temps encore, pour la contenir, pour l'amadouer. Parler, mais parler de quoi? de qui? de soi, mais de soi, des siens, de ses amis, de sa famille, de leurs histoires, de leurs désagrément s, de leurs secrets, de tout ce qu'il valait mieux cacher, mais puisque cela pouvait l'intéresser, mais puisque cela la pourrait satisfaire, il n'y avait pas à hésiter, il fallait le lui dire, tout lui dire, se dépouiller de tout, tout lui donner, tant qu'elle serait là, accroupie sur un coin du fauteuil, toute douce, toute plane, se tortillant. (I., pp. 58-59)

This very early example of a "tropism" differs from later examples in several striking ways. To begin with, it is written in the past descriptive or imperfect tense rather than in the present tense. The imperfect, while conveying continuity of movement, lacks the immediacy of the present tense. The ellipsis used in later tropisms has as its precedent, the comma. The approximations carry the movement forward; the author does not dwell on any one in particular, but, instead, makes them work together to produce
the effect of movement in the mind of the character. The analogous images which will occupy such a large part of the tropisms in later works, are limited to two images, cautiously placed between parentheses, in which a reference to analogous situations is made. The use of the word "comme" to introduce the images is another indication of the early stage in Sarraute's technique from which this text is taken.

The tropisms of the other characters in Portrait d'un Inconnu are conveyed to us by means of the sharp observations—and often the fantasies—of the hypersensitive narrator. In this scene the old man has just discovered that his daughter cut off a large segment of the bar of soap kept above the kitchen sink. The bar of soap becomes the indirect social stimulus to which he reacts in the following manner:

Petit à petit il lui semble qu'il sent dans son esprit, comme dans un membre engourdi, une sorte de crampe, de lourdeur, tandis que sa pensée, sans pouvoir s'échapper, tourne toujours (maintenant sa trajectoire est si bien tracée qu'elle ne subit plus, d'un tour à l'autre, aucun changement). Le mouvement devient peu à peu mécanique: le bond, la barre de savon, sa dissimulation, elle le ronge, elle le gruge. . . . Il sent une fatigue, un écoeurement, son cerveau est comme durci, vidé, seule la petite boule, inlassablement court toujours.

(P.I., p. 132)

In this example the ellipsis makes its appearance, but very tentatively. The image of the ball mechanically
repeating the same movement is better integrated into the whole passage. The physical sensations are rendered in a series of approximations. The feeling of numbness and the obsessiveness of his thoughts seem very real indeed as the bar of soap sets into motion the complex of attitudes he feels toward his daughter.

The narrator of Martereau is present at more scenes than his counterpart in the previous novel. The number of scenes which are the product of his imagination are fewer in number than in Portrait d'un Inconnu. The tropisms of the others present are most often communicated by the hypersensitive young narrator as he attempts to recreate the movements in himself which are suggested by the outer behavior of the others, as in this example. His aunt is responding to a certain tone of voice used by her husband, the narrator's uncle:

Elle, dès qu'il entre, dès qu'elle entend -- elle les reconnaît aussitôt, elle les connaît depuis longtemps -- cette voix, ce ton qu'il prend dans ses moments d'attendrissement, ce ton enfantin, désarmé, naïf et caressant et cette voix molle, mouillée, il lui semble -- je le sais, je l'éprouve comme elle chaque fois -- qu'en elle aussitôt tout se hérissé comme les poils sur le dos du chat.

(p. 55)

In a remarkable scene in Le Planétarium, the central character, Alain, refuses the grated carrots which his mother-in-law has prepared especially for him. His
tropisms take the following form:

Alain m'a dit qu'il aimait les carottes rapées. Elle est à l'affût. Toujours prête à bondir. Elle a sauté là-dessus, elle tient cela entre ses dents serrées. Elle l'a accroché. Elle le tire. . . . Le ravier en main, elle le fixe d'un oeil luisant. Mais d'un geste il s'est dégagé -- un bref geste souple de sa main levée, un mouvement de la tête. . . . "Non, merci. . . ." Il est parti, il n'y a plus personne, c'est une enveloppe vide, le vieux vêtement qu'il a abandonné dont elle serre un morceau entre ses dents. (p. 121)

He reacts to the attitude he senses behind her gesture: a desire to catch hold of him in some way, if only by having him admit to a preference for grated carrots, which he once acknowledged liking. The emotion is rendered in terms of animal reactions: attack and escape. The ellipsis is more prominent, and the imagery threads its way through the character's reaction.

As can be seen from these examples, the tropism itself cannot be isolated from the text as a whole, mainly because it is a process centered around shifting attitudes. This process affects the contents of consciousness like a hidden magnet, placed beneath a sheet of paper, causes iron filings upon the sheet to arrange in certain patterns. Similarly, conscious thoughts, perceptions, feelings and sensations are traversed by currents originating at the deepest levels of the psyche. By and large, the tropism belongs to the study of the psychology of
consciousness because it deals with states of mind, and also belongs to the field of social psychology because it is related to attitude arousal. The concept of attitude, in fact, like its counterpart, tropism, cannot be isolated and examined—it is akin to a force field. More than one attitude can be activated at a time: "The state of present attitude theory is such that there are no rigorous criteria available for ascertaining when we are dealing with one attitude or with more than one attitude."\(^{39}\)

There may be attitudes at different levels of the psyche which are simultaneously activated, or perhaps, in alternating fashion. In the case of disturbed personalities, it can be seen that conflicting attitudes are activated and affect behavior at different levels of awareness. The tropism is the most subtle of all the currents and undercurrents which move through the psyche, and which, at times, galvanize the person into some form of external behavior. Each of Sarraute's protagonists, however anonymous they may seem to be as characters, possesses the ability to sense the most subtle reactions and the most elusive nuances of attitude and emotion. The narrator of one novel explains it in this manner: "Je retrouvai tout de suite mon rôle, ma qualité de corps conducteur, à travers lequel passaient tous les courants dont l'atmosphère était chargée" (P.I., p. 144). The use of the word "chargée" in the preceding quotation, as well as the other terms
referring to electromagnetism, shows the tropisms to be as elusive a phenomenon as electricity. The attitudes of the self, including motives derived from these, interact with the currents coming from others. It is the intermingling of these currents, counter-currents and impulses in the mind which Sarraute has tried to capture in all of her writing.

One last issue merits inclusion in this discussion of the tropism, namely, the tropism in relation to conventional concepts of feeling. Sarraute believes that our feeling life is much more complex than terms such as "happy," "sad," "angry," etc. can convey, especially at the lower levels of awareness. As Sarraute sees it, feeling is often reduced to conventional outlines in which sentimentality is prominent. One critic notes the following:

Car au niveau des tropismes, bien avant l'apparition de la conscience claire mais quand l'individualité s'ébauche à peine, il règne une instabilité effrayante. Pour qui travaille, comme Nathalie Sarraute, dans l'infrarouge et sous le microscope, les grandes synthèses rassurantes que l'on nomme personnalité, sentiments, morale, caractère, apparaissent au mieux comme des illusions, ou pire comme des impostures, d'énormes structures creuses hâtivement bâties sur un terrain mouvant, et qui risquent, à tout moment, de s'enliser dans l'informe. Le mode des tropismes est donc celui de la terreur, de la solitude et de la dissimulation.

For Sarraute, the issue of feeling is a very complex one
indeed. The phenomenology of feeling is central to the concept of the tropism. The tropism is felt, however dimly, as a feeling reaction. It is interpreted by the individual in terms of the concepts he has available to him, but these concepts often distort certain aspects of these feelings. There is often a dichotomy between what one is supposed to feel and what one actually feels in response to a social stimulus situation. An effort to feel only what is considered to be a respectable reaction produces self-deception. In this scene from Sarraute's novel *Entre la Vie et la Mort* the central character, a writer, having achieved a certain measure of recognition for his first novel, is visited by admiring friends. He feels, on one level, pleasure because of the attention his home is receiving; however, on another level, he senses dubious intentions behind their behavior:

C'est surprenant, c'est agréable. ... comment ne pas se sentir un peu ému, flatté par cet intérêt. ... une curiosité presque avide avec laquelle ils observent tout autour d'eux, le plus discrètement possible ... leurs regards glissent, se posent ... Ils se lèvent, ils s'approchent, ils soulèvent, tiennent dans leurs mains avec précaution, avec respect. ... "Oh ça, qu'est-ce que c'est? Comme c'est curieux. ..."  

(E., p. 184)

The feelings by which the tropisms are felt are not necessarily respectable feelings. They make their presence known in sensations which are hard to put into
words and which are easily distorted by the unwillingness of others to admit to such feelings within themselves. 

Such is the case when the narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu tries to get some of his friends to confirm his impressions of the daughter's effect on him:

(...) -- j'ai essayé, d'une voix trop neutre, atone et qui devait me trahir, d'insister: "ne trouvaient-ils pas, n'avaient-ils pas senti, parfois, quelque chose qui sortait d'elle, quelque chose de mou, de gluant, qui adhérerait et aspirait sans qu'on sache comment et qu'il fallait soulever et arracher de sa peau comme une compresse humide à l'odeur fade, douceâtre. ..." C'était dangereux, trop fort, et ils avaient horreur de cela mais je ne pouvais plus me retenir ..."quelque chose qui colle à vous, s'infiltre vous tire à soi, s'insinue, peut-être qui quémande par endossus, exige. ..." Je me perdais. Mais ils faisaient semblant de ne pas voir. Ils étaient décidés à ce qu'on restât normal, décent: "Oui, elle semble tenir beaucoup à l'affection des gens," ils me répondaient cela pour me calmer, pour en finir, ils voulaient me rappeler à l'ordre. Ou bien -- je ne peux jamais avec eux, m'empêcher de me poser la question — ou bien étaient-ils vraiment, comme ils le paraissaient, entièrement inconscients? (p. 16)

Certain characters attempt to put their reactions to social stimulus situations, especially those which arouse problematical or unrespectable feelings, into terms which will be accepted by others. The father in Vous les entendez? tries to do exactly this:

Eh bien voilà: leurs rires sournois produisaient en moi...ça aussi, je peux le dire? Ça aussi est permis?... produisaient -- quoi de plus normal? -- en
moi un malaise. Quelles autorités, quelle police, quel régime dur réprimant toute tentative de subversion n'autoriserait pas un brave homme à constater tristement que des rires sournois ont provoqué chez lui un sentiment bien naturel de malaise?

(p. 196)

As can be seen from these examples, the tropisms arouse feelings which often escape clear definition, and which often, if admitted, would cause one to be regarded as somehow abnormal. There is certainly much irony in this reference to the great and true feelings in this passage from *Les Fruits d'Or*:

(...) les grands, les vrais sentiments . . . ceux de tous les hommes normaux, sains, pas ceux de quelques névrosés, de quelques fous, non, les grands sentiments éternels, les miens, les vôtres, ma chère amie. . . .

(p. 62)

In another passage (M., pp. 94-95), the true feelings are also mentioned with irony. Sarraute portrays Germaine Lemaire and Bréhier (the author of the novel in *Les Fruits d'Or*) as upholders of the conventional and respectable feelings, and hence formalist authors who are not concerned with a realistic re-creation of psychological experience (c.f., E.S., pp. 140-145).

Sarraute is equally harsh toward the behaviorist authors for dispensing altogether with the issue of experience and interiority—in a word, mind. Their emphasis on outward action or "behavior," although liberating for
many people, ultimately distorts psychological reality in an attempt to escape its complexities (E.S., pp. 111-113).

In conclusion, then, the following points with respect to the tropism have been mentioned in this section: 1) The tropism is of central importance to Sarrakute's novels; 2) Its role has expanded from one work to the next; 3) The term refers to an automatic process of psychological adjustment at a marginal level of consciousness, in response to a social stimulus situation; 4) The tropism is felt as a change in the content and direction of the stream-of-consciousness; 5) It is conveyed to the reader by means of a slow-motion technique involving the use of analogous images, shifting rhythms in the word order, and appropriate indications in punctuation; 6) The feelings associated with tropisms are not always subject to definition in conventional terms, and are often discounted because they are felt to be unrespectable.

Sarrakute's Concept of Man

One is inclined to wonder what general tendency motivates an author who, at different times in her life, has been concerned with physics, sociology, history, and law. The answer to this question is perhaps -- truth. Nathalie Sarrakute searches for the level of truth in human
experience. But can truth be found in the subjective phenomena which compose the subject matter of her novels? Is there a subjective truth? Depicting the experience of the self, as well as the self in relation to others, as realistically as possible, in all of its complexity, is the truth which Nathalie Sarraute searches for as she sits down to write. Sarraute's concept of man is based upon the realistic portrayal of the subjectivity of man as a center of experience. This center of experience is an arena of constant change and instability. To Nathalie Sarraute the self called man does not have distinct boundaries. The narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu speaks for Sarraute herself when he points out the disparity between what he would like the truth to be, and what his experience leads him to conclude:

Comme je voudrais leur voir aussi ces formes lisses et arrondies, ces contours purs et fermes, à ces lambeaux informes, ces ombres tremblantes, ces spectres, ces goules, ces larves qui me narguent et après lesquels je cours. . . .

(p. 71)

To Sarraute, man is a shifting pattern of movements in which continuity of identity is more apparent than real.

The image of the planetarium is of central importance to an understanding of Sarraute's concept of man. The tropisms are like the projection machine in a planetarium. The ceiling is the surface of the self upon which the
attitudinal shifts and patterns they create, take form.
From another point of view, the individual is like a
planet supported in the void by a balance of currents and
counter-currents. Inner currents interact with outer
currents to make the self, a seemingly solid entity, but in
reality threatened by change from outside circumstances.

As can be seen from the previous discussion,
Sarraute's concept of man is based on what changes rather
than on what remains the same. Everyone knows that drastic
changes can occur in the personality of a person if his
outer circumstances are sufficiently disrupted. In cases
like that it is the outer physical appearance which gives
continuity to the person after the change. This can be
seen, for example, in cases of radical conversion from one
belief system to another. For most people there are
changes of some kind with varying effects. Individual
differences exist with respect to the strength of what may
be called the "sense of self." Sarraute's characters
often give testimony to what some psychologists might
consider a weak sense of self, and consequently draw
attention to the effects of others upon themselves:

Sans intérieurité, l'être est ouvert à tout,
n'importe quoi pourrait s'engouffrer en
lui, il n'opposerait aucune résistance; il
est jeté en pâture à tout ce qui pourrait
le combler, il est entièrement soumis au
hasard, car il ne peut choisir ce qui va le
combler.
These characters are not willful, nor do they act with any decisiveness. In this respect, they do not seem to be representative of the full range of people known to us in real life. Their attention is directed inward; in a word, they are introspective. This group includes the narrators of the first two novels and the male protagonists of all the others (except for Les Fruits d'Or and Tropismes).

There exists in the novels another group of characters who seem to be more self-assured, at least on the surface. This group encompasses the father in Portrait d'un Inconnu, the narrator's uncle and Martereau, Alain's father and Germaine Lemaire in Le Planétarium, a number of characters--mostly literary critics--in Les Fruits d'Or, the writer's father in Entre la Vie et la Mort, and the friend who has come to visit in Vous les entendez?. This group of characters probably respond to others with less sensitivity than the first group, but they are also less aware of the inevitable effects others have on them.

All the characters of Sarrasute's novels are distinguishable in terms of their responsiveness to feeling. The emphasis is on degrees of sensitivity to moods, atmospheres and psychical currents which affect everyone in some way, but which are not perceived with the same degree of awareness. Sarrasute's concept of man is based
on change, as stated above, but this change has two
aspects: the constant modulations of the feeling self,
and the indeterminacy of personal identity.

But the feelings which Sarraute is concerned with
are responses to others, as shown in the study of social
stimuli and the tropism. This, in turn, is related to
the idea of dependency. Nathalie Sarraute's characters
are dependent on others for their feeling life as well as
their sense of identity. For Sarraute, the isolated in-
dividual does not exist. Man is a part of social groups
and involved with others. The dependency of the individual
on the family and other social groups is a recurrent theme
of all of Sarraute's novels. Each character is involved
in one or more social constellations, and he is invariably
affected (whether he chooses to realize it or not), by the
attitudes that come to bear on him from the others in the
social groups. It is this central aspect of Sarraute's
concept of man which points to a social-psychological
interpretation of these works.

If Sarraute's concept of man is based upon the
dependency of the individual upon the group, it then be-
comes apparent why the tropism is so important to her con-
cept of man. The true nature of one's relationship with
others is reflected in the tropism. These most subtle
reactions to others are the clue to the attitudes of
others toward oneself. The tropisms also indicate one's own corresponding attitudes. It is on this level, Sarraute would argue, that the fundamental reality of an interpersonal relationship can be found. One cannot know the other person completely because one's own presence elicits only a part of the complex of attitudes in the particular person. However, there is a more limited kind of knowledge which is accessible to those who take the trouble to look for it. This knowledge concerns the basis of interpersonal relationships from the perspective of the self. It is akin to a kind of psychological relativity. It includes knowing one's position in the groups one is dependent on, derived from a knowledge of the psychological reality of the self in relation to each member of the group.

What makes Sarraute's concept of man disturbing for many readers is most apt to be this emphasis on man's dependency on others. There are no individualistic heroes in Sarraute's novels. The few characters who give the impression of independence are later shown to be secretly dependent on a social group of one kind or another. Most of the characters know that they are part of larger social units, and, consequently stay attuned to the feelings of those upon whom they are in some way dependent. The narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu finds a substitute for his own
family in the old man and his daughter. The narrator of Martereau vacillates between the family, composed of his aunt, uncle, and cousin, and the couple made up of Martereau and his wife. Alain Guimiez in Le Planétarium wavers back and forth between his middle-class family and the coterie of Germaine Lemaire. Les Fruits d'Or is a brilliant study of the influence of the group upon the individual, expressed in the form of conformity to public opinion. In Entre la Vie et la Mort, the central figure is seen either with his family or in literary circles. Vous les entendez? is largely about the family group as it experienced by each of its members. It takes no stretch of the imagination to see how important the group is to Sarraute's concept of man.

To summarize, then, Nathalie Sarraute's concept of man points to a sentient being inescapably linked to others in the context of the social group or groups to which he belongs.

The source of Sarraute's concept of man could be the subject of any number of speculations. It may be found in her Russian background with its cultural emphasis on community. It may also be a reflection of her own experience, a form of generalization derived from her own personality, reflecting a pronounced need for others and their approval. From another perspective, it may be a
reaction to the individuality stressed by modern European existentialist writers.

This writer will not attempt to unravel this mystery. Experience often shows that more than one influence is at work in such cases. The important issue is the fact that this concept of man, discussed above, is essential to an understanding of Sarrute's novels.

Nathalie Sarrute's approach to character, based as it is on a social-psychological concept of man, will be studied in detail in a separate chapter. This brief sketch of the main outlines of Sarrute's concept of man has been presented at this point because it is essential to an understanding of the process of social interaction as it is presented in Sarrute's novels. This is the subject matter of the chapter which follows.
CHAPTER II

THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

The preceding chapter was centered around what are here considered to be the basic elements of social interaction as presented by Nathalie Sarraute in her novels. These basic elements or factors included attitude, social stimuli, and the tropism. A discussion of Sarraute's concept of man concluded the chapter. The subject of this chapter is a study of the dynamics of the social interaction process as it appears in the novels in the form of scenes involving encounters between characters. The introductory sections of this chapter are preparatory to a detailed analysis and interpretation of selected scenes from seven of Sarraute's works of prose fiction. The scenes are discussed in the order in which the works, of which they are a part, appeared in print; a certain development is apparent.

The first section of this chapter gives an overall orientation to the works of Nathalie Sarraute in their formal aspect. It is a discussion of the structure of the text itself in its main aspects.

In the second section, the main objective behind Sarraute's presentation of social interaction is examined. This section is intended to answer the question: What
facets of social interaction are of most importance to Nathalie Sarraute as a literary social psychologist?

The third section looks into those aspects of social interaction which Sarraute repeatedly emphasizes in an effort to give the reader a general idea of the issues which appear to be of most importance.

The last section of this chapter focuses on those scenes from the novels which best reflect the character of Nathalie Sarraute's novels in general.

The Formal Aspect of Nathalie Sarraute's Novels

Nathalie Sarraute's novels are composed of scenes of social interaction which are loosely held together by a surface plot of some kind. The real plot of these novels can be found on the level of the interaction of social stimulus situations and tropisms:

Le déroulement de ces états en perpétuelle transformation constituait une action dramatique très précise dont les péripéties devaient remplacer celles qu'offrait au lecteur l'intrigue du roman traditionnel. Cette action dramatique, toujours en train de se construire, gonflait l'instant présent et ne pouvait se couler dans l'ordre chronologique habituel. 42

Consequently, there are two main aspects to a typical Sarraute text: 1) A surface aspect consisting of realistic situations, usually involving rather mundane conversations; and 2) A depth aspect made up of unspoken thoughts or
sub-conversations, and tropisms presented in the form of imagery. Generally speaking, Sarrute's novels are composed of two levels of dialogue and a level of imagery. One critic compares them to poetry and drama: "It is no accident that Mme. Sarrute's novels are more like poetry and drama than prose fiction in their use of imagery and dialogue, both more immediate in their appeal to the active participation of the reader."  

Description of setting or character is very limited. There are few indications of time or place. These issues do not concern her very much. The setting is generally restricted to the homes and meeting places of the middle- and upper-middle classes. There are very few physical descriptions of characters; in fact, a name is usually not even given to them. The author's attention is primarily focused on presenting the tropisms to the reader. This absence of descriptive passages presents a striking contrast with the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet in which the physical world is so prominent.

Hence, for Sarrute, the only appearances of any importance are the social stimuli which are seen by the various characters, as described in the first chapter. These works are almost entirely mental in character: they seem to take place entirely in the mind. It is this quality which makes them appear abstract and intellectualized.
The number of characters is as limited as one can possibly imagine. There are three characters of any importance in *Portrait d'un Inconnu*, six in *Martereau*, perhaps seven in *Le Planétarium*, and two main characters in *Vous les entendez?* with the children in the background, and not presented individually except for a daughter who appears briefly. In *Les Fruits d'Or* and *Entre la Vie et la Mort*, there are more characters than in the other novels, but they are usually anonymous and generally do not appear in more than one scene, except for the author-protagonist of the last-mentioned work. The characters who are of importance are studied in terms of their involvement with others in the groups to which they belong: i.e., family, literary circle, etc. The character is of no inherent interest to Sarrasute; he is of importance only because his presence, real or imaginary, is essential as both a catalyst and a setting for the tropism:

> Car les drames intérieurs faits d'attaques, de triomphes, de reculs, de défaites, de caresses, de morsures, de viol, de meurtres, d'abandons généreux ou d'humbles soumissions, ont tous ceci de commun, qu'ils ne peuvent se passer de partenaire.

(E.S., p. 99)

The character does not disappear altogether, however. There is a limited amount of characterization of a social-psychological sort; this is given detailed consideration in the third chapter of this study.
A clear line of development can be seen in the use of point of view. *Tropismes* is written in the third person. Sometimes the thoughts of the characters are presented, and, at other times, these characters are seen only from the outside. The point of view is often sympathetic to one of the characters in these early texts. *Portrait d'un Inconnu* and *Martereau* are written in the first person from the point of view of a central character, an extremely sensitive type in each case. *Le Planétarium* and all of the works which followed it employ the third person stream-of-consciousness point of view. Although the point of view shifts around to each of the characters—but written in the form "il," or "elle," and sometimes the plural forms of these pronouns—one point of view, such as that of Alain Guimiez in *Le Planétarium*, appears more often than other ones. According to one critic, there is really one point of view in all of these works: "Since analysis is out—that is, the speaking, interpreting author is out—Sarraute's novels are logically written only in the first person, even when the interior musings use 'she' and 'he'." This does, in fact, seem to be the case, and corresponds completely to the extreme subjectivity of the subject matter of these works.

One last point should be mentioned with respect to the formal aspect of Nathalie Sarraute's novels, and that is the style in which they are written. It is primarily
functional, according to Sarraute:

When the inner action is fast and dramatic it can be jerky; at other times it is not. It depends which is appropriate. The style has the task of making the reader feel the movements. It is slow when they are slow; jerky when they are jerky. In any case I do not care for what is called le joli style. 45

The present tense is used almost exclusively beginning with Portrait d'un Inconnu, and serves the same functional purpose as all other aspects of the style. Sarraute considers the quest for a harmonious style of far less importance than transmitting the new psychological reality to the reader (E.S., p. 143).

This concludes this brief discussion of the formal aspect of Nathalie Sarraute's novels. The next issue to be considered involves taking a wider perspective on all that has been discussed so far, a perspective from which both the form and content of Sarraute's novels take on clearer outlines and reveal a deeper purpose and direction.

Sarraute's Main Objective:
Suspicion and the Debunking of Appearances

A search for the central tendency or direction of Sarraute's work as a whole seems to lead to the issue of suspicion and a pervasive distrust of appearances. As a matter of fact, appearances are invariably deceptive to some degree or another. Sarraute's characters are always looking for the crack in the facade of appearances. The
central characters in particular are never satisfied with the matter-of-fact explanations and the taken-for-granted postures which others are so willing to accept. Suspicion plays a central role in Nathalie Sarraute's social-psychological preoccupations. A curiosity coupled with a basic distrust of surface impressions is the driving force behind these explorations into the deeper levels of human encounter in the form of social interaction. Sarraute herself has suggested the possible source of this pervasive distrust: "In fact, when I was young, I was always made fun of on account of my credulity. People maintained that they could make me swallow anything." Perhaps one or more bitter disappointments in early life predisposed her to a more skeptical view of things in general. Her protagonists are not satisfied with simple explanations; they want to know if what they suspect to be true is really so: "Savoir... Toujours cette maladive curiosité, ce besoin de connaître ce qu'ils cachent, de jeter un coup d'œil derrière leurs décors, de voir confirmé ce que je flaire, pressens..." (M., p. 63).

The tropisms themselves are, perhaps of special interest because they are hidden from view:

These movements are hidden. They never appear in broad daylight. They are seldom expressed in interior monologues by the person who experiences them. They hide behind normal, harmless appearances, under commonplace conversations, under daily gestures;
they hide under cover of platitudes. It seemed to me, more and more, that they are the secret throbbing of life. They were the only thing I was interested in. I wanted the readers of my books to be interested only in them. Nothing should have diverted their attention from them.

A great deal of spying goes on in the average Sarrasute novel. The narrator in Portrait d'un Inconnu spies on the old man and his daughter; the narrator-nephew in Martereaum spies on the character of the same name, as well as the members of the family with whom he lives; Alain Guimiez probes about to find out what Germaine Lemaire is really like; a number of characters in the other books either spy on others or feel spied upon. The dissimulation of others is the justification for this continual spying:

Prudence. Ils sont prudents. Ils ne se risquent jamais bien loin. Il faut les épier longtemps avant de percevoir en eux ces faibles tressaillements, ces mouvements toujours sur place comme le flux et le reflux d'une mer sans marées qui avance et recule à peine par petites vagues lécheuses. (P.I., p. 149)

A sharpened awareness of what is really happening in any social situation is demonstrated by many of Sarrasute's characters. In fact, these characters would rather doubt the evidence of their senses than come to hasty conclusions where there might be error. The narrator of Martereaum has reservations about even accepting patent facts, when he does not feel they are really convincing— unlike his
practical uncle:

Moi aussi, je dois l'avouer, sous son influence, je me suis presque mis à les aimer. Seulement je n'ai pas son flair, son regard fureteur de chasseur, son coup d'œil implacable pour les dénicher. Une fois qu'il les tient, rien ne l'en fait démordre. Il tient bon envers et contre tout. Moi je ne les distingue pas très bien. Quand, aidé le plus souvent par lui, je crois déjà les tenir, un rien me fait lâcher prise. Je me donne alors à moi-même des excuses. J'accuse la férocité de mon oncle, qui finit par lui faire voir faux, son esprit fruste qui simplifie par goût secret d'une certaine brutalité: il n'a pas comme moi le goût de ces nuances infimes où parfois git la vérité, il manque d'indulgence, de sympathie... Je préfère, moi, parfois, tant j'ai toujours peur de ne pas voir assez clair, de me satisfaire à trop bon compte, même si le fait est patent et s'il démolit tout, nier l'évidence, douter de mes propres sens... (M., p. 206)

The heightened awareness by means of which Sarraute's characters arrive at a deeper comprehension of social-psychological issues takes on two forms: 1) Attention directed toward the subtler aspects of the behavior of others; and 2) Attention directed toward the effects on the self of the presence and behavior of others.

The first of these two forms of heightened awareness requires a sharp eye for significant detail: "On n'a pas encore découvert ce language qui pourrait exprimer d'un seul coup ce qu'on perçoit en un clin d'œil: tout un être et ses myriades de petits mouvements surgis dans quelques mots, un rire, un geste" (P., p. 39). The nephew in Martereau is so attuned to his uncle's behavior that he knows his
reactions in advance: "Je pressens ses moindres mouvements" (M., p. 169).

The reactions of all the participants, in fact, are a source of valuable information for many of Sarraute's characters, especially if they are to know the effects their own actions are having on others: "Il faut faire chaque fois l'effort de basculer de leur côté. Et de là, de leur place, se voir: chacun de ses gestes projetant en eux des ombres gigantesques, ses mots les plus insignifiants répercutant très loin en eux leurs résonances" (P., p. 201).

The other main form of heightened awareness, namely that which is directed inward provides two kinds of information: 1) Impressions which are often not consciously registered; and 2) Indications of one's true attitudes. The first would probably include what is commonly known as intuition, and the second, most likely encompasses the more elusive aspects of self-awareness. In this vein, a noted psychologist has remarked: "The part played by self-observation in the psychological comprehension of other people's minds is seldom consciously recognized."48

Sarraute's characters attend to their observations of others and their own inner reactions. In each case it is the significant detail which is the key to startling discoveries: "(...) il suffit de saisir le plus faible
indice et de ne pas le lâcher... vous ne pouvez pas imaginer jusqu'où, jusqu'à quels trésors cachés on est conduit quand on ose s'aventurer ainsi, tenant ce fil d'Ariane dans sa main." (F., p. 97).

Other examples of this heightened awareness based upon a distrust of appearances can be cited. The narrator in Martereau senses Martereau's almost imperceptible reaction to a seemingly friendly slap on the back given by the narrator's uncle:

Son oeil avait gardé toute sa limpidité, il n'avait pas paru broncher, mais j'avais senti comme sous la bonne grosse tape amicale il s'était rétracté: un très léger recul, un mouvement à peine perceptible, de ceux qu'on perçoit souvent sans l'aide du moindre signe extérieur, sans l'aide d'un mot, d'un regard; on dirait qu'une onde invisible émane de l'autre et vous parcourt, une vibration chez l'autre, que vous enregistrez comme un appareil très sensible, se transmet à vous, vous vibrez à l'unisson, parfois même plus fort... . . .

(p. 178)

A woman character in Les Fruits d'Or senses the reaction of another character:

Mais perdent-ils donc la tête? elle a envie de se dresser, de les arrêter... comment osent-ils? ont-ils donc oublié qu'il est là, qu'il écoute, replié sur lui-même... À chaque mot qu'ils prononcent sur ce ton désinvolte, assuré, en lui, elle le sent (pas un mouvement en lui qui ne se transmette à elle aussitôt), un dépôt lourd s'amasse, grossit... . . . Elle ne peut détourner les yeux de ses doigts aux ongles soignés qui tapotent la table à petits coups impatients... . . .

(pp. 50-51)
Another group of characters, fewer in number and less suspicious—or simply less sensitive in general—exists in striking contrast to the first group. These characters, by their lack of awareness of the real dynamics of a social situation, make the revelations of the other characters even more compelling. One such character is the friend who visits the father and children in Vous les entendez?:

L'amis assis en face de lui de l'autre côté de la table basse, le pouce et l'index appuyées comme pour mieux réfléchir sur les coins de ses paupières fermées, se tient immobile, se tait. Immuable. Impresnable. Aussi insensible que les murailles d'un château fort aux vaguelettes qui clapotent à leur pied, aux bestioles qui agitent dans le vase des douves.

(p. 181)

Other such types appear from time to time, and, in some cases, exert an attraction on their more sensitive counterparts. This is the case with the nephew in Martereau who longs for the certainty and seeming stability of Martereau, at least until he comes to know him better in the course of the novel:

J'ai toujours cherché Martereau. Je l'ai toujours appelé. C'est son image -- je le sais maintenant -- qui m'a toujours hanté sous des formes diverses. Je la contemplais avec nostalgie. Il était la patrie lointaine dont pour des raisons mystérieuses j'avais été banni, le port d'attache, le havre paisible dont j'avais perdu le chemin; la terre où je ne pourrais jamais aborder, ballotté que j'étais sur une mer agitée, déporté sans cesse par tous les courants.

(pp. 85-86)
This tendency can be seen in many of the central characters, who are mainly suspicious, but, at the same time, would like to be reassured that things are really innocuous and no different from what they appear to be on the surface. The narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu is caught between a tendency to be suspicious and a desire for reassurance when he offers the sample of the daughter's handwriting to some friends for their consideration:

De toutes mes forces je souhaite qu'ils ne voient rien, qu'ils me donnent tort, qu'ils donnent contre moi raison aux autres, qu'ils me rendent l'enveloppe, après l'avoir examinée, d'un air négligent, étonné et un peu désapprobateur: "Non, je ne vois pas. Il me semble qu'il n'y a rien là de très frappant... Cela me paraît vraiment sans intérêt."

(p. 20)

Occasionally, it is apparent that the suspicion is mutual, as in this encounter between the nephew and his aunt in Martereau:

Elle a senti quelque chose, c'est certain... elle s'est méfiée... elle m'observe... elle n'a pas cessé de m'épier par en dessous tandis qu'elle avait l'air de gazouiller innocemment, de s'ébrouer avec insouciance, quand je me croyais si bien en sécurité, fermé, gardé de toutes parts (...)

(p. 15)

Another factor, however, complicates matters here, just as in real life; those characters who know each other well are more attuned to their mutual reactions and less
easily duped by appearances. They know, in a sense, what the others are really "up to":

C'est ainsi que je l'ai vu jouer un soir à ses jeux en apparence anodins, à ses jeux clandestins, donner sûr de l'impunité, ces coups de pattes furtifs, comme un chat qui joue avec une souris.

(P.I., p. 122)

Martereau immediately senses his embarrassment, in response to his wife's attitude toward him, after accepting to buy the house for the narrator's uncle: "D'jà, avant même qu'il le distingue clairement, une chaleur, une vapeur brûlante l'inonde, il se sent rougir" (p. 223).

The narrator of this novel knows his aunt and uncle too well to take what they say and do at face value:

Je crois si bien connaître leur code secret, je suis si habitué à déchiffrer le sens véritable de leurs mouvements que je ne me fie jamais aux apparences. Peut-être pas assez parfois. Mon excès de méfiance doit m'induire parfois en erreur.

(M., p. 149)

A prevailing suspiciousness which usually leads to an awareness of the hidden aspects of social interaction, therefore, plays a central role in the novels of Nathalie Sarraute. At the same time, nevertheless, Sarraute does leave much of what occurs in social interaction open to various interpretations. In a sense, the reader can make of it what he will; but he is left with a sense of distrust all the same.
As far as the motives of others are concerned, there is no general consensus, no underlying theory of personality (c.f., E.S., p. 137). The impulse of self-preservation recurs in various forms, as well as what might be called a desire for contact and affiliation with others. In the area of sexuality, there is very little to be found, that is to say in the form of the actual conduct of her characters. A kind of diffused sensuality may be detected on the level of the tropism, connected as it is with bodily sensations. The impulses which arise from within are not seen as a factor *sui generis* but as a response to a situation. Once again, it must be emphasized, as in the earlier section on Sarraute's concept of man, that the dependency of her characters on social groups is reflected in every aspect of their inner lives and outer behavior.

If one were to look for a set of psychological theories to describe the deeper motives of Sarraute's characters—based mostly on inferences drawn from what they say, think, and feel—a correspondence would probably be found with the psychological theories of Alfred Adler, a disciple of Freud who broke away from the mainstream theories of psychoanalysis to found the Society for Individual Psychology. Adler's theories emphasized the need for power and status based upon feelings of inferiority and insecurity. He originated the term "inferiority complex." The emphasis in Sarraute's work, however, is on the present moment and social
interaction processes as they actually occur. The reader is not given the extensive biographical details concerning the characters from which a theory of motives and personality could be constructed. The best that can be said on this issue is that a look beneath the surface aspects of social interaction in Sarraute's novels reveals a great deal of calculation and generally Machiavellian behavior. Whether this is to be attributed to the personalities of these characters or to the social milieu is a question which the author does not answer. She confines herself to the present moment and what is actually happening—or seems to be happening—and does not interpret the phenomena or draw conclusions from them for the reader. One might say, in fact, that her suspiciousness extends to psychological theories in general, and that she does not believe in jumping to conclusions. An openness to experience in all of its aspects typifies her approach to her subject matter.

Returning once again to the issue of attitude, Sarraute studies the expression of attitudes in the form of social stimulus situations and tropistic reactions, but she does not look for the sources of attitudes outside of the situation in which they are activated. It is for this reason that a social-psychological interpretation of her novels seems most appropriate.

As a literary social psychologist, Nathalie Sarraute studies social interaction as it occurs between two or more
characters. Scenes of this kind make up the bulk of her works. In those scenes in which her characters are alone they are usually thinking about others and their relationships in general. A discussion of the main aspects of Sarraute's presentation of social interaction is the next topic to be considered.

Three Main Aspects of the Process of Social Interaction: Perspective, Levels, and Stages

Any scene depicting social interaction in the novels of Nathalie Sarraute may be studied in terms of three interrelated aspects: 1) the perspective of one or more of the participants; 2) the levels upon which interaction occurs; and 3) the stages of development in the interaction itself. Of these three aspects, perspective is the most important. It determines whether more than one level of interaction will be perceived at all, which in turn determines the stages of development seen from this perspective. It is for this reason that these aspects overlap. Assuming, however, a tendency toward suspiciousness concerning appearances to be a general tendency of Sarraute's work as a whole, it may be reasonable to conclude that the perspective of the most wary participant is intended to be the most reliable of all the perspectives presented. This is based upon the fact that this perspective is characteristic of Sarraute's first full-length novel, Portrait d'un
Inconnu, and its successor, Martereau. The reliability of this perspective is apparent when the reactions of all the participants are compared. It should be emphasized, however, that there is no absolute truth in a Sarrasute novel, only approximations and intimations of truth; in the end, all is in movement:

Mais rien n'est définitif dans le monde de Nathalie Sarrasute, tout est en perpétuel changement: les mêmes faits se déroulent sur d'autres écrans, l'éclairage change, l'angle de prise de vue change, les personnages se transforment. Le mouvement devient irrésistiblement une sorte de danse, une étrange fascination qui se développe selon un rythme. Tout est entraîné dans ce tourbillon... tout est en fluctuation...[49] les valeurs n'ont plus rien de déterminant... .

A look at the different levels of a social interaction situation as portrayed by Nathalie Sarrasute reveals that even in the simplest situation there is much more going on than meets the eye. This description of the two men in Vous les entendez?—viewed by the children—tells nothing of the inner dramas and the hidden turbulence which is the subject matter of the entire novel:

Ils ouvrent la porte, ils descendent, ils entrent... Les deux vieux hommes sont assis l'un en face de l'autre, enfoncés dans leurs fauteuils, leurs verres encore à demi pleins sont posés devant eux sur la table basse. Regardez celui-ci: il tient encore sa pipe serrée entre ses dents... Ét cette bête de pierre... . . . Qu'est-ce qu'elle fait là? Qu'est-ce que c'est? Un rhinocéros? Un puma? Non, voyez ses oreilles. C'est une bête mythique plutôt... . . . Un objet sacré qui servait
probablement à quelque culte. . . . Quel culte?. . . . Comment retrouver ce qu'elle pouvait bien représenter pour eux. . . . Ils soulèvent, retournent, palpent. . . . ces vestiges. . . .

(p. 154)

Most social interaction scenes in Nathalie Sarraute's novels involve two persons or what social psychologists refer to as a "dyad." There is a correspondingly smaller number of scenes involving three or more participants, but these scenes are difficult to manage especially when no names are given. The situation with only two participants is exceedingly complex for Sarraute and for the social psychologist: "The interaction situation is not an interaction between two persons, merely, but a series of transactions carried on in thickly peopled and complexly imaged contests." The face-to-face situation is considered the prototypical case of social interaction from which all other forms of interaction are derived. It is the situation in which the other person is real in the fullest sense, in all of his subjectivity. The fact that no distancing is possible in the face-to-face encounter is what makes Sarraute's scenes of social interaction dizzyingly complex situations. The presence of unseen others, mentioned or merely alluded to, further complicates matters.

A look beneath the surface level of social interaction invariably reveals the effect that the various participants have on each other. This aspect is referred
to as the social influence process, and refers "not only to ingenious Machiavellian ways of outwitting people, but to all the things we do, verbally or non-verbally, deliberately or unconsciously, in the course of social encounters to influence others."  

The social influence process in social interaction will now be considered as it appears in the novels of Nathalie Sarraute. The less conscious forms will be studied first, and then the more deliberate ones will be considered.

No reader can open a novel by Nathalie Sarraute and not notice the constant references to psychological atmospheres and what is here referred to as social chemistry. The presence of certain people has a certain generalized effect, often one that can only be sensed vaguely. A character in Tropismes describes the psychological atmosphere of the kitchen where his mother is chatting obsessively with the cook:

Et il sentait filtrer de la cuisine la pensée humble et crasseuse, piétinante, piétinant toujours sur place, tournant en rond, en rond, comme s'ils avaient le vertige mais ne pouvaient pas s'arrêter, comme s'ils avaient mal au coeur mais ne pouvaient pas s'arrêter, comme on se ronge les ongles, comme on arrache par morceaux sa peau quand on pèle, comme on se gratte quand on a de l'urticaire, comme on se retourne dans son lit pendant l'insomnie, pour se faire plaisir et pour se faire souffrir, à s'épuiser, à en avoir la respiration coupée. . .

(pp. 16-17)
In another situation a family takes a child on an outing but there is no escape from the atmosphere in which they live; it follows them even in the country:

Ils ne paraissaient rien voir, ils dominaient tout cela, les cris grêles des oiseaux, les bourgeons à l'aspect fautif, l'herbe tassée, l'atmosphère épaisse dans laquelle ils vivaient toujours les entourait ici aussi, s'élevait d'eux comme une lourde et âcre vapeur.
(T., pp. 103-104)

This atmosphere is a social-psychological reality for the character who experiences it, although it may not be perceived by others, as, for example, in the reaction of Gisèle's mother to the presence of her daughter with Alain. As she views the situation, it is a disquieting atmosphere:

Mais là-bas, chez les enfants... ombres, trous sombres, grouillements inquiétants, mous déroulements, vases dangereuses qui s'ouvrent, l'engloutissent... .
(P., p. 48)

The description of the atmosphere in which elderly people are customers is particularly striking:

La salle avait un éclat souillé et froid, les garçons circulaient trop vite, d'un air un peu brutal, indifférent, les glaces reflétaient, durement des visages fripés et des yeux clignotants.
(T., p. 100)

What Sarraute seems to be saying is that people are always affecting one another at some level. One character in Les Fruits d'Or advises avoiding certain people because their mere presence is disturbing and unhealthy:
Il y a des gens qu'il ne faudrait jamais voir, il faut les fuir, ils sont nocifs... ils laissent comme une arrière-goût... Encore le lendemain, on ne se sent pas bien... comme après avoir vu une mauvaise pièce de théâtre, un mauvais film... Une sensation comme celle de langue pâteuse que laisse un mauvais repas... Leur contact est salissant... Il y a quelque chose d'avilissant... (p. 27)

This very basic aspect of the social influence process is perceptibly changed when the participants are different people. In Portrait d'un Inconnu the narrator compares the effects of his presence on others to what happens when a certain friend is also present:

C'est sa présence à lui qui la rend ainsi. Il y a quelque chose d'insaisissable en lui qu'ils sentent tous immédiatement, qui les contient, les empêchent de déborder: il agit sur eux comme le moule de plâtre sur les os trop mous ou déformés, il les maintient droits, les redresse; au contraire de moi qui exerce toujours sur eux une influence mystérieuse comme celle de la lune sur les marées: je provoque en eux toujours des courants, des lames de fond, des remous; avec moi ils se soulèvent, s'agitent, débordent, je les lâche; lui, au contraire, sans le vouloir probablement--ces choses-là, c'est toujours inconscient--il les tient. Nous nous neutralisons en tout cas, lui et moi (...)

(p. 53)

Other examples can be cited with respect to the social chemistry aspect of social interaction. The nephew in Martereau feels that it is his own presence which prevents a calmness from developing between Martereau and his uncle. He says: "C'est moi entre eux le trouble-fête. Moi le
No ultimate explanation is given for this social chemistry. In the end, its real basis is a mystery. The narrator of *Portrait d'un Inconnu* surmises that the old man's reaction to his daughter, the mask he assumes in her presence, is a reaction he has had in her presence ever since she was a small child:

Il est infiniment probable—et quant à moi j'en suis certain—que ce visage, il a dû l'avoir toujours en sa présence. C'est ce même visage exactement qu'il avait sûrement déjà, si invraisemblable que cela puisse paraître, lors de leur tout premier contact, quand elle n'était encore qu'un enfant au berceau, au moment, sans doute, où il a entendu pour la première fois son cri têtu, strident, ou peut-être encore à cet instant où il a senti, tandis qu'il se penchait sur le berceau pour mieux la voir, pénétrer en lui et lui faire mal, comme pénétrer dans la chair insidieusement le rebord soyeux de certaines herbes coupantes, la ligne duvetée, agressive, de saarine trop découpée qu'elle relevait très haut en criant.

(pp. 63-64)

Numerous examples could be cited concerning this elusive level of social interaction. There are numerous references concerning the old man and his daughter. They seem to draw certain words and gestures out of people (P.I., pp. 152-153). The narrator feels that the daughter arouses the hidden shame of others: "C'était elle, je le savais, qui faisait sourdre au-dehors sous les regards
gênés des gens les hontes"(...) (P.I., p. 141). The narrator's uncle in Martereau overflows with talk of business, stocks, etc. and figuratively covering his nephew with ashes and mud (p. 40). A character in a scene from Les Fruits d'Or would like to shake up some others who appear to have been mesmerized (p. 95).

The point where social chemistry fades into conscious control of others is difficult to ascertain. Many characters employ devious methods in their efforts to influence others. There are numerous references to hypnosis, spells, and other forms of subtle manipulation. Characters feel manipulated in strange and subtle ways:

Il leur semblait parfois qu'elles ne cessaient de regarder en lui une baguette qu'il maniait tout le temps comme pour les diriger, qu'il agitait doucement pour les faire obéir, comme un maître de ballet.

(T., p. 27)

Although certain characters may be silent, they are still exerting some kind of control over the behavior of others. The children in Vous les entendez? seem to be somewhat aware of the effect they are having on their father:

C'est amusant d'observer comme il essaie de se soulever, de lever la tête le plus haut possible hors de ce qui se dégage, sécrété par nous, de cette couche de gaz déléterre qui émane de notre présence immobile, de notre silence... s'épaissit, s'étend, monte peu à peu jusqu'à lui... 

(p. 139)
The narrator in *Martereau* thinks that a current from Martereau controlled him and his cousin when they handed over the money without asking for a receipt (p. 241). The narrator's aunt in this same novel controls her husband without batting an eyelash or even looking at him. A current issues forth from her and controls him as if by radar (M., p. 53). The writer's mother in *Entre la Vie et la Mort* seems to send out waves which control his movements, in a flashback scene from his childhood (pp. 35-36). Martereau's handshake causes an automatic response in the nephew (pp. 91-92). Martereau's wife keeps the nephew from asking embarrassing questions by assuming an expression of sad resignation (pp. 195-196). These are but a few examples of this form of subtle manipulation.

This discussion of the social influence process, as it approaches more conscious and deliberate forms of social control, brings up the important issue of power in social interaction situations. Invariably, there is a covert struggle for control in every social interaction scene described by Sarraute. The tactics and strategies used by these characters could be assembled into a textbook of Machiavellian techniques. Alain's father, Pierre, acts distracted by a fold in the rug in order to momentarily confuse his sister, Berthe, who is complaining to him about Alain's insistence on getting the apartment (P., p. 250). She in turn uses passivity to make Alain's accusations
against her seem even more impertinent (p., pp. 246-247). The narrator's uncle in *Martereau* punctures the bubble of his nephew's vanity as a successful interior decorator by asking him exactly how many chairs he has actually sold (p. 205). Similarly, the author's father in *Entre la Vie et la Mort* startles his son, proud of having just published a book, by asking him how much he had to pay to get it published (p. 162). The same tactic appears in the scene in which the uncle asks his nephew and his daughter if they obtained a receipt for the money they entrusted to *Martereau* (p. 168). In each of these three last situations a simple question is the strategy used:

Maintenant d'un seul coup il a trouvé en nous le point, le joint où il a introduit la mèche de la machine infernale qui va nous pulvériser. Mais quelle machine infernale? C'est l'instrument le plus usuel, le plus commun, celui que tout homme de bien manie à tout instant sans songer à faire le moindre mal: une simple question très naturelle.

(M., p. 168)

Tante Berthe in *Le Planétarium* knows from experience that any question about Alain will befuddle and disorient her brother Pierre (p., p. 177). In order to get his aunt to come along with him and his uncle--to see a country house up for sale--the narrator laughingly and casually persuades her to come, while carefully avoiding a reference to his uncle (M., p. 108). The narrator's aunt in *Martereau* casually and insidiously asks her husband if he
did not make a blunder by mentioning his distaste for people who try out different occupations, when speaking to Martereau (p. 130).

As all of the previous examples show, things are not what they appear to be. There is a hidden aspect beneath the surface level of social interaction in these scenes. The characters converse continuously but their words have unseen implications:

La conversation maintenant rendait pour moi un autre son, elle perdait son apparence de conversation banale et anodine. Je sentais que certains mots qu'on prononçait ouvraient de vastes entonnoirs, d'immenses précipices, visibles aux seuls initiés qui se penchaient, se retenaient -- et je me penchais avec eux, me retenais, tremblait comme eux et attiré -- au dessus du vide.

(F.I., p. 144)

This is often the case in the social interaction scenes which Sarraute presents to the reader. The words which are actually spoken are carefully chosen:

Tous les mots sont choisis soigneusement, vidés de tout sens qui pourrait peut-être leur conférer une originalité. C'est le langage du banal, de l'inexpressif, un langage des diplomates prudents qui n'osent s'engager parce qu'ils n'ont pas reçu de leur gouvernement les ordres nécessaires, ils restent alors dans le vague.53

An awareness of the subterranean conflicts and struggles of these characters appears on the level of the tropisms where their real attitudes and reactions are registered. More
often than not the words spoken are merely the tip of the 
 iceberg in the average social interaction scene. For a 
deepen understanding of the interaction between characters, 
the reader requires the perspective of a character who 
thoroughly distrusts appearances.

In addition to the various forms of interpersonal 
influence discussed above, there are other social-
psychological activities which are hidden from view. Social 
interaction has an underlying political stratum. There are 
hidden factions and unseen alliances at work beneath the 
surface. Sarraute's novels are filled with references to 
silent communication and conspiratorial looks. In this 
scene, Alain Guimiez is visiting Germaine Lemaire. One of 
her protegés is about to leave and a silent interchange re-
veals where the lines are drawn, at least for the moment:

Il se penche vers elle, assise toute droite, 
royale, sur sa chaise au haut dossier. . . 
qu'elle enregistre aussitôt: Allons, je 
peine perceptible. . .un mouvement invisible 
plus rapide, plus clair que les mots, et 
mais tâchez tout de même de vous amuser un 
peu. . .vous nous raconterez plus tard 
...on rira bien. . . Ah, que voulez-vous, 
noblesse oblige, c'est la rançon de la 
gloire, ces petits jeunes gens avides qui 
essaient de venir se frotter, qui cherchent 
à glaner. . . Le favori, l'heureux 
courtisan s'incline, souriant, sur la main 
qu'elle lui tend, se redresse. . . "Alors 
c'est entendu, demain je vous téléphonerai 
pour ce papier". . .se retourne. . .

(P., p. 98)
When the children excuse themselves and get up in Vous les entendez?, a silent exchange preceded their movement (p. 9). Germaine Lemaire conveys a message by means of a glance (p., p. 211). The two aloof critics exchange glances before one of them speaks in defense of the controversial book in Les Fruits d'Or (p. 92). Alain and Gisèle consider the latter's mother in a silent language: "Leurs yeux se cherchent, se trouvent tout de suite, s'immobilisent, se fixent, tendus, comme pleins à craquer. Elle sait de quoi est faite cette transfusion silencieuse qui s'opère au-dessus d'elle (...)" (P., p. 51). A silent communication process is going on within a group in a scene in Entre la Vie et la Mort (pp. 45-46). The writer-protagonist of the latter work knows that silent interchanges are going on around him: "(...) il perçoit leurs chuchotements, il connaît ces échanges muets entre eux. . . ." (p. 41). The importance of silent communication in Nathalie Sarraute's presentation of social interaction can be ascertained from the copious references to it (c.f., P., pp. 179-180; M., pp. 208-209; V., p. 95).

In addition to silent communication, passwords appear frequently to signal a micro-political action. The father in Vous les entendez?, the children observe, has expressed his alliance with them by the use of a word:

Pas question de se borner, de se fier aux seules ondes invisibles, ni même aux
Bien sûr. Quelle question! . . .  

(p. 138)

Certain words have deep and hidden implications for certain characters. The mere mention of these words can set off all kinds of subterranean reactions:

Il y a des mots -- anodins en apparence comme des mots de passe -- que je ne prononce jamais devant elle, je m'en garde bien. Je les contourne toujours de très loin, je prends des précautions pour les éviter, je surveille toujours, quand elle est là, tous les abords, pour les empêcher de surgir, et si quelqu'un, dans son ignorance, dans son innocence, les prononce en sa présence devant moi, je fais semblant, pour la rassurer, de ne rien voir, je prends cet air inconscient, faussement distrait, qu'affectent dans la chambre d'un malade les gens délicats ou timorés au moment où l'on apporte la chaise percée ou le bock à lavement.  

(P.I., p. 56)

The hidden levels of social interaction are not always open to the scrutiny of even a few of the participants. Although the father in Vous les entendez? immediately perceives the attitude lurking behind the little girl's remark on Cretan sculpture, the drama behind this little scene is not apparent to the friend who is visiting. From
the perspective of the child, this little scene took
place in the following manner:

Eh bien quant à moi, je dois dire que cela
me fait penser plutôt à la Crête. À la
sculpture crétoise. . . . Et se levant,
prénant congé avec une parfaite aisance,
tandis que le tyran, ses mains cramponnées
aux accoudoirs pour ne pas saisir l'impudente,
la frapper. . . tout congestionné, haletant,
avance la tête comme pour mordre: La quoi?
(p. 142)

As far as father and children are concerned, the situation
hidden from view is as real as any other aspect of life.
To be sure, Saramaute herself would admit that this level
of experience is to be respected for its subjective truth.

The disparity between surface levels and sub-
surface levels of social interaction is a constant concern
in the novels of Nathalie Sarraute. This contrast is
constantlly brought to the attention of the reader. When
the narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu shows the sample of
the daughter's handwriting to a certain group of friends,
his distrust is aroused by their quick willingness to agree
with him and by the way they use certain words as he does.
We are made aware of the fact—without having to be told
directly—that they are subtly ridiculing him (p. 21). In
Martereau, the narrator observes his uncle trying to
insinuate himself into the conversation at the dinner table
after having endured several days of his wife's silence, her
means of revenge upon him:
Il est évident qu'il cherche depuis quelque temps déjà à pactiser : tous ces derniers jours, il faisait des efforts timides, touchants, pour se glisser par le côté dans la conversation qu'à tous les repas elle menait avec nous, toujours plus enjouée et pleine d'entrain à mesure que chez lui le niveau descendait.

(p. 147)

In this novel, the narrator is also keenly aware of the way his cousin is used in the psychological warfare between aunt and uncle:

Je vois la manœuvre tout de suite. . . .
Leur fille -- son arme la plus puissante, la poix, l'huile bouillante qu'il déverse d'ordinaire toute sifflante de sa haine sur l'ennemi - est maintenant son drapeau blanc . . . . Leur fille qui donne au "vous" toute sa force de destruction. . . .

(p. 150)

Even in such an apparently innocuous gesture as the servant's telling the old man 'bout a leak in the bathroom, in Portrait d'un Inconnu, a less respectable motive is suggested:

Là, il était un peu somnolent, il allait s'assoupir un peu. On dirait qu'elle l'a senti -- tout de suite elle accourt, profitant de sa faiblesse -- elle est là qui attend maintenant, en le fixant de son œil immobile et rond d'oiseau; elle sait bien qu'elle est en train de le ravaler -- ils sont bien plus rusés, bien plus conscients, au fond, qu'on ne croit, sous leur air stupide et anodin de volailles -- elle prend plaisir à le tirer à soi, jalouse (ils sont jaloux de ces choses-là), hors de ce monde où -- elle doit le sentir vaguement -- il plane au-dessus d'elle, il lui échappe, pour l'enfermer dans son monde à elle, celui où elle vit, tout dur et rêche, couvert d'aspérités, menaçant. . . . Elle
The point of view in the preceding scene is that of the narrator, and the scene is, of course, entirely imagined. This is characteristic of the New Novel, however, with its emphasis on the juxtaposition of the imaginary and the real—ostensibly, to show the unreality of all fiction. But another intention can be detected here: a desire to portray the way in which people try to understand the experience of others and see life from their perspective. A heightened sensitivity to the complexities of social interaction impels many of Sarraute's characters to look at situations from various angles. As a matter of fact, scenes are often repeated in part or in their entirety in order to give the reader the different points of view of the participants, and hence to reveal as much as possible about the subterranean aspects of social interaction.

The relationship between the surface level and the sub-surface level in social interaction, as Nathalie Sarraute presents it, is extremely complex. The words actually spoken by her characters are the final product of an inner drama of conflicting impulses and divergent attitudes experienced on the level of the tropism. The spoken word, in turn, sets off a chain of hidden reactions
in the others present. Consequently, the link between the inner worlds of each of the participants is conversation. The ever-shifting, underlying psychological movements—that is to say, the tropisms—of others can often be guessed at by following the spoken word to its source in the private thoughts and impulses of the person who spoke it. Sarraute's characters often do this, especially when they are puzzled or surprised by a comment uttered in conversation: "(...) il doit répéter encore et encore une fois, refaire le chemin qu'ont parcouru en elle les mots (...)" (E., p. 159). Often the words spoken by characters are somehow incongruous as in this case: "Dans le mot quelque chose résonne qui ne va pas à cet homme au visage doux et las, à ce vieil ami au bon regard usé, quelque chose d'emphatique, de lourdement satisfait (...)" (F., p. 36). In general, one might say, there is a tendency for Sarraute's characters not to take anything at its face value, but to look instead for hidden dimensions.

In addition to the perspective and the different levels of social interaction, there is also a developmental aspect referred to here as the "stages." The drama of social interaction follows some kind of plot. In the complex web of action and reaction, as in a play, there are various phases: an initial situation, turning points or critical junctures, and a final situation of some sort. In the course of social interaction, alliances are made as
characters move toward and away from others. Conflicts emerge and people rise or fall in status. At the end of a scene of social interaction a character may be motivated to take some sort of action or change his attitudes toward others in some way.

In an extended scene of social interaction in Sarraute's novels, there is generally some kind of inner plot. There are points at which the interaction changes direction in a way which affects all the participants. The interpretations given to what occurs may vary considerably from one character to another, but a consensus of sorts may be said to exist with respect to these critical junctures or turning points in a scene of social interaction.

A discussion of the stages or the plot of social interaction invariably leads to the question of conflict. As in a good play, the moments of conflict are of special interest. A play without conflict is hardly a play at all. Similarly, Sarraute does not bother with scenes of interaction in which there is no conflict at all. There is always some sort of friction or disagreement, but the level at which it makes its presence known may range from an outright argument to a subtle duel. In this little domestic scene in *Martereau*, the various stages and the outcome of a quarrel between the narrator's aunt and uncle are presented:
Des éclats de voix, un cri, une porte qui claquent presque toujours les signes avant-coureurs de ses silences. Le silence est sa méthode la plus sûre, le procédé le mieux mis au point de tous ceux qu'elle emploie pour le dresser. Lui, il sait bien quand il sort en tirant sur la porte pour la faire claquer le plus fort qu'il peut (mais rien à ce moment-là ne pourrait l'empêcher de lui porter ce coup que de tous ses nerfs tendus elle attend), il sait qu'elle va immanquablement avec la détermination glacée et calmement différée des sadiques, lui infliger la punition.

(p. 142)

The stages in such an interaction as the one quoted above are clearly discernible and understood by the participants. When the conflict is more subterranean, however, an awareness of the more subtle indicators of the stages of social interaction becomes necessary.

The movement of social interaction is a very delicate matter in Nathalie Sarraute's novels. A constant threat hangs over situations in which a thoughtless movement can have drastic consequences: "(...) à la moindre hésitation, tout l'édifice construit avec tant de soins, d'un seul coup s'écroule. . ." (M., p. 223). Different versions of the same scene appear to show how things might have happened otherwise. Alain Guimiez imagines how the meetings in the bookstore between himself and Germaine Lemaire, in the presence of his father, might have taken a different turn if not for a certain expression on his face (P., pp. 147-149). Scenes are repeated from different points of
view to show the separate psychological reactions, but the turning points or critical stages in the interaction remain essentially the same in the different versions. A visit by Pierre, Alain's father, to Tante Berthe is first presented from her point of view, and then it is presented as he sees it (P., pp. 245-264 and pp. 265-281). In 

Entre la Vie et la Mort, a scene in which the young writer is taking his first train journey with his mother is presented in four versions, each from the same point of view—that of the child—in order to show, presumably, the different possibilities inherent in a situation, and how the use of another word or other social stimulus would have produced a different outcome (E., pp. 29-40).

Sarraute's characters are so aware of the delicate mechanisms of social interaction that they sometimes conduct experiments just to measure the effects of a particular word or gesture:

Ce que j'éprouve en ce moment ressemble à la satisfaction, à l'excitation du savant qui voit son hypothèse hâtive confirmée par l'expérience. J'ai envie de me rendre mieux compte, d'étudier le processus de plus près . . . . "C'est très intéressant, ce que vous venez de me dire là, cette idée que tout chez elles se passe ici (je montre mon front). (M., p. 69)

At other times, a character is unable to go through with this type of experiment:

Quelque chose alors en elle va frémir, se
dresser... quelque chose va fuir, se
terrer. ... ou se dérouler avec lenteur
en énormes anneaux visqueux. ... Mais
il ne peut pas affronter cela, il ne peut
pas bouger, il est comme frappé de
paralysie. ... et puis a quoi bon? il sait
qu'il ne pourra pas réussir, l'expérience
... il n'y aura probablement pas d'autre
reaction perceptible qu'un signe de tête
distrait, marquant l'acquiescement.
(E., p. 160)

There are numerous references, some more direct than others,
to scientific experiments of this sort. This tendency
can, of course, be traced back to the generalized suspicion
and distrust of appearance studied earlier. At the same
time, it illustrates the precariousness of the stages
through which social interaction progresses.

Any number of things can initiate a certain turn of
events in a scene of social interaction so that the over-
all development changes in direction. Often the action or
gesture, or other social stimulus, is not intended to have
the effects which issue forth. The friend who visits the
father in Vous les entendez? sets everything into motion
when he unthinkingly walks over to the mantlepiece and
takes down the statue: "(...) le voilà qui s'approche, qui
prend dans ses mains... ne se rendant compte de rien, à
mille lieues, à cent mille lieues de se douter..." (V.,
p. 47). The workers who are installing Tante Berthe's
oval door and who assure her that the door handle, which she
finds unattractive and vulgar, is used throughout the
Brazilian embassy, do not know the effect this comment has on her and the ensuing transaction (P., p. 16). In a similar vein, a character who suggests to the penny-pinching old man in *Portrait d'un Inconnu* that he allow his daughter to take up golf, does not realize the repercussions which are taking place (P.I., p. 145). Characters such as these are not as sensitive as others, namely the protagonists of Sarraute's novels, and, hence, much less cautious about what they say and do.

One aspect in particular of social interaction in which various stages are to be noted is what social psychologists refer to as "balance." Situations are balanced and unbalanced from one moment to the next. The attitudes of individuals toward each other have an effect on their attitudes toward a third person or object. People who like each other generally want to believe they are in agreement. People who dislike each other generally feel more comfortable holding contrasting views. Situations are said to be out of balance when the latter relationships are reversed.54

The effect of "balance theory" on the stages of social interaction is repeatedly demonstrated in the scenes in Nathalie Sarraute's novels. In a scene from *Le Planétarium*, in which the topic of discussion is the writer, Germaine Lemaire, the situation is out of balance in several
ways. Alain and Gisèle's father hold different opinions of Germaine Lemaire. The latter finds her ugly, while the former is filled with admiration for her. Father and son-in-law tolerate each other and, hence, the difference of opinion does not seem to matter much to them. Gisèle, however, finds the situation to be out of balance because she is fond of both her father and her husband. Her situation with each of them is out of balance and this creates most of the conflict and movement in the scene (P., p. 126).

The issue of balance appears quite frequently in the description of social interaction processes. Two characters who seem to like each other are in essential agreement about the talent of certain writers; at one point, however, they disagree over the merit of a certain poet. The scene is viewed by one of the participants in this manner:

Attendez, je vous suis. . . . On ne peut pas se quitter ainsi, quand on a, dans une fusion si parfaite franchi tant d'obstacles, parcouru ensemble un monde conquis. On ne lâche pas si brutalement son fidèle compagnon. . . . Je ne peut pas supporter de me retrouver seul comme avant, de recommencer à errer sans soutien, titubant, ballotté de tous côtés. . . . Je ne veux pas vous quitter. . . . Vers vous je tâtonne . . . .

(F., pp. 152-153)

The character whose reaction is seen in the previous example changes his opinion on the matter of the poet so as to
restore the situation to its earlier state of balance. The imbalance is still there, however, since he realizes that he is only pretending. The imbalance has moved below the surface.

In a scene from Le Planétarium, balance is upset and restored as the characters—Alain, Germaine Lemaire, and a small group of her followers—express their attitudes with regard to facing the wall or not facing the wall while writing, Louis XV armchairs, English club chairs, and other matters (pp. 204-215). In the same novel, Alain is discussing a periodical with a friend when the latter exhibits an opposing attitude toward the magazine. The situation becomes unbalanced and takes a new direction (pp. 182-183). A series of scenes in Les Fruits d'Or center upon the imbalance which resulted when a friend presented a postcard illustration of a Courbet painting to a man and woman who were visiting him. The man passed the picture to his wife without bothering to say anything. The dynamics of this little scene are summarized at one point, from the point of view of the concerned wife:

(...) la main s'enfonce dans la poche intérieure du veston, tire la reproduction, se tend... Et cette brusque rafale... Cet énorme coup de vent... Tout s'éteint. Nuit noire. Où êtes-vous? Répondez. Nous sommes là tous les deux. Ecoutez. J'appelle, répondez-moi. Juste pour que je sache que vous êtes toujours là. Je crie vers vous de toutes mes forces. Les Fruits d'Or... vous m'entendez? Qu'en
The implications of this one scene fill the first forty pages of *Les Fruits d'Or*. The narrator of *Martereau* would like to achieve a balance with his uncle by virtue of their mutual admiration for Martereau:

(... ils sont mon oeuvre, c'est mon oeuvre, la réunion de ces braves gens qui s'entendent si bien, qui parlent la même langue. ... l'enfant de parents divorcés qui les voit enfin réunis doit éprouver ce même ravissement... ensemble, dans la sécurité, dans la norme... je suis avec eux, pareil à eux, leur trait d'union... on se comprend...)

(p. 124)

His expectations are not realized, however, as it becomes apparent that his uncle does not like Martereau as much as the narrator had thought.

The balance which is so pleasant in social interaction can be upset so easily. The sudden intimacy and sense of understanding may reverse just as quickly as it is established:

Si fragile, on le sait bien. Qui ne sait que les fusions les plus complètes ne durent que peu d'instants. Il est imprudent d'engager trop souvent, de prolonger trop longtemps l'épreuve, même entre proches, même entre soi... Une autre forme, une autre ligne ramenée d'ailleurs ne suffit-elle pas pour qu'aussitôt se séparent, s'éloignent l'une de l'autre, encerclées de solitude, les deux âmes soeurs? N'est-ce
pas là notre lot à tous, notre inévitable sort commun?

(V., p. 75)

The question of balance and micro-politics in the process of social interaction are, of course, different aspects of the central issue of attitude. The attitudes of the participants are elicited in the course of a social encounter. The situation progresses accordingly from balance to imbalance, etc. The level of analysis in Sarraste's novels makes one think of a microscope. The stages of social interaction on many levels suggest in this writer's mind the image of a three-dimensional chess game, with moves on different levels composing a complex network of thought patterns.

To summarize, then, the interrelated aspects of perspective, levels, and stages of social interaction permit the reader to maintain some sort of stable orientation with regard to Nathalie Sarraste's scenes of social interaction. It must be emphasized, however, that the complexity and the subjectivity which Sarraste exposes in social interaction cannot be fitted into a cut-and-dried pattern. A certain amount of clarity is achieved by viewing these scenes in terms of these aspects. Sarraste is not interested in systems of ordering the psychological data of reality. She wishes to involve the reader completely in the flow of the tropistic movements of her characters, and is suspicious of any kind of conventional grillwork.
used to order these data. The states of mind portrayed in her novels are too delicate and elusive even to be rendered in the form of a film (E.S., p. 30). In fact, she attempts to write novels in which the psychological element is as abstracted from the character as modern--i.e., abstract--painting is abstracted from the representation of the object (E.S., p. 71). An analogy with music is instructive at this point. Trying to describe a novel by Nathalie Sarraute apart from the text itself is about as difficult and misleading as trying to describe a musical composition. A closer look at these works is the subject matter of the next section.

The Development of Sarraute's Technique: An Analysis and Interpretation of Selected Scenes

The participation of the reader in the creation of the novel is a characteristic concern of the New Novelists. The reader is given the choice of various outcomes in a story, and allowed to interpret things more or less as he chooses. In Nathalie Sarraute's novels, reader participation is an absolute necessity if her purpose is to be achieved: namely, that the reader feel the tropisms within himself, that he be so completely swept up in the inner movements of the characters that he forget, for a moment or more, whether the reactions occurring are in the book he is reading or in himself. To achieve this special objective, Sarraute has
had to eliminate from her works anything which makes it possible for the reader to stand back from the action and view it from a distance. Hence, characters often have no names; physical descriptions are virtually non-existent; the reader slips in and out of the minds of the various characters with incredible fluidity. A study of Sarraute's development in the presentation of her social-psychological subject matter reveals the manner in which her technique has slowly caught up with her primary objective.

In this section, each of the seven works of prose fiction considered here will be studied in terms of social interaction scenes. The scenes selected for detailed study here are considered significant in the context of the works from which they are taken. They are considered representative of her work as a whole and the particular novel in question. The works are studied in the order of publication so that Sarraute's technical development as a literary social psychologist can be demonstrated.

Tropismes is made up of twenty-four short texts, the longest of which does not exceed four pages in length. There is much more description than in the later works. Of the twenty-four texts, seventeen involve some sort of social interaction which includes a dialogue and the corresponding tropisms. The social interaction aspects of these texts will be considered in the order in which they appear in the
book. The most striking of these have been selected for study here.

In text II, a male character manipulates the thoughts and conversation of an indeterminate number of female characters. He is compared to a ballet master and they the dancers, as far as the action on the level of the tropism is concerned. They are apparently free to discuss whatever they wish about him while all the time he is controlling them and influencing their every move:

"Et pourquoi? Et pourquoi? Et pourquoi?"
Allez donc! En avant! An, non, ce n'est pas cela! En arrière! En arrière! Mais oui, le ton enjoué, oui, encore, doucement, sur la pointe des pieds, la plaisanterie et l'ironie. Oui, oui, on peut essayer, cela prend. Et l'air naïf maintenant pour oser dire des vérités qui pourrait sembler dures, pour s'occuper de lui, car il adorait cela, le taquinait, il adorait ce jeu. Là, attention, doucement, doucement, cela devient dangereux, mais on peut l'essayer, il peut le trouver piquant, amusant, aguichant.
(p. 28)

The scene continues in this manner as the female characters circumvent issues which he dislikes hearing mentioned. Their feeling is one of fatigue at having to play this continuous game. The reader himself shares their exhaustion as he follows the jerky action of the text. The image of the ballet master threads through the entire episode.

Text VI is about a woman who uses objects to dominate her family. She rises early in the morning and goes from
room to room creating a turmoil. She tells the members of the family to hurry in order not to miss the train and generally scolds them for their negligence:

Les choses. Les objets. Les coups de sonnette. Les choses qu'il ne fallait pas négliger. Les gens qu'il ne fallait pas faire attendre. Elle s'en servait comme d'une meute de chiens qu'elle sifflait à chaque instant sur eux: "On sonne! On sonne! Dépêchez-vous, vite, vite, on vous attend."

(p. 41)

The animal imagery so typical of Sarraute's writing enters into this scene. The pack of dogs yelping gives the reader an immediate impression of a threatening and somewhat chaotic situation—the impression Sarraute is trying to convey, no doubt.

Text VII concerns a wife who keeps the conversations in which her husband is involved on certain topics, namely, those that do not make him anxious in any way:

Elle se tenait aux aguets, s'interposait pour qu'il n'entendît pas, parlait elle-même sans cesse, cherchait à le distraire: "La crise... et ce chômage qui va en augmentant. Bien sûr, cela lui paraissait clair, à lui qui connaissait si bien ces choses... Mais elle ne savait pas... On lui avait raconté pourtant...

(p. 45)

She takes special precautions to avoid talking about art, a subject which bothers her husband and makes him feel insecure. Asked in the presence of her husband, by a friend,
if she has gone to see the Van Gogh exhibition, she tries to minimize the importance of the artists by stressing their peculiarities and idiosyncrasies when the friend does not take note and change the topic of conversation:

Eh bien, puisqu'ils y tenaient, puisqu'elle ne pouvait pas les retenir—qu'ils les laissent donc entrer. Tant pis pour eux, qu'ils entrent pour un instant. Van Gogh, Utrillo ou un autre. Elle se mettrait devant eux pour essayer de les masquer un peu, pour qu'ils n'avancent pas trop, le moins possible, là, doucement, qu'ils marchent de côté docilement, longeant le mur. Là, là, ce n'était rien, il pouvait les regarder tranquillement: Utrillo était ivre (…)

(pp. 46-47)

The imagery reflects the attitude she is trying to convey.

The idea of the artists filing in quietly along the side of the room strikingly illustrates what is really happening in this little scene of social interaction. The power in this situation is clearly in the hands of the husband. A large number of scenes in *Tropismes*, as a matter of fact, revolve around power situations in which one character is adapting to the covert demands of another.

In text VIII, an old man who likes to talk in a seemingly philosophical manner about the brevity of life and related bits of wisdom is seen from the perspective of a small child. The latter's response to the old man's talk of death reflects the old man's subterranean attitudes toward young people—a mixture of envy and disguised cruelty:
Et le petit sentait que quelque chose pesait sur lui, l'engourdissait. Une masse molle et étouffante, qu'on lui faisait absorber inexorablement, en exerçant sur lui une douce et ferme contrainte, en lui pinçant légèrement le nez pour le faire avaler, sans qu'il pût résister--le pénétrait pendant qu'il trottaïnt doucement et très sagement, en donnant docilement sa petite main, en opinant de la tête très raisonnablement, et qu'on lui expliquait comme il fallait toujours avancer avec précaution et bien regarder d'abord à droite, puis à gauche, et faire bien attention, très attention, de peur d'un accident, en traversant le passage clouté.

(PP. 52-53)

The deeper level of this interaction comes across in the image of the child being forced to swallow something unpleasant.

In the text numbered IX, a man is engaged in conversation with a certain type of woman, who, for some unexplained reason, arouses a great deal of anxiety in him. He feels compelled to talk without stopping as she sits across from him on the edge of her chair:

Elle était effrayante, douce et plate, toute lisse, et ses yeux étaient protubérants. Elle avait quelque chose d'angoissant, d'inquiétant et sa douceur était menaçante.

(p. 57)

His behavior suggests that of birds in the presence of a snake. Once again, the animal imagery cues the reader in on the deeper psychological reaction of this character.

The scenes in Tropismes—perhaps because of their
brevity—do not expand to include the perspectives of others and the developmental stages of social interaction which can be found regularly in the full-length novels. The aspect of social interaction which is uniformly stressed is the lower level where the real action is taking place under the guise of innocuous conversation.

In text X, the psychological atmosphere of a "salon de thé" where women are chatting incessantly is rendered in the following form to the reader:

Tout autour c'était une volière pèpiante, chaude et gaîment éclairée et ornée. Elles restaient là, assises, serrées autour de leurs petites tables et parlaient. Il y avait autour d'elles un courant d'excitation, d'animation, une légère inquiétude pleine de joie (...)

(p. 63)

The mixture of opposing feelings with which the scene is charged comes across very well in the image of an aviary.

A certain type of woman, avid for knowledge of literature and culture is portrayed in text XI. Others react to her pseudo-intellectual probing in this manner:

Ils en éprouvaient une répulsion indicible. Lui cacher cela—vite—avant qu'elle ne le flairer, l'emporter, le soustraire à son contact avilissant... Mais elle les déjouait, car elle connaissait tout. On ne pouvait lui cacher la cathédrale de Chartres. Elle savait tout sur elle. Elle avait lu ce qu'en pensait Péguy.

(p. 70)
As in the example, there is often irony and humor in the way Sarraute presents characters such as this one. The point of view in this text is that of the people who find this character a nuisance. In a longer scene, such as those in the full-length novels, the point of view of this character would probably be presented in some way.

Text XII is about a professor at the Collège de France who likes to psychoanalyze famous writers. Sarraute's attitude toward this kind of literary reductionism can be easily inferred from this satirical portrait:

Il se plaisait à farfouiller, avec la dignité des gestes professionnels, d'une main implacable et experte, dans les dessous de Proust ou de Rimbaud, et étalant aux yeux de son public très attentif leurs prétendus miracles, leurs mystères, il expliquait "leur cas."  

(p. 75)

The hidden message of his lecture to his students is rendered in the form of images. He holds the authors in the palm of his hand; the students have nothing to fear from them; however awesome they may seem they are abnormal (pp. 76-77).

In text XV, an elderly gentleman visits a family and figuratively seizes a young girl in the grip of conversation:

Il l'avait agrippée et la tenait tout entière dans son poing. Il la regardait qui gigotait un peu, qui se débattait maladroitement en agitant en l'air ses petits pieds, d'une manière puérile, et qui
souriait toujours, aimablement: "Mais oui, je crois que c'est bien ainsi. Oui. Vous prononcez bien. En effet, le t-h . . . . Tha. . . . Thackery. . . . Oui, c'est cela. Mais certainement, je connais Vanity Fair. Mais oui, c'est bien de lui." (p. 94)

The psychological manipulation of certain characters by others is the subject matter of a number of tropisms. In text XIX, a man is controlled by two older women. In XXIII, a woman receives her parents for their weekly visit. She is irritated by their self-pity and would prefer seeing them less often but she cannot assert herself.

From a social-psychological point of view, Tropismes is largely concerned with the debunking of appearances. A generalized suspicion pervades the texts in this book. Characters are presented in terms of their outstanding attitudes and their generalized reactions. Social interaction scenes are very limited in scope and, hence, the tropisms do not develop as they do in her longer works. For fully-developed scenes of social interaction, it is necessary to turn to the full-length novels.

There is a clear line of development in Nathalie Sarraute's presentation of scenes of social interaction in her full-length novels. The first phase of this development can be seen in Portrait d'un Inconnu and Martereau. The hypersensitive narrator presents the scene to the reader, while attempting to ascertain the inner reactions of the
other characters by means of inference and intuition. The second phase corresponds to the use of shifting point of view, more or less clearly indicated by the use of a space in the text to indicate when another character's reactions are being presented. The novel which best exemplifies this phase is Le Planétarium. A third phase of this development is the gradual intermixing of point of view on the scene within a single paragraph or section. The beginnings of this phase can be seen in Les Fruits d'Or; it is more apparent in Entre la Vie et la Mort, and clearly discernible in Vous les entendez?

In a scene in Portrait d'un Inconnu (pp. 18-24), the perspective is that of the narrator. The reactions of the others are presented in the form of conjectures on the part of this narrator. He has gone to see some friends with whom he feels he can talk freely in order to discuss his real opinions of the daughter. In the first stage of the scene (pp. 18-21), his attitude is one of self-assurance, but this gradually shades into one of distrust. In the second stage they are talking to him about the sample of the daughter's handwriting which he has brought; they seem to be confirming his negative attributions regarding the daughter (pp. 21-23). In the third stage of the scene, the narrator realizes that they are actually ridiculing him by exaggerating his claims (pp. 23-24). The narrator tells the reader what his own reactions are and tries to figure out
the real attitudes of the others present by means of his heightened awareness. The following are examples of the narrator's own feeling reactions at different points in the social interaction: "Je sais bien que je pourrai toujours, quand je voudrai, me dédommager avec les autres, ceux avec qui on se sent au chaud (...) (p. 18); "(...) je voudrais maintenant aussi qu'ils me donnent tort, qu'ils donnent contre moi raison aux autres (...)" (p. 21); "(...) il me semble qu'ils me promènent quelque chose sur le visage (...)" (p. 23); "(...) [son rire] vous accroche par en dessus et vous traîne . . ." (p. 24).

What seems to be happening in the minds of the others is presented in the following manner: "Ils sont curieusement passifs et comme un peu inertes" (p. 19); "(...) [ils ont] l'air détaché et digne de l'expert à qui on soumet les pièces d'un dossier (...)" (p. 20); "Ils me semblent qu'ils ricanent un peu; ils ont l'air tout réjouis de me montrer qu'ils connaissent cela aussi . . ." (p. 22); "Ils rient, l'air enchantés (...)" (p. 23).

In Martereau, there is a scene (pp. 122-139) in which the narrator describes a visit by Martereau to his aunt and uncle's home; all four characters are present in the main part of the scene. There follows a continuation of the scene with just Martereau and the narrator--the latter is seeing the former out. As in the previous novel, we have the perspective of the narrator.
The bulk of the scene is concerned with the narrator's uncle's discourse on the value of hard work and consistent goals. He tells about the hardships he endured in order to achieve success. At one point his comments seem to contain a veiled insult aimed at Maritereau: "Taper toujours sur le même clou" (p. 129). This is also ironic inasmuch as the remark suggests the word for hammer in French, "marteau," a word which the character's name clearly suggests. Everyone knows that Maritereau has moved around from one job to another. The narrator senses his aunt's reaction and tries to ascertain whether or not the uncle's remark has affected Maritereau. The latter does not seem to have registered any irritation at the time, however, the narrator is eager to probe further and accompanies his older friend out to ask him what effect his uncle has on him. His efforts are unsuccessful, but he does feel somewhat relieved.

The narrator's thoughts move about in time; he recalls what his uncle told him about Maritereau being a Jack-of-all-trades (p. 28), and he imagines what his aunt will ask his uncle afterwards, namely whether or not he offended Maritereau by his remarks (pp. 131-133). The exact stages of the scene are difficult to pin down, other than to say that there are three stages to the scene, the second being the critical juncture when the uncle's problematical remark is made (p. 129).
One of the most interesting scenes in *Le Planétarium* is the chance meeting of Alain Guimiez, who is browsing in a bookstore with his father, and Germaine Lemaire. The scene is taken up again at various points, but the main presentation of the social interaction can be found from page 147 to page 155. The reader is first given, from Alain's point of view, how the latter would have liked things to happen (pp. 147-149). Everything could have been different if only he had reacted differently: "Un air de surprise heureuse. Un air d'abandon, de grâce tendre" (p. 147). Instead of the happy expression Alain's face registers fear and confusion and this is what sets everything off in the wrong direction (pp. 149-150). We are given the father's view of Germaine Lemaire: a curiously attired older woman who looks like an outmoded actress (p. 150).

The scene presents Alain's and his father's reactions, which are intermixed. The reader does not learn what Germaine Lemaire felt at the time until a flashback scene from her point of view presented later on in the novel (pp. 199-200). It then becomes clearly apparent to the reader that she was quite offended by Alain's father's attitude toward her, and hated both father and son at that time. The original scene comes to a close with Alain's father making a sarcastic remark aimed at both his son and the woman writer: "Mais j'en suis très fier. Alors il paraît que ce sera notre grand critique? Un futur Sainte-Beuve? . . . ." Her reply
to him is also cutting: "Oh Sainte-Beuve, je n'en sais rien. Pourquoi Sainte-Beuve, d'ailleurs, vous l'aimez donc tant?" (p. 154).

Most of the scenes in this novel are presented with spaces between the different characters' reactions to what is happening. This is clearly discernible in a rather long scene earlier in Le Planétarium in which Alain's mother-in-law and father-in-law are entertaining guests. He is asked by her to tell the guests a funny anecdote about his aunt, Tante Berthe, but his mood changes as a result of the psychological atmosphere he senses in the gathering, and he instead comes to his aunt's defense, expressing his sympathy for her (pp. 23-42). The scene ends with Alain insinuating that his mother-in-law is no better than his aunt and probably has skeletons of her own in the closet. The guests tactfully get up to leave and the scene comes to a close. The presentation in that scene moves from the consciousness of one character to another in an orderly progression until the eventual outcome.

A good example of parallel scenes is also contained in Le Planétarium: the visit Alain's father makes to his sister. The first version of this scene is presented from her point of view (pp. 245-264); the second version, from his (pp. 265-281). The dialogue is essentially the same in both scenes: the aunt is complaining to her brother about her nephew's deplorable behavior; he tells her that she is exaggerating
things; they experience a moment of closeness; he tells her to clear the mess up herself, since both she and Alain are adults. The levels of experience are different in each case as each character's feelings are linked to memories. Alain's father recalls his sister's efforts to mold Alain in her own way (p. 285), causing her to feel resentment. In the scene from his point of view, the reader is shown the father's exasperation with his sister's playing the role of the martyr (p. 266), and his pleasure at the idea that his son is a real tough guy (p. 267).

There is a rather amusing scene in *Les Fruits d'Or* in which a literary critic, called Parrot, flattered by the idea that his article on The Golden Fruits was praised by another critic, is trapped into giving some examples from the work, something he omitted from his article (pp. 156-165). The scene begins with Parrot's realization that he has fallen into a trap by accepting to comply with the other person's request: "Le voilà pris. Il est tombé dans le piège. Impossible de s'âchapper" (p. 156). He is unable to find any really convincing quotations to support his high opinion of the book. He tries to save face by muttering, with enthusiasm: "'C'est très beau!'" (p. 165). The other characters are more or less anonymous—this is typical of this work in which the group plays such an important part—and their reaction is given in a collective image:
Il tâtonne au hasard et arrache ce qui s'enfonce en lui et le déchire: leur dédain, leur pitié, cette complicité sournoise entre eux, cette conviction qu'ils ont de son inconscience, de sa jobardise. . . .

(p. 165)

There is a scene in *Entre la Vie et la Mort* in which the central character, having become a well-known writer, is receiving guests (pp. 184-193). The visitors are looking for signs of the unusual in the writer's home and lifestyle, but they are disappointed to find that he is just like everyone else. The scene begins with the writer's reactions as he answers their questions concerning various objects in his home, prepares some tea for them, answers questions about his family. There is a shift in time to the future: the writer learns that his teapot was called a samovar; they apparently had to fabricate something exotic about him (p. 187). The scene, begun earlier, continues: the writer senses their annoyance over the fact that their expectations of the unusual are frustrated.

In *Vous les entendez?*, the scenes of social interaction are not clearly separated; they flow into each other, back on previous scenes, reflecting the attitudes of father, children, and the visitor. Allusions to one scene, in particular, are threaded throughout the book. Essentially, what this scene is about is as follows: the father and friend have been discussing some of their favorite works of art in various museums (pp. 133-136). The scene in question
here occurs from page 136 to page 143. The children have
come downstairs again. The father, increasingly drawn
toward them in the social interaction, makes awkward attempts
to demonstrate his allegiance with them:

--Alors, vous voilà redescendus? ... On
n'a pas sommeil? C'est vrai que c'était un
peu tôt pour aller se coucher... malgré la
fatigue... Au fait, et cette partie de
pêche?... Et cette balade?... Comment ça s'est passé?... En une seconde
la mémoire est revenue, le code est retrouvé,
tous les signes que nous seuls connaissions
sont là (...)

(p. 137)

The thoughts of the children are presented in the next few
paragraphs. Finally, after the two men have resumed their
discussion—they are saying that the statue is probably
Zapotec—the friend asks one of the children, a daughter,
what she thinks of the piece (pp. 140-141). The reader has,
at this point, her own startled reaction juxtaposed with the
apprehension of her father. Ultimately, the following
occurs:

Prenant de l'assurance. La voix très calme
... Eh bien, moi, je pense... le ton
peut-être un peu trop sûr, sans réplique...
portant encore des traces trop visibles de
tant d'années de rebuffades, d'humiliations
... Eh bien quant à moi, je dois dire
que cela me fait penser plutôt à la Crète.
À la sculpture crétoise... Et se levant,
prenant congé avec une parfaite aisance, tandis
que le tyran, ses main cramponnées aux
accouloirs pour ne pas saisir l'impudente, la
frapper... tout congestionné, haletant, avance
la tête comme pour mordre: La quoi?

(p. 142)
The father's anger is due in part to the hint of ridicule in the remark, and, in part, to the possibility that the comparison is original and somewhat correct, making him wonder why he didn't think of it himself.

In these examples, the development of Nathalie Sarraute's technique in the presentation of social interaction can be noted. The interplay of perspectives, levels, and stages of social interaction is increasingly more complex and the reader obtains a fascinating picture of both the actualities as well as the possibilities inherent in even the most ordinary—at least, to all appearances—scenes of social interaction.

The following chapter deals with the character as presented in the context of social interaction.
CHAPTER III

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND CHARACTER PORTRAYAL

Nathalie Sarraute's approach to character--perhaps the most puzzling and problematical aspect of her work--takes on clearer outlines when a concern with social psychological issues is seen to underlie what appears to be a deliberately unconventional approach to character portrayal. This point of view is elaborated in detail in the second--and central--section of this chapter. Preceding it, however, is a general review of Sarraute's theoretical statements on the subject of character. This section serves as an introduction to the problems discussed later on in the chapter. In addition, a separate section, devoted to phenomenological, existential, and generally philosophical questions, follows the main discussion in which the terminology of the social psychologist is used exclusively. In the concluding section the main points are re-stated and given critical assessment.

A Preliminary Consideration of
Nathalie Sarraute's Theoretical Statements on the Subject of Character

The greater part of Nathalie Sarraute's stated opinions regarding character can be found in the collection
of essays entitled *L'Ere du soupçon*, published by Gallimard in 1956. This work consists of a short preface and four essays on various aspects of the novel. The second essay—from which the title of the collection is taken—was originally published as an article in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1950. In it one can find Sarraute's most complete statement on the subject of character in the novel. Additional comments on character, distributed throughout the other essays, as well as published interviews, amplify her point of view on this subject. This writer has taken advantage of all of these sources in compiling this general synthesis of Sarraute's ideas on character.

Generally speaking, Nathalie Sarraute's comments can be grouped around two central issues: 1) a critique of the traditional character in the novel; and 2) a justification of the approach to character which she has taken in her novels. Tracing the development of the character in the novel, Sarraute emphasizes the fact that he has lost just about every distinguishing characteristic he ever had, including his name:

> Il a, peu à peu, tout perdu: ses ancêtres, sa maison soigneusement bâtie, bourrée de la cave au grenier d'objets de toute espèce, jusqu'aux plus menus colifichets, ses propriétés et ses titres de rente, ses vêtements, son corps, son visage, et surtout, ce bien précieux entre tous, son caractère qui n'appartient qu'à lui, et souvent jusqu'à son nom.

*(E.S., p. 57)*
She attributes these changes to a gradual revision of the model of man upon which the traditional character was based. Instead of psychological layers surrounding an inner core of truth, we find "homo absurdus" (E.S., pp. 10-12), a being devoid of unity of self as in the novels of Kafka. The modern reader and the novelist are united in their suspicion of the so-called traditional character. As a matter of fact, says Sarraute, they are suspicious of the idea of character altogether:

Elle [l'évolution actuelle du personnage de roman] témoigne, à la fois chez l'auteur et chez le lecteur, d'un état d'esprit singulièrement sophistiqué. Non seulement ils se méfient du personnage du roman, mais à travers lui, ils se méfient l'un de l'autre. Il était le terrain d'entente, la base solide d'où ils pouvaient d'un commun effort s'élanter vers des recherches et des découvertes nouvelles. Il est devenu le lieu de leur méfiance réciproque, le terrain dévasté où ils s'affrontent. Quand on examine sa situation actuelle, on est tenté de se dire qu'elle illustre à merveille le mot de Stendhal: "le génie du soupçon est venu au monde." Nous sommes entrés dans l'ère du soupçon.

(E.S., p. 59)

Before this state of affairs, tinged with suspicion, came into being, the character was the object of the mutual reverence of the author and his reader, like the saint in religious paintings framed by the donors (E.S., p. 57). Although many readers would like to maintain this traditional situation with respect to the character, they know inside that the character conceived in this manner is
but a convenient label:

Quant au caractère, il [le lecteur] sait bien qu'il [le personnage] n'est pas autre chose que l'étiquette grossière dont lui-même se sert, sans trop y croire, pour la commodité pratique, pour régler, en très gros, ses conduites.

(E.S., p. 63)

The reader continues to believe in the character because he needs to have a concept of the person in order to be able to act in the affairs of everyday life. The character of the traditional novel is nonetheless unable to withstand the onslaught of new psychological knowledge. The revelation of this new material requires a change in the concept of character:

Or, nous l'avons vu, les personnages, tels que les concevait le vieux roman (et tout le vieil appareil qui servait à les mettre en valeur), ne parviennent plus à contenir la réalité psychologique actuelle. Au lieu, comme autrefois, de la révéler, ils l'escamotent.

(E.S., p. 71)

Deprived of the support of both reader and author, the traditional character eventually collapses (E.S., pp. 56-57).

The suspicion, which Nathalie Sarraute singles out as the reason for the collapse of the traditional concept of character, is not altogether detrimental. She views it as a kind of self-defense reaction by means of which the novel is able to restore its equilibrium in the wake of new psychological discoveries:
Le soupçon, qui est en train de détruire le personnage et tout l'appareil désuet qui assurait sa puissance, est une de ces réactions morbides par lesquelles un organisme se défend et trouve un nouvel équilibre.

(E.S., p. 77)

Unable to create characters that are convincing to himself and his readers, says Sarraute, the modern novelist can, in truth, speak only of himself:

Et puisque ce qui maintenant importe c'est, bien plutôt que d'allonger indéfiniment la liste des types littéraires, de montrer la coexistence de sentiments contradictoires et de rendre, dans la mesure du possible, la richesse et la complexité de la vie psychologique, l'écrivain, en toute honnêteté, parle de soi.

(E.S., p. 69)

Unlike the traditional novelist--Balzac, for example--the contemporary writer is unable to maintain a balance with respect to the distance between his characters and himself. He is, therefore, unable to provide the reader with many of the customary satisfactions, such as an atmosphere of easy familiarity, a feeling of solidarity, revelations on the secret facets of the lives of others, wise advice and solutions to the reader's problems, and the vicarious experience of the lives of others (E.S., pp. 124-135). The novelist, to be honest, ought to concentrate instead on the complexity of his own inner nature rather than attempt to create dolls fit to amuse children (E.S., p. 88).
Briefly stated, then, Nathalie Sarraute's argument against the so-called traditional or conventional character derives its support from the idea that the psychological concepts upon which this character is based are out of date. Sarraute no doubt was thinking of the revolutionary changes brought about by the theories of Freud, in particular, who upset all of the commonly-held notions of the psyche by maintaining that an unconscious level of motives and impulses lay beneath the surface of consciousness. Many writers saw the attempt on the part of their predecessors to analyze the motives of their characters as naive in comparison to the revelations of psychoanalysis. Introspection was seen to be as unreliable as analysis from the outside. Some American novelists preferred to describe their characters from the outside and present them to the reader in an active framework—Hemingway and Dos Passos, for example. Nathalie Sarraute chose to dispense with the analysis of character while continuing to concentrate on the inner life. The stream-of-consciousness technique, an advance over the "monologue intérieur" and, incidentally, the product of a French mind—Edouard Dujardin—was put to outstanding use by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, writers for whom Nathalie Sarraute has expressed great admiration. She has followed in their footsteps, in a manner of speaking. It must be emphasized, however, that her work explores
character at its most basic levels. The focus is on the
tropism and not on the total character:

I am not concerned with the whole character. I am not interested in creating characters, but in creating certain movements of mind which best develop when people are in contact with one another. This happens sometimes during an apparently banal conversation or when people are thinking about each other. But you see these are the feelings and movements common to all of us—not just to one particular type of character.55

[Italics in original]

The preceding remarks embody the core of Sarraute's thinking on the subject of character and mark the dividing line between her own approach to character and that of the mainstream novelist. Let us now examine those aspects of characterization in her work which diverge most noticeably from the norm and consider the justification she offers for each of them.

The most frequently criticized aspect of Nathalie Sarraute's novels is the relative anonymity of character. This is reflected in the general absence of proper names, physical descriptions, or vital statistics. Critics find that the individual is conspicuously missing from her novels: "Cependant Nathalie Sarraute désindividualise la psychologie plus radicalement qu'aucun autre romancier."56 Another critic remarks that "chez Sarraute on a noté que l'emploi du pronom personnel sujet a remplacé en quelque sorte l'idée de personnage."57 A third commentator points out that a major problem in reading the
works of Sarraute is that "she seeks to unburden us of the individual." The author's position on this issue is clearly stated in the following remarks:

Le personnage de roman ne pouvait que détournier sur soi notre attention, enfermer dans un moule qui ne pourrait pas la contenir cette substance fluide qui circule chez tous, passe des uns aux autres, franchissant des frontières arbitrairement tracées. Ce personnage ne devait plus être qu'un porteur d'états, un porteur anonyme, à peine visible, un simple support de hasard.59

Nathalie Sarraute does not want the reader to pay attention to characters when he should be concentrating on the flow of tropisms which derive from a common basis of experience which Sarraute refers to as the "fond commun" (E.S., p. 36). It is for this reason that she deliberately deprives the reader of those indications which he naturally turns to in order to create his "trompe l'oeil" of character (E.S., p. 71). Hence, Sarraute's characters are contrived to be supports for those often unexplored states of mind which are latent in everyone.

The lack of names, which exemplifies the most radical aspect of Sarraute's approach to character, appears to be a necessity for her in order to reduce the distance between herself and her characters:

The lack of names in all my books does not come from a desire to be modern, difficult, or obscure. It comes from sheer necessity. I have sometimes tried to replace the "he" or "she," which I generally use, by the character's name. I have then found out that
it made me move away from that place on
the border of consciousness where the
tropisms can be observed and where no
names are ever pronounced, where we see a
rapid image, a vague form. It made me
move away, somewhere on the outside, on
to the social level. And then, as I said,
I do not care to create lively characters
that imitate life like Madame Tussaud's
wax dolls. 60

With the exception of *Le Planétarium*, characters with
names in Sarraste's novels tend to arrest the action of the
tropisms as in the case of M. Dumontet whose presence at
the end of *Portrait d'un Inconnu* literally brings the
novel to a close.

Along with the relative anonymity of character, the
lack of a unified point of view—i.e., the "hero"—is a
frequent topic of critical commentaries. If, as Sarraste
assumes, all people are the same at a certain level (E.S.,
p. 69), then any attempt to glorify a particular individual
is meaningless. The hero or central personage is no more
important than any other character:

*Il [le lecteur] a vu tomber les cloisons
étanches qui séparaient les personnages les
uns des autres, et le héros de roman devenir
une limitation arbitraire, un découpage
conventionnel pratiqué sur la trame commune
que chacun contient tout entière et qui
capte et retient dans ses mailles
innombrables tout l'univers.*

(E.S., p. 64)

One critic describes the results of the breakdown of these
watertight compartments in the following manner: "The
Balzac type disappears and is replaced by anonymous beings,
who exist (exception being made for their animal tropisms and social conditioning) only in bewilderment and panic."61 Another commentator suggests a comparison between Nathalie Sarraute's subject matter and Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious:

Mme Sarraute also suggests to us that the persons we see speaking and acting with what appears to be full consciousness may only be the tip of the iceberg: below the surface their psyches and ours may meet and mingle in the collective unconscious, so that it might be unwise to distinguish separate individuals at all.62

Although Nathalie Sarraute does not believe in heroes or characters in an absolute sense–they are the products of the imagination like the narrator's musings about Martereau—the fact remains that individual differences persist among her characters, but to a very limited degree. Her almost single-minded interest in psychological states common to all has caused her to de-emphasize the outer person and focus her attention on the inner self. To Sarraute, this shift of gravity from outer to inner is a typical feature of the modern novel:

Sous la pression du tumulte, l'enveloppe qui le [le personnage] contient s'amincit et se déchire. Il se produit comme un déplacement, du dehors vers le dedans, du centre de gravité du personnage, déplacement que le roman moderne n'a cessé d'accentuer. (E.S., p. 39)

Lacking the external indicators he relied upon in the past, the reader must recognize these characters from within:
Au lieu de se laisser guider par les signes qu'offrent à sa paresse et à sa hâte les usages de la vie quotidienne, il [le lecteur] doit pour identifier les personnages, les reconnaître aussitôt, comme l'auteur lui-même, par le dedans (...)

(E.S., p. 73)

The view from within has traditionally been presented either by an omniscient author or by a first person narrator. Sarraute rejects the first procedure, as many contemporary novelists do, for the reason that she considers such knowledge to be unrealistic. This issue alone could provide material for a rather lengthy debate among critics! Sarraute, as it was mentioned earlier, relies upon the use of a narrator in her first two full-length novels, Portrait d'un Inconnu and Martereau, and then shifts to the third person stream-of-consciousness techniques in the works which follow. This phenomenological presentation of the character as a center of experience seems to be her preferred method for dealing with point of view. The emphasis, as stated earlier, is on feeling states--expressed as tropisms--rather than on rational thinking. When her characters do think to themselves it is usually about how others view them, in contrast to the way in which they view themselves. This suggests a central concern of social psychology: the self-concept. This relationship will be studied in detail in the second section of this chapter.
The self in relation to others brings us back to Sarraute's concept of man, discussed in the first chapter. The essence of that earlier discussion was that Sarraute's concept of man is primarily relational in character. The Sarrautian character derives his sense of self or identity as a result of his involvement with groups of one kind or another. Sarraute purposefully de-emphasizes the physical or body aspect of her characters in order to concentrate on the ever-changing symbolic self.

This discussion of Nathalie Sarraute's theoretical statements on the subject of character began with a consideration of Sarraute's views on the traditional character in the novel and gradually led into the area of her own practices and their justification. Her concept of character, like the other aspects of her writing which have already been discussed, suggests the presence of the social psychologist within the novelist. The following section contains a social-psychological analysis of Sarraute's techniques of character portrayal.

An Analysis of Nathalie Sarraute's Approach to Characterization
From the Perspective of Social Psychology

The social psychologist concerns himself with social interaction, hence his view of the person is relational rather than discrete. This central emphasis of the social psychologist's perspective on the individual can be
elucidated by comparing the broadly-based notion of "personality" with the social psychologist's concept of the "self-concept." One definition of "personality" reads as follows:

Personality may be defined as the pattern of characteristics and ways of behavior which accounts for an individual's unique adjustments to his total environment; it includes major traits, interests, values, attitudes, self-image [or self-concept], abilities, behavior patterns, and emotional patterns.63

Admittedly, definitions of personality are as varied as the psychological schools from which they are derived. Some of these are based on psychological types; others emphasize individual development—as in the case of psychoanalysis; while still others classify people on the basis of certain traits.64 As a rule, the social psychologist rejects the idea of an individual isolated from his social context. From his point of view, the "separate person is an abstraction unknown to experience."65 In a sense, he is correct insofar as a personality is an abstraction from which predictions concerning behavior are made. The term "self-concept" instead, is a recurrent one in the literature on social psychology. Although not synonymous with the concept of personality, the self-concept is widely considered a very basic and crucial component of personality.66 The following is a summary of one author's definition of the "self-concept": The self-concept is that organization
of qualities which the individual attributes to himself, including evaluative attributes (adjectives) as well as roles or position labels (nouns), derived from social interaction. Four assumptions underlie this definition of the self-concept: 1) An individual's self-concept is based on his perception of others' responses to him; 2) An individual's self-concept serves to direct his behavior; 3) The individual perceives the responses of others accurately; and 4) The responses of others are actually based on their reaction to the individual's behavior. 68

This distinction between "personality" and "self-concept" is also reflected in literature. The novelist who creates so-called traditional characters is, by and large, outlining personalities. He is trying to capture by means of analysis of motives, reactions, etc., what the true nature of the character consists of. A novelist like Nathalie Sarraute, on the other hand, makes no claims to such knowledge. She presents her characters contextually, that is to say each one in terms of his own view of himself and from the perspective of the other characters. There is no privileged viewpoint on any character in her ideal scheme of things. This is not how things turn out overall, however. As indicated earlier, it is quite likely to be true that the perspective of the more suspicious characters is intended to be more reliable
than that of the other characters in the novel. Yet, even assuming that this is true, this viewpoint too has its limitations. Characters who apply psychological theories to others in order to explain them away are treated with ridicule like the psychoanalyzing professor in Tropismes who classifies Rimbaud and Proust (pp. 75-77).

The drama concerning character in the novels of Nathalie Sarraute is the drama of self-definition. The conflicts between characters revolve about the issue of personal identity. The identity or self-concept of the character is constantly open to revision as a result of interaction with other characters. In the process of social interaction an identity may be confirmed or denied; another, and perhaps more objectionable, identity may be assigned to the character. The vicissitudes of personal identity, apart from the presentation of tropisms, is largely what Nathalie Sarraute's novels are about.

The fabric of interpersonal relationships in the novels of Nathalie Sarraute lends itself to an analysis in social-psychological terms. Such an analysis would basically demonstrate how each character is related to each of the other characters in the network of the social groups in which he is involved. A discussion of this type would, of course, acknowledge the limitations Nathalie Sarraute has placed on the concept of character in her works, as evidenced in the previous discussion. It needs emphasizing, however,
that, all of the author's claims to the contrary, the character does survive, although not in the traditional sense. This is attested to by one critic, the author of a lengthy article on just this particular subject, in the following manner:

Le "personnage" auquel les romanciers traditionnels avait accordé une confiance aveugle devient ainsi pour Nathalie Sarraute l'image à la fois trompeuse et nécessaire de l'existence humaine. Trompeuse: il se présente comme la source des tropismes, alors qu'il en est seulement le support. Mais nécessaire, ou du moins inévitable, car toute expression mène à lui. 69

Another critic expresses the same idea by means of a rather arresting metaphor: "L'architecture romanesque du XIXe siècle demeure en partie debout; nous errons parmi les colonnes, les pans de mur. . . ."70 Before proceeding to show exactly what remains of these so-called ruins of the character, it is necessary to turn to a more detailed examination of the social-psychological concepts relevant to the later discussion. The reader will recall that the terms "personality" and "self-concept" were defined and compared earlier in order to indicate the difference between Nathalie Sarraute's approach to character and that of the traditional novelist. These concepts and others now require further explanation and clarification.

The terms to be discussed can be conveniently arranged into three main areas: 1) The social psychologist's view of
the person; 2) The self in social interaction; and 3) The framework for self-conceptualization and the identification of others. The definitions provided for each of these terms will apply throughout the remainder of this study. To facilitate later reference, each major concept is underlined when it is first introduced. Presenting these terms separately, it is hoped, will allow the later description of Nathalie Sarraute's character relationships to flow more smoothly.

From the perspective of the social psychologist, the person is the union of a body organism and a self. **The self** is a person's experience of himself, whereas the self-concept is primarily a product of the environment which shaped it. A person experiences himself as hovering in a balance between being and having a body.\(^7^1\) The social psychologist is generally content to leave explanations concerning the exact nature of the self to philosophers. For Nathalie Sarraute, in particular, the self is both the locus of mental states—both cognitive and affective—and the performer of social roles. This conforms very closely to E. Goffman's distinction between the **phenomenal self** and the **performed self**.\(^7^2\) An important term, the self-concept, discussed earlier, here refers to a person's total sense of identity as opposed to particular situational identities.

The self assumes **social roles** or **roles** in its interaction with others. A social role is a concept of the self
which serves to direct a person's behavior or performance in a particular social setting. In role-taking the individual learns to choose the forms of behavior expected of him by others. The social role is one of the most important concepts in social psychology. There is an interaction which takes place between the person and his social role. The social psychologist is keenly interested in this level of interaction. This is the point at which the individual encounters the social system. For Sarrute's characters the incongruity between the performed self and the phenomenal self is a central concern.

The development of the self-concept and role-taking are considered to be rather complex forms of social interaction. A social role itself may be clearly structured, as in a work situation or institutional context, or it may be more loosely organized and less clearly defined. In the first case, we would be referring to the sociologist's meaning of role, while in the second case the social psychologist's meaning would apply. A social role includes certain actions accompanied by appropriate attitudes and emotions. The range of an individual person is measurable by the number of social roles he is capable of playing. This is commonly referred to as "role-taking ability." Roles are generally complementary in social interaction as, for example, in the case of teacher-student or employer-employee. A social role is also associated
with a particular position having a certain rank or status, along with certain obligations. When a situation presents an individual with incompatible expectations, the result is role conflict. Lastly, any social role can be played in full awareness or blindly.

Because of its purely symbolic constitution, a person's self-concept or identity is a source of disquiet. A new life situation may upset it or undermine it completely. Conversions from one belief system to another have just such an effect. In this vein, one is also reminded of the turbulence of that period known as adolescence when an individual sets out to fashion an identity for himself.

Within the self-concept itself, an individual may experience what is called dissonance. This refers to the feeling of self-alienation which accompanies the realization that there is an inconsistency in the relationship among the various concepts a person has of himself. It is generally conceded that the self-concepts of most people contain numerous contradictions and inconsistencies. Without giving the matter too much thought, people tend to segregate their discrepant identities. However, once a person's attention is directed to the discrepancy, he usually attempts to reduce the particular inconsistency. This reaction is based upon the need to perceive oneself as a totality.
This concludes the discussion of the social psychologist's view of the person. The dynamics of self and others in social interaction is the next topic to be considered.

The self in social interaction has an active aspect—the performed self, and a passive aspect—the phenomenal or experiential self. The relationship between self and others in the face-to-face situation is both flexible and complex. It is flexible because it is a fluid process of shifting roles, and complex because it involves interpreting impressions from one moment to the next. Each participant both sends and receives a plethora of subjective data. In order to obtain intellectual control over his interpersonal experience, a person has recourse to some kind of conceptualization. This topic will be treated separately afterward.

Let us first consider the active aspect. An important and useful concept here is the presentation of self. This refers to the overall manner in which a person presents himself to others. It is assumed that there will always be a certain amount of self-dissimulation depending upon the requirements of the situation. In presenting himself to others an individual attempts to regulate the impression he is making on the other; that is referred to as impression management. The attempt on the part of the
individual to inhibit certain responses, evoked by the other, but incompatible with the impression he is trying to achieve, is referred to as response inhibition.\textsuperscript{82} When an individual fails to manage his presentation, something is communicated unintentionally. Many of Sarrute's characters are attentive to such slips since they indicate underlying attitudes. Suspicion and the debunking of appearances, discussed in Chapter II, provide the motives for a closer look behind the masks: "Le doute est l'élément principal de tout masque."\textsuperscript{83} This discussion of the active side of the self in social interaction would not be complete without mentioning the fact that the self actively attributes motives, traits, and intentions to the other.

In considering the passive aspect of the self, or phenomenal self, the emphasis is on the receptivity of the self. The feedback from others obtained in the course of social interaction has many facets. Generally speaking, the other in the face-to-face encounter is a mirror to the self; he reflects back an image of the self. This is referred to by some as the "looking-glass self,:"\textsuperscript{84} or "mirror response."\textsuperscript{85} As indicated earlier--in the discussion on the self-concept--the individual sees himself in terms of roles (nouns) and attributes (adjectives). The other responds by confirming the particular identity that is presented to him, or by denying it in some way. These
counter-attributions of the other may be directly stated or implied. In short, the mirror response of the other reflects his attitudes toward the self across the entire spectrum of social stimuli. The tropisms of the phenomenal self keep the individual in touch with this informative level of feeling response.

The necessity for interaction with others for the self to have any identity whatsoever is attested to by many behavioral scientists:

> Identities are socially bestowed. They must be socially sustained, and fairly steadily so. One cannot be human all by oneself and, apparently, one cannot hold on to any particular identity all by oneself. ³⁶

Ultimately, an individual must revise or abandon a self-concept which others fail to acknowledge:

> The more frequently the individual perceives responses that are inconsistent with his self concept the more likely he is to change his conception of himself (all other factors being equal). ³⁷

An individual’s social location largely determines whether his refusal to recognize a particular social identity imposed on him will have any effect. ³⁸ This situation is further complicated by the fact that a person may have a realistic or unrealistic view of himself.

> It is easy to see, from the preceding remarks, how an individual would be inclined to surround himself with
others who confirm his self-concept. This is the basis for his social affiliations.

The third and last topic of this preliminary theoretical discussion is the framework for self-conceptualization and the identification of others. This includes a discussion of reference groups and language.

In his social behavior the individual moves toward and away from other individuals and groups in keeping with his self-definition or self-concept. The abstract frame of reference within which he defines himself and others is known as a reference group. A reference group may be real or imaginary. In either case, it is the model an individual uses as a basis for comparison with others. A reference group forms the basis for an individual's opinions, convictions, attitudes, and behavior. It is important for him to know both the system in which he defines himself and that in which he is defined by the other. The location of self and others in these abstract configurations is a significant part of social interaction.

A reference group, like any category, requires a name. This leads to the complicated issue of language and the self-concept. Language was discussed earlier in the context of the discussion on social stimuli where it was noted that the spoken word is a potent social stimulus. The power of language resides in its ability to
conceptualize and thereby summarize a great deal of information. Labels and names make it possible to identify others, particularly with regard to their value in relation to the self. Lacking this, an individual has no definite basis for action with regard to someone else. The names he gives himself also serve as directives in the conduct of his life.

In Nathalie Sarraute's novels the process of categorization is generally contrasted with the fluidity of subjective experience. In this example from the novel Martereau, the nephew takes his uncle's penchant for categorizing into account when he attempts to convince him of Martereau's dishonesty:

Sans hésiter, je choisis maintenant pour le convaincre la méthode qui convient. Il y en a deux qui s'offrent à moi, comme pour certains problèmes, deux procédés: l'un par l'algèbre, l'autre par l'arithmétique. C'est l'arithmétique dont je me sers habituellement pour mon usage personnel. Pour lui, elle ne vaut rien: toutes ces données concrètes, sensations, impressions vagues, réminiscences, pressentiments, fluides et courants, éveillerent sa méfiance ou sa fureur. Seul le signe couramment admis, indiscutable, général, le convainc.

(pp. 242-243)

Sarraute's characters are particularly attentive to commonplace words which are apt to slip by unnoticed, with disturbing effects later on:

Les mots seuls. Des mots surgis de n'importe où, poussières flottant dans l'air que nous
respirons, microbes, virus... on est tous menacés. Vous comme moi. Aucun d'entre nous ne peut être assuré de rester indemne. Des mots banals, pas même adressés à vous. Des mots que des inconnus ont échangés à une table de restaurant voisine, marchant devant vous dans la rue ou dans une allée de jardin, assis près de vous dans l'autobus, et que vous avez absorbés, parfois sans même sur le moment vous en rendre compte. --Quels mots? --Des mots très ordinaires, si je vous les répétai pas vous vous moqueriez de moi, et pourtant ils ont pénétré en moi, ils se sont incrustés, je ne peux plus m'en débarrasser, ils enflent, ils appuient... Quelque chose s'en désage...

(E., pp. 75-76)

The narrator in *Martereau* compares these seemingly innocuous words to time bombs, in a psychological sense. Care must be taken in rendering them harmless at their first appearance:

(...) un instant d'inattention, de détente insouciante, d'oubli, et leurs mots s'abattirent sur moi au moment où je ne m'y attendais pas, me sauteraient dessus par derrière, ou bien, tout à coup, parfois beaucoup plus tard, leurs mots qui auraient pénétré en moi à mon insu, mas par un mystérieux mécanisme d'horlogerie exploseraient en moi et me déchireraient. Il fallait les capter tous au passage sans rien laisser passer, tous leurs mots, leurs plus légères intonations, et les examiner lentement, les désamorcer comme des engins dangereux, les ouvrir pour en extraire une matière trouble et louche à l'odeur écoeurante et la tourner et la retourner pour mieux la voir, l'agiter, palper sans fin, flaire...

(p. 26)

The nephew's counterpart in *Portrait d'un Inconnu* expresses himself similarly on the subject of the effects of words:
Mais les mots pénètrent en nous à notre insu, s'implantent en nous profondément, et puis, parfois longtemps après, ils se dressent en nous brusquement et nous forcent à nous arrêter tout à coup au milieu de la rue, ou nous font sursauter la nuit et nous asseoir, inquiets, sur notre lit.

(p. 92)

In the face-to-face situation, categorizing or typifying the other is more subject to his interference. Outside of this situation, the crystallizing effects of language categories—as, for example, in the form of names, labels, and stereotypes—are harder to deal with since they cannot be challenged at their source.

The words which perturb Nathalie Sarraute's characters are largely the adjectives and nouns by means of which the other characters make attributions concerning them. The writer-protagonist of *Entre la Vie et la Mort*, for example, aspires to being accepted as a predestined writer; instead, he is labelled as a misfit:

Il le [le mot "inadapté"] saisit—quelque chose de dur, de pointu, de tranchant—et il le lance, il ferme les yeux pour ne pas voir la chair vivante où le mot s'enfonce qui s'ouvre, palpite, saigne, se débat... il tire à lui, mais rien ne vient, le mot sans avoir rien accroché lui revient: un objet grossier, hideux, comme ceux qu'on gagne aux loteries des foires... il le regarde perplexe, embarrassé, il ne sait où le poser, qu'en faire....

(pp. 49-50)

Each character retains a hold on his self-concept by means of the particular stock of words available to him,
as the previously-cited character explains:

Chacun de nous sûrement a son petit stock de mots à lui. Vous en avez comme moi. Ce ne sont peut-être pas les mêmes. Mais c'est sans importance. Ce que je veux juste vous dire, c'est qu'ils ont quelque chose, ces mots, de très particulier... Ils restent là, en vous, toujours en activité, ils entrent de temps en temps en éruption, ils dégagent des vapeurs, des fumées... Ou plutôt ils agissent comme certaines drogues, tout ce qui vous entoure est transformé... (p. 76)

To reiterate then: language makes possible the typification of social interaction whereby an individual assigns himself and others an identity.

This completes the discussion of the terms and concepts from social psychology relative to a discussion of the character in the novels of Nathalie Sarraute. Before proceeding to a study of Tropismes and Sarraute's other works of prose fiction, a few remarks on the nature of the relationship between real people and fictional characters would not be completely out of place, given the fact that concepts devised to describe actual people are being applied here to imaginary beings. The best evidence in support of this procedure would seem to be Nathalie Sarraute's emphatic claims to realism in her works (E.S., pp. 140-145). Her characters, however disembodied they may appear, are intended to resemble real people, and their relationships are modeled after those of
real life. Sarraute has consistently maintained that her
goal in writing is to portray life realistically. She
has flatly rejected formalism as alien to her purpose.

The brevity of the texts in Tropismes does not per-
mit an extensive social-psychological discussion of
character relationships. Some of the most interesting
material from this work includes a look at the self-
concepts of these characters and its basis in familial and
other social relationships. The reader only receives a
brief look at the way in which these characters are re-
lated to each other. Thanks to the author's sharp eye for
significant detail, however, the reader receives an
accurate impression of the attitudes of these characters.

The texts of Tropismes are written in the third
person form. The author vacillates between a form of
narration in which the characters are viewed more or less
objectively, and a form in which their thoughts and feel-
ings are revealed to the reader. The latter approach is
the prototype for the third-person stream-of-consciousness
 technique characteristic of Sarraute's novels beginning
with Le Planétarium. In many texts of Tropismes the ob-
jective and subjective are ironically juxtaposed:

Maintenant ils étaient vieux, ils étaient
tout usés, "comme de vieux meubles qui ont
beaucoup servi, qui ont fait leur temps et
accompli leur tâche," et ils poussaient par-
fois (c'était leur coquetterie) une sorte de
The inclusion of fragments of sentences which these characters repeat to themselves serves to reveal self-concepts sustained by clichés. In some cases, a social role serves as the basis for very conventional self-concepts. In this example, an English lady and her cook are perfectly at one with their social roles. The lady is described as follows:

Une demoiselle aux cheveux blancs, aux joues roses un peu violacées, lit devant la porte un magazine anglais. Elle est assise là, toute raide, toute digne, toute sûre d'elle et des autres, solidement installée dans son petit univers. Elle sait que dans quelques minutes on va sonner la cloche pour le thé.

Meanwhile, the cook is preparing the tea and is equally absorbed in her work:

La cuisinière Ada, en bas, devant la table couverte de toile cirée blanche, épluche les légumes. Son visage est immobile, elle a l'air de ne penser à rien. Elle sait que bientôt il sera temps de faire griller "les buns" et de sonner la cloche pour le thé.

Nathalie Sarraute is a very careful and attentive writer, no detail is without significance. The mere fact that the cook's first name is a part of this social relationship warrants mentioning it. In addition, the use of the phrase "elle sait" in each description suggests both the
complementary social roles involved and the self-assurance associated with them.

Another character, a young girl, has accepted the identity assigned to her, acting out the appropriate social roles which derive from it. She sees herself as a pliant and well-behaved young person:

Dans son tablier noir en alpaga, avec sa croix épinglée chaque semaine sur sa poitrine, c'était une petite fille extrêmement "facile," une enfant très docile et très sage: "Il est pour les enfants, Madame, celui-là?" demandait-elle à la papetière, quand elle n'était pas sûre, en achetant un journal illustré ou un livre.
(p. 121)

The same character is shown years later still conforming to a self-image which she has outgrown, listening to tedious talk about relatives and entertaining fleeting thoughts of breaking out of the psychological confinement in which she lives; but the reader knows that this alternative will remain a mere fantasy (pp. 122-123).

In another scene, we are shown some women shopping for clothes. Unable to find exactly what they are looking for, they conceal their disappointment and irritation before the salesman because they consider themselves to be well-bred:

Mais oui, je regrette beaucoup, oui, pour une autre fois... "et elles souriaient tout de même, aimablement, bien élevées, bien dressées depuis de longues années, quand
elles avaient couru encore avec leur mère, pour combiner, pour "se vêtir de rien," car une jeune fille, déjà, a besoin de tant de choses, et il faut savoir s'arranger."

(p. 83)

An aggressively pseudo-intellectual woman is described in one scene. Sarraute satirically contrasts this woman's self-concept, namely that she is an intellectual, with the way others view her:


(p. 70)

Another character, also a woman, sees herself in terms of femininity and piety (pp. 87-89), or at least as she construes these attributes. In another scene, a group of anonymous women have structured their lives around their conceptualization of their identity as women: "Dans l'après-midi elles sortaient ensemble, menaient la vie des femmes" (p. 63). This sort of life involves going to tea-rooms where they chatter gaily, select cakes daintily, and discuss feelings, love, and life: what they consider to be their domain (pp. 63-65).

Family situations, which will later play such an important part in Sarraute's novels, are also the subject of this author's attention in Tropismes. Identities based
on familial relationships are often portrayed as unstable because of conflicts of one sort or another. One dis-harmonious family is described as follows: "Elle rassemblait à table la famille, chacun caché dans son antre, solitaire, hargneux, épuisé" (p. 15). Another family is harassed by the mother who is hysterically addicted to objects and schedules (pp. 39-41). Another scene depicts a woman character who is afraid to move for fear that her family will set upon her: "Elle les sentait ainsi, étalés, immobiles derrière les murs, et prêts à tressaillir, à remuer" (p. 35).

The situation of the children is often portrayed as sad. In the first text of the collection a group of women and children are seen standing before a store window. The children are described in this manner: "Et les petits enfants tranquilles qui leur donnaient la main, fatigués de regarder, distraints, patiemment, auprès d'eux attendaient" (p. 12). A family goes to the suburbs for an outing: "Ils avaient amené avec eux le compagnon de leurs heures de repos, leur petit enfant solitaire" (p. 104). A scene takes place in which a small child is psychologically smothered by his grandfather:

Quand il était avec des êtres frais et jeunes, des êtres innocents, il éprouvait le besoin dououreux, irrésistible, de les manipuler de ses doigts inquiets, de les palper, de les rapprocher de soi le plus près possible, de se les approprier.

(p. 51)
The struggle for self-definition puts many of Sarrute's younger characters at odds with their parents and other relatives. In one scene from Tropismes, a daughter does not wish to be identified with her very conventional parents; ironically enough, their main concern is to assure themselves that she has not lost this identification with them:

Elle aurait tant voulu les repousser, les empoigner et les rejeter très loin. Mais ils se tenaient autour d'elle tranquillement, ils lui souriaient, aimables, mais dignes, très décents, toute la semaine ils avaient travaillé, ils n'avaient toute leur vie compté que sur eux-mêmes, ils ne demandaient rien, rien d'autre que de temps en temps la voir; de rajuster un peu entre elle et eux le lien, sentir qu'il était là, toujours bien à sa place le fil qui les reliait à elle.

(PP. 133-134)

Many of the relationships described in Tropismes are patently destructive. An atmosphere of psychological cruelty is present in many scenes. Characters victimize other characters as in the case of the sadistic old gentleman who teases a young girl, the daughter of a couple who have invited him to dinner. The latter's appearance in the living room puts an end to this uncomfortable scene for the young lady (PP. 93-96). In the case of another character, his psychological suffering at the hands of others seems to be of longer duration, and is exacerbated by the fact that he is obliged to pretend that
all is well:

Il était lisse et plat, deux faces planes—ses joues que tour à tour il leur offrait et où ils déposaient, de leurs lèvres tendues, un baiser.
Ils le prenaient et ils le triturait, le retournaient en tous les sens, le piétinaient, se roulaient sur lui, se vautraient. Ils le faisaient tourner, et là, et là, ils lui montraient d'inquiétants trompe-l'œil, des fausses portes, des fausses fenêtres vers lesquelles il allait, crédule, et où il se cognait, se faisait mal.

(p. 111)

One of the central problems in Tropismes, and perhaps in all of Nathalie Sarraute's works, is the inability of many characters to maintain a distinction between the self-concept as an ongoing human production and their social roles. A character may identify totally with his social role; his self-concept, in other words, becomes synonymous with his socially assigned typifications. The character sees himself as a certain type and does not maintain any subjective distance between himself and his role-playing. This line of thinking, of course, is highly suggestive of the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. The Sartrian argument employs a unique philosophical vocabulary and will be discussed in a later section.

The early sketches contained in Tropismes foretoken the social-psychological issues which play such an important part in Nathalie Sarraute's subsequent writings:
the social basis of the self-concept, the playing of social roles, and the attitudes underlying social affiliations. Sarraute's first full-length novel, Portrait d'un Inconnu, provided her with the necessary scope for a fuller exploration of the relationship between self and others.

In an article published in Le Monde in January of 1972, shortly before Vous les entendez? was published, Nathalie Sarraute outlined her initial approach to the writing of a novel. It is probably safe to assume that this comment applies to all of her novels:

Au moment de me mettre au travail sur un roman, j'ai presque toujours une vision géométrique de celui-ci: Portrait d'un Inconnu, cela se présentait comme un espace entièrement clos avec une agitation intérieure provoquée par deux consciences en train de s'affronter.91

The characters or consciousnesses interact in an abstract or mental framework, as suggested by the analogy. The relationships between characters can be plotted, in a sense, along the lines of influence and social affiliation. In Portrait d'un Inconnu, there are actually three main characters: the elderly father, his daughter, and the narrator, who is a family friend. How each of these characters sees himself, how the others see him, and the interplay between these two perspectives is largely what the novel is about. Other characters appear from time to time, but the central focus is always on the three
The presentation of this novel is further complicated by the inclusion of a significant fantasy factor. The anonymous narrator imagines scenes between the father, daughter, and others, based on what he knows about them already. These imagined scenes are made necessary by the limited point of view. They are also common in Martereau, but less common in the later novels where the shifting point of view no longer makes the use of this device necessary.

The dramatic tension between these characters varies with the amount of conflict between a character's self-concept and the view others have of him. Since Sarraute's characters generally define themselves in relation to the others around them, their definitions of their own identities often implicitly contain attributions about the other characters. A careful consideration of the matter led this writer to the conclusion that it would be best to treat each character separately as a focal point of interaction with the others. This should not be construed as an attempt to outline traditional characters—i.e., personalities—but, rather, as an effort to situate each character in his social-psychological dimensions.

The narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu is obsessed by an old man and his daughter, friends of his family. Their
mutual acquaintance dates back quite a few years inasmuch as the narrator shares his earlier impressions of the daughter with a friend he has known since his school days. The narrator may or may not be the unknown man of the title—in a sense, all three characters are relatively unknown. The narrator sees himself as different from the people he lives around; he views himself as a shy, introverted type: "(...) tous ceux qui errent comme moi, craintifs, dans la pénombre de ce qu'on nomme poétiquement 'le paysage intérieur' (...)" (p. 25). He realizes that he probably does not see things the way most people do; he even imagines being somewhat like a case history in a psychiatry book. He would like to experience life the way so-called normal people do and see the other side of things: "'l'autre aspect' celui dont on ne parle pas dans les livres de médecine tant il est naturel, anodin, tant il est familier (...)" (p. 27). He feels alienated from objects: "Je ne dois pas (...) chercher à me rapprocher des choses, essayer de les amadouer pour les rendre anodines, familières (...)" (p. 28). He sees himself as acutely sensitive to what others see in him: "L'impression que les gens ont de moi détient sur moi tout de suite, je deviens tout de suite et malgré moi exactement comme ils me voient" (p. 53). He knows that he is in need of reassurance (p. 20), but distrusts the outer appearances of what he sees, an attitude which extends even to the streets
of his neighborhood: "Je sais bien qu'il ne faut pas se fier à l'impression que me font les rues de mon quartier" (p. 26).

The narrator's self-concept is, in large measure, based upon an identification with a painting in a museum in Amsterdam, an anonymous portrait of an unknown man (p. 87). He finds an image of himself that is both liberating and invigorating in the disturbing, formless vitality of the seemingly unfinished portrait. At the same time, the instability of this self-concept and his responsiveness to others leave him vulnerable to their typifications of him, particularly when they identify him as an outcast: "Il ne me restait plus (...) qu'à essayer par un pénible effort de me dérocher d'eux, d'accepter d'être abandonné par eux, tenu à l'écart (...)" (p. 18). Although troubled by a suspicion that he is somehow like the father and daughter, the narrator cannot avoid being irresistibly attracted to them: "(...) certains détails, en apparence insignifiants, de leur aspect, de leur accoutrement m'accrochent tout de suite, m'agrippent--à coup de harpon qui enfonce et tire" (pp. 30-31). He tries to disengage himself from this disturbing identification, especially with respect to the daughter, by discussing her peculiarities with others. To his dismay, however, he learns that they find him to be like
the daughter and her father:

(...) ils m'empoignent, moi, elle, le vieux, ils nous tiennent tous ensemble, pressés les uns contre les autres, ils nous serrent contre nous, nous étreignent.

(pp. 23-24)

Even his old school friend, with whom he usually enjoys talking about the daughter, suggests that he is not unlike her in some ways: "Curieux, au fond, que ce soit aussi un mot que tu affectionnes... [le mot "réchauffé"] ton mot à toi..." (p. 50). This comment disturbs him because he knows that he feels a certain empathy with her: "Je ne peux jamais éviter de percevoir, venant d'elle, les décharges les plus légères, et de vibrer à l'unisson" (p. 142). He feels that they share the same heightened awareness: "Elle a aussi ce même flair surnaturel des choses" (p. 31). His relationship with her is tinged with ambivalence.

The daughter tends to shun the narrator's company, except when others are present. On one such occasion she suggests that he is a slanderer after surprising him in the process of chatting with a friend: "'De qui médisez-vous? cela vient de me lacérer tout à coup" (p. 51). On another occasion he is wryly aware of her opinion of him: "À ses yeux, je faisais peu raffiné, un peu paysan du Danube, pas compréhensif, pas sympathisant comme elle, quelqu'un de peu civilisé" (p. 141). Toward the end of the
novel the narrator sees himself reflected in a mirror while walking along the street with the daughter. This, incidentally, is the first and only physical description the reader receives of him. The narrator knows that she sees him as a flabby, balding, sloppy, and somewhat eccentric person:

J'évite de regarder, trottinant à côté d'elle, ce bonhomme "sur le retour," à la mine négligée, court sur pattes, un peu chauve, légèrement bedonnant. Parfois je ne peux l'éviter. Il surgit d'une glace juste en face de moi, au croisement d'une rue. Jamais mes paupières fatiguées, mes yeux ternes, mes joues affaissés, ne m'étaient apparus aussi impitoyablement que maintenant, près de son image à elle, dans cette lumière crue.

Elle la voit, elle aussi, dans la glace, cette image aux lignes molles, un peu avachies—le fruit malsain d'obscures occupations, de louches ruminations, que fait-il au juste toute la journée? à quoi peut-il passer son temps? elle doit se le demander vaguement.

(p. 211)

The father generally sees in the narrator a carbon copy of all that he finds objectionable in his daughter: a parasitical life style; spending family money on medical treatments and trips for reasons of health, and so on. The narrator senses these attitudes and the subtle attributions made about him:

Je le connais. Il y a sous tous ses actes, même insignifiants en apparence et anodins, comme un envers, une autre face cachée, connue de nous seuls, et qui est tournée vers moi.

(p. 92)
The father also brings out the timidity of the narrator by his bullyish behavior: "Il sent vaguement avec son flair subtil quelque chose en moi, une petite bête apeurée tout au fond de moi qui tremble et se blottit" (pp. 37-38). At the end of the novel, the reader is inclined to ask whether or not the narrator's self-concept has undergone a change. It seems that he has forgotten about the portrait and redefined himself along more conventional lines. He will be like everyone else: "Elles sauront tout de suite--elles ne s'y trompent jamais--qu'elles n'ont plus besoin de se méfier, que je suis des leurs" (p. 237).

In Portrait d'un Inconnu and Martereau, we must rely on the narrator for information concerning the self-concepts of the other characters. This information, hence, is not entirely reliable; however, it often carries conviction.

In the case of the daughter, the reader knows that she sees herself as sensitive and refined, at least compared to the narrator (p. 141). She is tricked by the latter into admitting that she considers herself to be maltreated by her father who does not seem to appreciate her: "'Vous savez, c'est dur avec lui. Il ne peut pas comprendre. . . . Il y a des moments. . . . C'est dur pour une femme seule, vous savez. Et je n'ai plus
personne que lui..." (p. 57). She receives confirmation of this identity of "neglected daughter" from her social affiliations, particularly a group of women who are more than ready to assure her that she is too delicate with her father, that she is correct in seeing herself primarily as his "daughter": "'Après tout, il aura beau faire, vous serez toujours sa fille, il sera toujours votre père. On ne va pas contre ça, allez'" (p. 62). A significant detail connected to this self-concept associated with dependency is the satchel which the daughter carries about with her: "le cartable d'écolier qu'elle porte toujours en guise de sac" (p. 32). The attitudes derived from this self-concept are also evident in the manner in which she presents herself to the narrator: the image of a helpless little girl:

Je la tiens coincée: elle reste devant moi sans bouger, elle se tordure seulement un peu, il me semble qu'elle tremble très légèrement, et elle approuve ce que je dis, juste en ponctuant avec docilité chacune de mes phrases d'un bruit sifflant, un hffii, hffii aspiré, rappelant les derniers hoquets d'une petite fille qui vient de sangloter et qui se laisse consoler. Il y a quelque chose de presque touchant dans sa passivité, dans sa maladresse qui l'empêche de répondre sur le même ton: il y a même là, en comparaison de moi--je m'en rends compte vaguement--quelque chose qui ressemble à de la pureté. (p. 33)

Toward the end of the book this self-image has changed to that of a self-effacing, contented middle-class wife:
Je la regarde. Elle n'a pas l'air d'écouter. Sur son visage maintenant rien d'autre que cette expression d'absence confiante qu'elles ont -- il n'y a qu'à regarder ces visages de femmes assises autour de nous aux autres tables -- cet air de paisible et vague rumination qu'elles ont toujours pendant que les hommes, près d'elles, parlent d'affaires, discutent de chiffres.

(p. 229)

The narrator's view of the daughter is generally negative in character. He finds her grotesque in appearance and compares her to a hyena (p. 32). This comparison is highly suggestive of his attitudes toward her when one considers the fact that a hyena is a scavenger which feeds on carrion, utters a shrill cry, and is generally regarded as cowardly. The way in which the narrator refers to the daughter also conjures up the image of a scavenger in another sense: she lives on ready-made ideas. The narrator calls her "l'Hypersensible-nourrie-de-clichés" (p. 47). The narrator questions his friends in an effort to learn whether or not they share his feeling that there is something sticky and tenacious about her:

Je leur ai demandé s'ils ne sentaient pas comme moi, s'ils n'avaient pas senti, parfois, quelque chose de bizarre, une vague émanation, quelque chose qui sortait d'elle et se collait à eux. . . .

(p. 15)

The narrator is generally disgusted by the daughter to the point of hating her, especially when she presents
herself to him in the manner described earlier: "Je dois maîtriser en moi le dégoût, la haine qui monte" (p. 58). At one point, he even sees her in the form of a gargoyle: "Sa tête, au bout de son cou rigide projeté en avant, fait penser à une tête de gargouille" (p. 210). He sees in her a mixture of fear and aggressiveness:

(... ) il y a quelque chose d'obstiné et d'avidé, quelque chose d'aveugle et d'implacable dans la façon dont elle avance dans la bonne direction, coupe de biais les chaussées, son dos toujours rentré, comme menacé par-derrière d'un coup de pied, ses longues jambes maigres en avant.

(p. 34)

The narrator is aware that these qualities he discerns in her are conspicuously absent from her presentation of self in the presence of those people whose approval she seeks: "Avec eux rien de mordant, d'agressif, ne perce jamais dans son accent" (p. 60).

Through the intervention of the narrator, we are made aware of the attitudes of various others toward the daughter. The psychiatrist, whom the narrator consults for help with his obsessions, tells him that the father and daughter are merely neurotics: "'Vos gens sont de grands nerveux'" (p. 75). Certain acquaintances tell the narrator one thing to his face—"'Oui, elle semble tenir beaucoup à l'affection des gens' ( ...)" (p. 16)—and only voice their real opinion when they think that he is not
around: "'Et elle, c'est une maniaque. Elle n'est pas responsable. Moi je dis qu'elle est plutôt à plaindre, la pauvre fille!'" (p. 17). Others see father and daughter as anti-social eccentrics (p. 22).

From the father's point of view, his daughter is a parasite who drains him both financially and emotionally: "La parasite. La sangsue. Collée à lui, sans s'arracher de lui un seul instant, elle n'a cessé d'aspirer avec avidité tout ce qui sortait de lui" (p. 193). It is suggested that he has always felt something painful about her mere presence, even when she was still an infant (pp. 63-64). As a self-protective reaction, the father assumes a mask in her presence, a self-conscious expression intended to keep her at a distance (p. 63). He attributes to her, what he considers, a major character flaw, namely, offhandedness: "La Désinvolture . . . c'est ainsi, je pense, qu'il doit s'appeler . . . la Désinvolture. . . ce crime qu'ils n'ont jamais osé nommer. . . ." (p. 190). The father and daughter confront each other in terms of their social roles of Father and Daughter, trying to exact the obligations each feels the other owes. The image of two enormous dung beetles grappling with each other suggests the rigidity of the roles upon which their relationship is based:

Ils s'arc-boutent front contre front, lourds, maladroits, enfoncés dans leurs
carapaces rigides, leurs épaisse armures
--deux insectes géants, deux énormes
bousiers. . . .

(p. 184)

The same image is used earlier by the narrator in a
discussion on the subject of father and daughter with a
friend (p. 48).

The father is the last member of the triad of
central characters in Portrait d'un Inconnu. Generally
speaking, he considers himself an old man, knowledgeable
and wise, vaguely aware of his fear of dying, and a victim
of his daughter's relentless desire for money. Despite
his negative feelings and his hostility toward his
daughter, he does not wish to sever the ties between them.
He likes to feel self-contained, secure, and in control of
his personal world:

Au gré de son caprice, de son humeur,
suivant que va à tel ou tel d'entre eux sa
préférence du moment, le spectacle se
modifie. Tout change. Au gré de son
caprice. Le monde, docile, s'élargit à
l'infini ou au contraire se contracte;
devient étroit et sombre, ou immense et
transparent. A son gré, les couleurs
changent. Rien n'est fixe. Rien ne
s'impose à lui. Sous son impulsion, comme
la toile légère ou se balance l'araignée,
le monde oscille et tremble.

(p. 118)

The image of the spider plays an important part in
the narrator's thoughts about the father. The narrator
associates certain qualities with the spider: quietly
waiting for its prey, dominating the area covered by its web, living in a solitary fashion. On two separate occasions the narrator thinks of the father as "une grosse araignée" (p. 35 and p. 116). This conception of the father directs the narrator's general method of dealing with him: "Avec lui, il faut toujours être sur le qui-vive, n'avancer qu'avec la plus extrême prudence, en se retournant à chaque pas" (p. 120).

Throughout the novel, we see the father in a variety of situations in which he conducts himself a bit differently each time. In other words, we see him playing different social roles. While visiting an old friend of his, an elderly widow living in a suburb of Paris, he plays the part of the crusty but basically good-natured old man:

Je la vois qui se tourne vers lui: il est évident qu'elle ne se rend compte de rien, il n'est rien d'autre à ses yeux qu'un vieil ami bien brave sous ses airs bourrus, "le bourru bienfaisant": elle est si innocente, si crédule qu'elle l'a toujours accepté dans ce rôle qu'il a choisi de jouer auprès d'elle et de son mari (...) (p. 109)

In another scene, we find him in the company of some male friends who are discussing business and politics. This particular social affiliation is based on an important reference group for his self-concept:

Un courant s'établit, délicieux. Le cercle des hommes, solide, rassurant, se resserre autour de lui. Bien d'aplomb sur ses pieds
The fact that the father likes things to be uncomplicated and straightforward is reflected in his penchant for reading school books (pp. 114-115). In another scene, the old man teases a timid waitress, and the narrator informs us that it is his custom to select timid people for his victims: "Ce sont les timides surtout qu'il choisit, je l'ai remarqué, les délicates, les sensitives qui tressaillent, rougissent plus vite que les autres (...)" (p. 137).

The father is adept at role-playing and does not feel any strain in playing these different parts, he becomes what the situation requires:

Et lui, tandis qu'elle lui secoue la main, il sent que malgré lui il se fait semblable à cette image, il la réflète fidèlement: c'est cette extrême sensibilité à l'impression que les autres ont de lui, cette aptitude à reproduire comme une glace l'image que les gens lui renvoient de lui, qui lui donne toujours la sensation de jouer avec tous la comédie, de n'être jamais "lui-même": "un trait, dirait mon spécialiste, fréquent chez les nerveux." pp.(111-112)

There is one situation in which his role-playing tends to encounter difficulties: the subject of his daughter.
Like Alain's father in *Le Planétarium*, the old man of *Portrait d'un Inconnu* reacts painfully to the mention of his offspring's name. In each case, the child is a painful part of the self-concept. The elderly widow touches a sensitive nerve in the father when she talks to him about his daughter:

Il lui semble que la vieille promène les mains sur ses plaies, il a envie de crier, mais elle ne voit rien... Elle prononce innocemment les paroles consacrées: "Ils sont durs avec vous..."

The attribution that he is treated harshly by his daughter and others clashes with his confident self-image. This thought resurfaces in his mind later on and he ponders its painful implications (pp. 127-128).

The others, primarily women who defend the daughter, maintain a certain stereotyped image of the father: "'C'est un vieil égoiste, disent-elles, je l'ai toujours dit, un égoiste et un grippe-sous, des gens comme ça ne devraient pas avoir le droit de mettre au monde des enfants!'" (p. 17). The father also has his supporters: these are the men who make him feel respectable and practical:

Il n'est pas seul, lui non plus, il a, comme elle, sa cohorte protectrice, sa vieille garde (...) ses vieux amis (...) Sous leur regard placide, ce regard si assuré toujours un peu indifférent, il lui semble qu'il se remplit tout entier d'une matière
consistante qui le rend compact et lourd, bien stable, "un Monsieur," lui aussi, protégé, respectable, enfonce fortement, fiché comme un coin dans l'univers solidement construit qu'ils habitent.

(pp. 178-179)

The old man is as ambivalent about his daughter as she is about him. His thoughts turn to her when he awakens alone and anguish-ridden in the middle of the night, and he seems to experience a certain satisfaction when he finds that—as he suspected—she has stolen some soap from him. It seems that even this painful relationship is preferable to nothing. His attitude on this is reflected in what he says to the narrator toward the end of the novel: "'Ma foi, j'ai fait ce que j'ai pu, je l'ai élevée comme je pouvais, ça n'a pas été toujours facile, c'est dur pour un homme seul'" (p. 235). These words are ironic in that they mirror a sentence uttered by the daughter earlier in the novel: "'C'est dur pour une femme seule, vous savez'" (p. 57). Rather than consciously acknowledge his sense of loss, the old man lapses into a series of clichés intended to reassure himself that all is as it should be (p. 236). We are left with the impression that his self-concept will now center upon being a proper father-in-law, elderly sage, and resigned older person.

The relationships described above are, of course, refracted through the consciousness of the narrator. The
question of reliability naturally comes to mind. Since Nathalie Sarraute does not make a point of indicating the narrator's unreliability, this writer has given all the information provided about these characters equal consideration. The relationships described in Portrait d'un Inconnu are complicated, intriguing, and convincing.

In Martereau, there are six characters of significance: the young narrator, his uncle, aunt, their teenage daughter, Martereau, and the latter's wife. The social-psychological presentation of these characters' attitudes, self-concepts, and mutual relationships makes for intriguing reading. The reader is less inclined to doubt the narrator's reliability since most of the scenes narrated take place in his presence. The hypothetical scenes are usually presented as such. In this writer's opinion, the limitations which a first-person narrator placed on the social-psychological material Nathalie Sarraute wished to present, were largely responsible for what appears to be a permanent shift to the third-person stream-of-consciousness point of view in her subsequent novels.

In Martereau the reader encounters a most subtle pattern of interpersonal relationships involving the six aforementioned characters. The convalescent nephew-narrator is the link between the family triad and the dyad
of M. and Mme Martereau. The novel captures the invisible world of attitudes and tropisms which link these characters together. The procedure used in discussing the characters of the previous novel will be repeated here: each character will be studied in his social-psychological dimensions, namely, in terms of his self-concept, social roles, attitudes, and relationships.

The self-concept of the nephew is an amalgam of conflicting attitudes. He vacillates between seeing himself as legitimately ill, and therefore justifiably dependent on his uncle for financial support, and, on the other hand, feeling guilty and experiencing low self-esteem because of his inability to support himself. On one occasion thoughts such as these run through his mind: "(... je ne la gagne pas, moi, ma vie, et j'en souffre (...) je suis malade (...))" (p. 24). Elsewhere he states: "Il me semble quand je tressaille que c'est moi le coupable; moi la brèbis galeuse, la bête puante qui ferait (...) se détourner avec dégoût tous les braves gens (...)" (p. 84). He acknowledges to himself his low self-esteem and his tendency to denigrate himself: "(...) s'il fallait choisir, je crois bien, que je serais plutôt enclin à prendre parti pour eux contre moi" (p. 83). The narrator admits to being excessively self-effacing, an attribute which, he concludes, arouses people's suspicion: "Mon excès même d'effacement doit éveiller parfois au début
leur méfiance" (p. 8). At the same time, he is aware of being excessively suspicious, as he tells us repeatedly: "Mon excès de méfiance doit m'induire parfois en erreur" (p. 149); and elsewhere: "(...), je l'accuse peut-être à tort, je suis si soupçonneux, ils me le disent souvent (...)" (pp. 80-81). The narrator leads a predominantly passive life, free from the pressures of serious decision-making. This is to his advantage inasmuch as he is unable to typify others in any way whatsoever, and so cannot arrive at a firm basis for his actions toward them:

C'est là pour moi, avec eux, le pire: cette impossibilité de prendre parti en face d'eux. De les aimer pour de bon ou les haïr. De leur passer un carcan autour du cou, de leur coller un numéro sur la poitrine pour bien savoir à quoi m'en tenir. Tout le monde (sinon, comment vivrait-on?) y parvient sans effort, avec une rapidité, une sûreté qui chaque fois me confond. (p. 49)

The narrator sees himself primarily as the victim of his uncle's family; he is unable to defend himself against their attacks. They can treat him howsoever they wish: "(...), je suis un jardin public livré à la foule le dimanche, le bois un jour férié. Pas de pancartes. Aucun gardien. Rien avec quoi on doive compter" (p. 28). Even his time is not his own: "Mon temps n'a pas de murs, de piquants. Mon temps est un lieu de passage ouvert à tous les vents . . ." (p. 57). The narrator enjoys those rare moments of bliss when he feels perfectly secure with the family, such
as the scene when they are returning from an excursion to the country in the family car (p. 110). Most of the time, however, the members of the family are engaged in a continuous kind of psychological warfare. His relationship with his uncle is most problematical.

The practical, self-made man has a basically negative opinion of his nephew, while demanding that the latter show his unswerving allegiance to him: "(...) il faut rester collé à mon oncle, me serrer tout contre lui (...)" (p. 127). The narrator's uncle seems to classify his nephew with the latter's parents: an incompetent mother and an alcoholic father. The narrator perceives these attitudes in the social stimuli coming from his uncle. The uncle is disappointed in his nephew; he had hoped he would take over his business:

(...) charmant, le neveu, "mon neveu," dans le temps il en était fier, il croyait qu'on en ferait quelque chose, il en parlait aux clients, aux concurrents: "mon neveu travaille avec moi, il va prendre ma succession. . ." mais je t'en fiche, ils ne sont bons à rien, toute la famille, des écoeurés, des fainéants. . . .

(p. 34)

He sees his nephew in terms of a reference group of losers. All of the nephew's social affiliations are dubious in his opinion. An interior designer associate of the narrator is unhesitatingly classified in the following manner:

"J'en ai connu des gens comme lui. . .ça ne donne jamais
rien plus tard. . . c'est un petit vaniteux, il a une susceptibilité d'écorché vif. . . " (p. 47). Some friends whom the nephew introduced to his uncle while the family was vacationing are summarily dismissed: "C'est toi qui me les as amenés. . . . C'est ta spécialité de t'acoquiner avec des gens comme ça. . . ." (p. 78). Even a former girlfriend of the narrator is not spared: "'Comment est-ce qu'ils l'appelaient? Un joli numéro aussi. . . ." (p. 79).

The nephew clearly admits his ulterior motive in introducing Martereau to the family: he hopes that his friendship with Martereau will effect a change in his uncle's attitudes toward him:

Je sais bien que même là mes mobiles ne sont pas si simples, si purs. Ils ne le sont jamais ici avec eux. C'est encore mon oncle cette fois qui provoque mes mouvements. Je veux le séduire, lui en imposer, lui montrer patte blanche. . . . lui prouver que je suis avec lui, comme lui, comme il prétend être, du bon côté, dans le monde des vrais hommes ( . . . ) (p. 123)

A large part of the drama in Martereau concerns the ups and downs of the relationship between these three characters.

The nephew summarizes his relationship with his uncle by calling it a kind of mutual game, tacitly agreed upon, and not to be taken too seriously:

Je respecte toujours ce qui est convenu tacitement entre nous, je joue le jeu
The narrator's relationship with his aunt is also based on a pre-arranged script and appropriate social roles. He is cast in the role of confidant and courtier in the interaction which occurs between them. Although the nephew seems as hypersensitive to the feelings and attitudes of others as the narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu, he appears to be more adept at impression management than his older counterpart:

J'observe scrupuleusement les règles du jeu. Je me tiens dans la position voulue. Je la regarde sans broncher même dans ces moments où l'on a un peu honte, un peu chaud, et où l'on détoure les yeux malgré soi pour qu'ils ne s'aperçoivent pas qu'on voit; même dans ces moments-là je la regarde bien droit d'un regard innocent et approuveur. (p. 7)

In some respects, this relationship resembles that of Alain Guimiez and Germaine Lemaire in Le Planétarium. The young man, like a well-trained member of a dance company, steps aside in order to allow the prima ballerina to occupy the center of the stage (p. 9). The narrator's aunt demands a better performance from her nephew than her husband generally requires from the young man (pp. 15-16). The narrator suspects that his aunt views him with condescension, but he is reluctant to admit this to himself:

"Il ne peut pas y avoir chez elle à mon égard un pareil
sentiment de condescendance" (p. 20). At one point it is clear that his aunt is implying that he is a parasite because he does not earn his own living (p. 23). The aunt and her daughter form a dyad leaving the nephew as an isolate inasmuch as he is also excluded by his uncle who disdainfully groups the three others together by the special connotation he gives to the pronoun "vous" (pp. 151-152).

Given the circumstances described above, it is understandable that the narrator might look elsewhere for someone to emulate; and so, he turns to Martereau. The latter's attitudes toward the narrator need not detain us very long since he generally displays concern and friendliness toward the young man. Martereau usually greets him in the same courteous manner: "Alors sa poignée de main forte et cordiale, sa tape sur l'épaule: 'Et comment va, jeune homme?' opèrent sur moi un effet immédiat" (p. 91). Martereau reassures him that he is correct in looking after his health, that he is reasonable:

"Mais vous êtes raisonnable, je le sais."
Raisonnable--c'est vrai. C'est ce que je suis. Je me soigne. C'est pour ma santé que je suis ici, pour des raisons évidentes de santé, sur le conseil des médecins que je mène cette vie un peu ouatée, au ralenti, que j'ai accepté leur hospitalité.  
(p. 93)

Martereau provides the nephew with the necessary
confirmation of his identity as a person legitimately ill and doing his best to regain his health. Martereau also allays the narrator's suspicions concerning his aunt and uncle: they are truly concerned about their nephew's happiness and well-being (p. 94).

The narrator is generally convinced that Martereau's real attitudes are being given outward expression. On the other hand, the narrator is rather suspicious to begin with, and finds, as the novel progresses, that Martereau's sincere concern for him may only be superficial. There is one scene in particular which occasions all manner of doubts and uncertainties in the mind of the narrator. The latter has the impression that Martereau pretends not to see him when the two of them are crossing a street from opposite directions (pp. 176-177). Toward the end of the novel, he sees a rather unpleasant picture of himself, as well as his family, in Martereau's reactions to what he says: "(…) un propre à rien, de la graine de raté, (…) l'image que je vois en lui me fascine, je me penche . . .notre image à tous ici: malsains, frivoles, désœuvrés, gâtés. . ." (p. 284). The mystery is never resolved, however, and the novel ends with Martereau and the narrator conversing in a congenial manner (pp. 280-291).

The narrator's uncle's self-concept can be pieced
together from what he actually says as well as from the narrator's shrewd speculations on that subject. The uncle is rather clear about his identity and reference groups. He sees himself as an experimenter: "(...) eh bien, en fin de compte, c'est la seule chose qui ait compté pour moi dans l'existence, (...) expérimenter. . ." (p. 128); and, at the same time, he considers himself a success because he learned the value of pursuing a single interest: "'Taper toujours sur le même clou. Il n'y a que ça'" (p. 129). He sees himself as a hard worker dedicated to doing his best (p. 47). He clearly distinguishes himself from the group he calls the "good-for-nothings," a reference group he employs to identify his nephew:

Les rêveurs, les ratés qui marchent dans les prairies humant l'odeur des fleurs, composant des herbiers, attirant des papillons... les imbéciles, les bons à rien à la place de qui les gens comme lui doivent réfléchir, lutter, et qui se permettent de dédaigner--pensez donc, c'est si salissant--l'univers solide et dur où de vrais hommes se battent pour eux, pour les incapables, les paresseux, les petits énervés, les dégoutés, les "esthètes"... (p. 41)

Despite the uncle's insistence on practicality, the nephew senses that he feels somewhat inferior to his wife, particularly with respect to her refined behavior. The latter attitude is expressed in one version of a scene in which the family goes out to dinner: "(...) il est indigne, il le sait bien, si maladroit, grossier... il se
sent un peu inquiet, perdu, tout avec elles [la mère et sa fille] est si impondérable, insaisissable (...)" (p. 52). Another version of the same scene shows him feeling hostile and contemptuous toward them (p. 32). This undercurrent of resentment toward those others who seem to be more sensitive than himself also seems to figure into his self-concept.

The narrator has a generally ambivalent attitude toward his uncle: he is repelled by what he considers to be his childish and brutal simplicity of mind, and, on the other hand, he finds some things about him admirable. The nephew is aware of a tendency to undermine his uncle:

Moi je cherche à l'affaiblir, à le démoli, à lui faire prendre conscience de sa brutalité, de sa simplicité enfantine, à l'attirer dans les terrains bourbeux qu'il a en horreur--il sait bien qu'il finirait par s'y enliser--dans ce qu'il appelle ma "psychologie". . . . (p. 207)

At the same time, the nephew cannot avoid admiring his uncle's ability to focus in on people's weaknesses, thanks to his instinct for facts: "J'admire la sûreté de ses coups" (p. 168); and elsewhere: "Tous ses coups m'émerveillent par leur sûreté" (p. 28). In one scene, the narrator confides to Martereau that he considers his uncle to be somewhat misanthropic, as a result of having had a hard life, but he does not consider him a
fondamentally bad man (p. 137). This may not reflect his real attitudes inasmuch as he is eager to ferret out Martereau's opinion of his uncle.

The narrator's aunt and uncle have a curiously inharmonious relationship: when one of them shows signs of elation, the other acts depressed:

Il y a entre eux un système de compensation: celui des vases communicants. Quand dans l'un le niveau descend, aussitôt dans l'autre on le voit qui monte. Si lui paraît déprimé, elle aussitôt devient toute guillerette et animée, bavarde avec nous, parade. Lui alors se renfrogne de plus en plus (...)
(p. 144)

It seems that this pattern applies to the other members of the family as well (p. 167). The narrator's aunt may speak flatteringly of her husband--"'Il est toujours très bien dans les grandes occasions'" (p. 17)--but her customary attitude toward him is one of reserve and coldness, as in this scene in which the narrator's uncle asks his wife where she would like to go for dinner:

D'un mouvement à peine perceptible (mais qu'il perçoit aussitôt: c'est comme un souffle froid, une froide et pâle irradiation qui émane d'elle, du ton un peu trop neutre sur lequel elle lui répond, quand il demande où on ira. ..."je ne sais pas, où tu voudras." ...de son silence ...du geste avec lequel elle relève son manteau en montant devant lui dans la voiture ...), elle l'écarte, elle le tient à distance, elle creuse un vide entre eux qu'il veut combler, elle étend un désert glacé qu'il veut à tout prix franchir, il s'agite, se démène, se tend, la danse commence. Les
rôles—sans que ni lui ni elle n'y
puissent plus rien changer—sont distribués
entre eux pour la soirée.
(p. 56)

The narrator is unsure of Martereau's attitudes
toward his uncle. Since Martereau presents himself as the
very essence of bourgeois respectability, much of what he
says comes out in the form of polite clichés: "Mais
j'aime beaucoup le voir, moi aussi, il est très intéressant,
j'aime parler avec lui. Il a conservé toute la fougue de
la jeunesse. C'est bien rare. Et avec ça, il a de
l'expérience!" (pp. 137-138). The narrator imagines a
scene in which his uncle paid a visit to Martereau and his
wife, a scene at which the narrator was not present.
Martereau senses that the narrator's uncle is somewhat
bothered at having to spend an evening with them, and
consequently feels resentful (p. 222). This little scene
may have instigated all of the problems concerning
Martereau's real intentions in not providing a receipt for
the money he received to buy the house. The scene occurs
as a flashback reconstructed in the nephew's imagination.
The economic and social barriers between Martereau and the
narrator's uncle would seem to preclude the possibility of
any real friendship. Martereau never fully articulates
his resentment. Nathalie Sarraute, it seems, wishes to
preserve this character's mystery.
The narrator's aunt sees herself as a lady of refined tastes, artistic, and once a part of a coterie of artists (p. 10). She likes to think of herself as calm, controlled and self-assured: "Moi je ne me mettrais pas martel en tête" (p. 18). She also likes to consider herself a spontaneous and unconfined person, free to indulge her whims. The narrator takes advantage of this insight into her self-concept when he attempts to persuade her to come along with him and her husband to see a house for sale in the country (p. 108).

The narrator generally considers his aunt to be pretentious: "Elle le sent sûrement, la dame à la licorne, la petite fée, quand elle se pavane devant moi sans frein" (p. 27). He considers her childish: "(...) l'image enfantine que ses coups de crayon grossiers ont fait surgir (...)" (p. 22). He sees her as tenacious, like a dog on the lookout (p. 16), and as persistent and stubborn as an ant re-building its anthill (p. 130). He knows that she is hard to fool: "(...) rien ne lui échappe, elle voit tout (...)" (p. 16). He also knows that she is proud and cannot tolerate embarrassment, especially in the presence of those whom she considers her inferiors (p. 146). The narrator is convinced that neither she nor her husband would openly admit that destructive games are continually played out in the family.
circle (pp. 24-25). Although the young man admires his aunt's ability to stand up against his uncle, he also fears her cold-blooded tactics (p. 33).

The narrator correctly senses his uncle's basic affection for his wife and his somewhat clumsy efforts to please her: "(...) il l'aime, au fond c'est cela, il l'a toujours aimée, rien d'autre n'a vraiment compté (...)" (p. 55). The narrator detects his uncle's pleasure when his wife is agreeable (p. 109), as well as his frustration and disappointment when she rebuffs him (p. 147). The narrator's uncle also gives indications of another set of attitudes toward his wife and daughter. He appears to classify them in a reference group of mindless and frivolous females: "Assis en face d'elles, il les observe. . .des perruches. . .des pies voraces. . . leur cerveau pèse moins, c'est connu, on a raison de les garder enfermées dans des harems (...)" (p. 29). In the relationship between husband and wife, it is fundamentally clear, however, that the wife has the upper hand.

The narrator, thinking he has seen Martereau in the company of his aunt (p. 251), imagines an amorous relationship between them. Martereau, the nephew fancies, sees his aunt as a helpless and delicate little bird (p. 260). No clear indications are given which confirm or deny the nephew's fantasy.
The narrator's young cousin is an ally of her mother in the continuous family warfare. There are virtually no indications of this minor character's self-concept. In one scene, in which the narrator imagines talking with her about the day they handed the money over to Martereau, there are indications that she resents her parents and sees herself as a justifiably rebellious child: "'J'ai toujours envie de jeter par les fenêtres tout ce qu'ils me donnent. . .tout ce qu'ils ont. . .'" (p. 240). It is not unreasonable to assume that she truly feels this way, if one stops to consider her behavior throughout the novel. The narrator's aunt complains to him, at one point, about her daughter's sloppiness, lack of intellectual interests, and objectionable friends (p. 59). Once she detects the slightest satisfaction in his reaction, she proceeds to enumerate her daughter's virtues and undeveloped talents (p. 64). He later sees them together, chatting merrily as if nothing had happened (p. 73). It seems that the mother was piqued over the fact that the young lady was excluding her from her company. The aunt sees her daughter as a comrade: "(...) la mère, à mesure que la fille grandit, prend de plus en plus avec elle ces attitudes de camarade de pension (...)" (p. 30). The mother sees what her husband and nephew think of her daughter by carefully noting their reactions:
Elle veut voir par nos yeux (d'elle-même, toute seule, ce visage que sa fille a maintenant, elle ne le verrait pas—sans nous, elle ne verrait rien—ou même si elle le voyait, elle n'y ferait pas attention, n'y attacherait aucune importance, elle s'en moque au fond: le lien entre elles deux est trop fort, la fusion est trop grande. . . (…) [Elle] voit avec nos yeux ce que nous voyons: cette petite sotte minaudière, cette sainte nitouche. . . .

(pp. 153-154)

It is clear from the following what her father and cousin really think about her. The narrator recalls that his uncle once remarked that one need only look at the mother to see what the daughter would be like in twenty years (p. 29). It will be recalled that the uncle lumps them all together with his disdainful "vous" (p. 28 and pp. 151-152).

The central figure of the novel is the character of the title, Martereau himself. The pivotal question posed by the novel might be phrased as follows: Is Martereau through and through the simple and practical man he presents himself to be? The narrator, the reader's main source of information for all the characters, is unable to detect any incongruity between Martereau's presentation of self and the inner man: "Pourtant j'ai beau regarder, je ne surprends pas en Martereau le plus léger frémissement, rien, pas une ride" (p. 125). Martereau appears to be the picture of bourgeois respectability and conventionality. And yet, the affair of the country house arouses everyone's
suspicions concerning him. In the third of four variants of the same scene--Martereau and his wife after the uncle's visit during which Martereau consented to buy the house in his name (pp. 207-237)--the narrator imagines Martereau thinking of himself as a strawman, a front manipulated by others:

Cette rougeur, cette chaleur, ce sont les signes avant-coureurs, l'éclair qui précède le grondement du tonnerre, presque aussitôt, dans un fracas assourdissant, la foudre s'abat: un homme de paille: c'est cela. Il reste cloué sur place, pétifié, calciné: un homme de paille. (...) Inutile, il n'y a rien à faire. ... c'est là, ça brille (...) comme le diamant au milieu de sa gangue, dur et pur, impossible à rayer: un homme de paille. ... .

(pp. 223-224)

The idea that this typification of himself motivated the uncle's request is suggested to Martereau by his wife's reactions after the uncle has left. Once again, Martereau may have actually felt this way, or this may merely be the product of the narrator's overactive imagination. Needless to say, the question is still unanswered at the end of the novel.

What is clear, however, is the range of attitudes felt toward Martereau by the other characters. The narrator himself, presumably an adolescent, indulges in a kind of hero worship with respect to Martereau. In his daydreams he sees him living a simple and harmonious life in Holland, living the life of a dignified aristocrat in
England, as an admiral and a general; he imagines Martereau in each stage of his life, playing every role to perfection (pp. 87-90). His adulation of Martereau borders on an obsession: "Je le vois. Je ne me lasse pas de le regarder: il est le spectacle le plus merveilleux, le plus apaisant pour moi et le plus stimulant qui soit. Ses moindres mouvements me fascinent" (pp. 95-96). It is evident that much of the narrator's admiration for Martereau stems from the former's desire for the company of a forthright and supportive adult. Martereau is the perfect foil, it would seem, to the murky psychological atmosphere which prevails at the narrator's home: "C'est son immobilité, justement qui les maintient. Sa dureté qui les rend durs" (p. 87). For the narrator, Martereau represents the possibility of stability and security: "Le temps lui-même est pris, retenu dans le réseau léger que tracent ses gestes. La certitude, la sécurité se trouvent là" (p. 96). When the narrator is in the presence of Martereau he feels like a child from the slums who, while growing up amid shouts and beatings, finds peace at Sunday school (pp. 96-97). The narrator suspects that Martereau makes a small effort to conform to the young man's idealization of him:

Bien sûr, il n'est peut-être pas exactement tel qu'il m'apparaît en ce moment, il améliore probablement en ma présence très légèrement sa ligne, il se donne peut-être
In the course of the novel, the narrator begins to doubt that Martereau is everything he seems to be. The young man suspects that Martereau may have been manipulating him all along (p. 180). The nephew never really finds out whether or not Martereau is a master performer of social roles. The reader is inclined to suspect that Martereau has all outward expressions of his phenomenal self under control, and that he has succeeded in duping the narrator, but this remains only a conjecture, in the end. Much of the fascination of Nathalie Sarraute's novel resides in the enigma that is Martereau.

It was mentioned earlier that one of the narrator's motives in cultivating Martereau's friendship was a desire to better his relationship with his uncle. This wish of the narrator is not fulfilled:

Mais je suis en train, je crois, de prendre mes désirs pour des réalités, je divague. . . . Martereau lui-même n'est pas assez fort pour nous maintenir quand nous sommes ensemble, mon oncle et moi. (p. 124)

The reason for this apparent failure lies in the complex of attitudes which the narrator's uncle holds with regard to Martereau. The narrator's uncle, a successful man, considers Martereau a failure, a Jack-of-all-trades who
never succeeded at anything (p. 128). There are numerous indications of the uncle's contempt for Martereau throughout the novel; however, it isn't until very late in the novel that this character gives the narrator his candid opinion of Martereau:

"Mais moi il y a longtemps que je l'ai jugé, je le connais depuis longtemps, votre Martereau, je l'avais un peu perdu de vue, mais je sais, les gens ne changent pas: c'est un touche-à-tout, il a essayé tous les métiers...ça a toujours craqué, il y a eu toujours quelque chose qui clochait...c'est un paresseux, au fond, un faible..."

(p. 246)

The narrator and his uncle seem to reach a temporary truce when they both agree that Martereau is assuredly dishonest: "Aucun doute n'est possible. Martereau est un filou" (p. 244). However, once Martereau has sent the uncle a letter announcing the date when he will relinquish the house, the uncle accuses his nephew of instigating the whole unpleasant affair: "'Tu avais fini par me monter la tête, à moi aussi. J'ai vexé ce brave bougre pour rien...'" (p. 278).

The relationship between Martereau and his wife is given some consideration by the author. They present themselves to the narrator in a highly conventional manner:

Ils se tiennent tous deux devant moi, dossés à la porte. Il a son bras autour
des épaules de sa femme, elle s'appuie contre lui tendrement. Beau couple: elle un peu plus petite, menue, lui grand et fort, teint toujours frais, belles rides nettes, épais cheveux gris. Ils se regardent dans les yeux comme font les amoureux sur les cartes postales en couleurs, lui la tête inclinée vers elle, elle le visage levé vers lui. . . .

(p. 186)

It seems that Martereau and his wife would like the narrator to consider them the very picture of marital bliss. They posed for him in a similar fashion on an earlier occasion (p. 98). The narrator senses a certain false-ness in this image presented to him; the performance is somehow flawed. He experiences embarrassment and attributes this cluster of tropisms in himself to his feeling their sense of shame at not really being what they pretend to be (p. 188). It is, perhaps, this reaction in himself which gives rise to the four hypothetical scenes, mentioned earlier, in which the real attitudes of Martereau and his wife toward each other are explored. The reader is given a different view of Mme Martereau: "Elle a son air faussement résigné, trop doux: la pauvre femme dans défense entre les mains d'une brute. . . il sait qu'elle se voit ainsi" (p. 235). She sees herself as a long-suffering woman, and Martereau notes that she seems to take delight in this identity. We are given to believe that M. and Mme Martereau communicate in a private code in which they make negative attributions about each other:
Martereau feels that he is being classified by her as extravagant and irresponsible; Mme Martereau becomes a kill-joy and a spoil-sport in the eyes of her husband (pp. 209-211). In effect, these four scenes portray the disagreeable reality of their ostensibly harmonious marital relationship.

The relationships, attitudes, and identities presented in Martereau can only be outlined in a presentation such as this. The continuous flow of social stimuli expressing all the nuances of these attitudes and the feeling reactions or tropisms compose the fabric of this complex and elusive novel. More than any other novel by Nathalie Sarraute, Martereau is most suggestive of the writings of Marcel Proust in its delicate exploration of the shadowy region between illusion and reality in interpersonal experience.

Nathalie Sarraute's fourth work of prose fiction, Le Planétarium, is without doubt her most ambitious effort in the social-psychological presentation of character. There are no less than seven important characters: Alain Guimiez and his wife Gisèle, the latter's parents, Alain's father (Pierre), the latter's sister (Tante Berthe), and the well-known authoress, Germaine Lemaire. Since there is no narrator—the third person stream-of-consciousness point of view is used—the inner thoughts and tropisms of each of these characters are
presented directly. The constant shifting of perspectives provides the reader with a rather dizzying view of this social microcosm. In this discussion of Le Planétarium, the family members will be considered first, then Germaine Lemaire.

Alain Guimiez is the central character in Le Planétarium; he is the link between the two social systems of the microcosm suggested by the title: the world of the family and the literary circle of Germaine Lemaire. Alain's sense of identity is caught between these two reference groups. To Germaine Lemaire he presents himself as the victim of a bourgeois family: "Eh bien oui, je me suis laissé dévoré. Détruire par n'importe quoi. Toute la famille..." (p. 101). He thinks that his family will embarrass him in the eyes of his idol and cause him to be rejected by her. This is apparent in the bookstore scene, discussed in Chapter II (P., p. 146), as well as in the scene in which the famous writer is visiting Alain. The latter's apprehensions center about the possibility that his wife, Gisèle, will come in at an inopportune moment:

Il la sentira collée, soudée à lui comme un frère siamois, il va doubler de volume, former avec elle et étaler devant eux une masse lourde, énorme dont il ne pourra pas diriger les mouvements, dans laquelle ils pourront à leur aise planter leurs regards, leurs dards... . . .

(p. 213)
Alain prides himself on his sensitivity and intuition (p. 145), but he reminds the reader of the narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu because of his difficulty with impression management: he is unable to disguise his reactions. The drama of Alain's struggle for self-definition involves each of the other characters.

Gisèle's aspirations for Alain include a professorship at the Collège de France, but Alain rejects this identity (p. 79). She considers Alain charming like his father, but others do not concur with her (p. 136). Gisèle is proud of Alain's high aspirations while being vulnerable to doubts occasioned in her by the typifications of Alain made by others (pp. 80-81). These are unbearable to her because they separate her from Alain (p. 81). Gisèle feels that Alain has a pressing need to be reassured: "'Oui, vous le connaissez aussi bien que moi. Vous savez comme il a besoin d'être rassuré, soutenu..." (p. 143).

Gisèle's parents incarnate the practical, down-to-earth values which Alain finds so stultifying. These values take concrete form in a pair of conventional leather armchairs which Gisèle's mother would like to give to the young couple. Objects play an important part in the self-concepts of characters in Le Planétarium. Alain would like to have a Louis XV "bergère" instead of the leather armchairs; the antique chair is important for his
identity as a refined and esthetically sensitive person. Gisèle's mother is critical of Alain's manner of living and would prefer that he have a different identity: "'Un homme à d'autres chats à fouetter, il se moque de ces choses-là, des bergères Louis XV, des fauteuils....'") (p. 62). The young man's mother-in-law typifies him as a member of an eccentric family. This is the usual framework in which she sees him. In one scene she suggests that he takes after his aunt, Tante Berthe, a character she considers an oddball: "Mais, dites-moi, c'est une idée fixe chez vous aussi, ça vous passionne... elle vous fascine, votre tante. Vous la comprenez trop bien. Vous avez de qui tenir, au fond... Je m'en étais toujours doutée..." (p. 41). In a later scene she muses to herself that Alain's family is "cette famille de fous" (p. 46). Nathalie Sarraute does not provide the reader with much information concerning Gisèle's father's attitudes toward his son-in-law. There is one scene, however, in which the older man expresses a negative attitude about Alain: he is a silly gossip (p. 32).

Alain's father and the latter's sister were largely responsible for his upbringing; it seems that the elder Guimiez's wife died when Alain was still a small child. A struggle ensued between father and sister over the socialization of Alain. Let us first consider what Pierre (Alain's father) thinks of him.
Pierre feels that his son is not very manly and lacks self-confidence: "C'est un grand timide, Alain, un anxieux. . ." (p. 143). He would like his son to show initiative, and he takes pleasure in any indication of the latter. In a scene in which Tante Berthe is complaining to her brother about Alain's threats to have her removed from the apartment she is reluctant to give up, Pierre remarks: "'Ah, sacré Alain, va, qu'est-ce qu'il a encore fait?'" (p. 252). The message is not misunderstood by Tante Berthe: "Elle sait, elle reconnaît aussitôt ce qu'il regarde en lui-même avec ce sourire fat, le film qu'il est en train de projeter pour lui tout seul sur son écran intérieur" (p. 252).

Tante Berthe is an important character for Alain's self-concept. Although she is not an actual artist, her obsessive interest in interior decorating is art at one remove. Alain's possession of her apartment—-at the end of the novel—-suggests an identification of an esthetic kind. Alain is not merely being sarcastic when he remarks to his mother-in-law: "'Mais bien sûr que je lui ressemble'" (p. 42).

Tante Berthe is accustomed to seeing Alain as her little darling; she doted on him since he was a child. She fears an end to their old relationship because of Alain's persistent efforts to acquire her apartment:
Le gamin nerveux, mais bon au fond, brave petit, affectueux, par lequel elle se laisse mordiller, forte, généreuse, indulgente, s'offrant au martèlement furieux de ses petits poings, l'enfant gâté, insupportable, coléreux, va se transformer en cela: un forban, un ingrat. (p. 249)

Tante Berthe ultimately moves to a smaller apartment by her own choice and, it seems, goes on feeling as she always had about Alain.

The most important character for Alain's identity is unquestionably Germaine Lemaire. Alain longs to be a successful writer, and thinks, wrongly in the final analysis, that his social affiliation with Germaine Lemaire and her coterie will assure him of that desired identity:

Ce nom, Germaine Lemaire, que sa voix calme prononce, est un scandale. C'est une explosion. Ce nom les ferait reculer. Il ferait disparaître de leurs visages ces coups d'œil continuels sur lui, si perspicaces, ces sourires entendus, le bout mobile du nez de la tante cesserait de s'agiter, se figerait, tendu, perplexe. . . . Mais quelques mots peuvent encore les faire bondir vers lui de nouveau, l'enserrer . . . .

(p. 89)

After visiting the famous Germaine Lemaire, Alain feels that he has fallen in status as he had feared all along. A telephone call interrupted their visit and Alain understood that he was not to remain much longer (p. 109). He had mustered up the courage to visit the writer immediately
after a quarrel with his wife, Gisèle (pp. 87-110). He returns home again unsure of his present status in the eyes of his idol. In a social-psychological sense, a crucial component of Alain's self-concept is still in question, namely whether or not he truly belongs to that bohemian group of young intellectuals. For the time being, he returns to the fold of the family.

Germaine Lemaire's attitudes toward Alain cause him to worry a great deal; they are also puzzling for the reader. Why does this well-known authoress concern herself with him at all? In a conversation with the writer in an art gallery, the day before the opening of a new exhibition, Alain comes close to discovering the answer: "'Je n'ai pas encore compris comment vous avez pu m'accorder un peu d'attention. Quand je pense à tous ces gens brillants, si doués, des génies...'" (pp. 160-161). They are interrupted by a group of her devotees and the conversation changes direction before Alain is able to learn what he wishes to know. He later imagines what he suspects she thinks of him:

(...) elle dirigera vers de vagues lointains un regard pensif:

"Alain Guimiez... Voyons... il y a bien longtemps que je l'ai perdu de vue. Qu'est-il devenu, au fait? Il ne manquait pas de talent. Il me semble qu'il préparait un travail, une thèse, sur quoi déjà... Oui, il était très timide,
timoré, toujours un peu excité, bizarre, un curieux garçon. . . ."
(p. 166)

It would seem that the older woman has an erotic interest in the young man, but that is not the main reason for her interest in him. She considers Alain a potential member of her coterie because of the effect he seems to have on her. She requires the negative attitudes reminiscent of spoiled children, which the members of her group express, to serve as a filter between herself and the outside world; she is reluctant to confront both the satisfaction and the insecurity she feels as a result of her fame (p. 198).

The attitudes of some of Germaine Lemaire's followers also concern Alain's identity in relation to the group. In the eyes of one of them he sees himself in the following manner:

En ce moment, son regard placide se pose sur ce qui frétille là, devant lui, ce petit Alain Guimiez. . . un bien gentil petit, insatisfait, inquiet. . . produit très pur de sa classe: jeune intellectuel bourgeois marié à une petite fille gâtée comme lui. Mais que faire à cela? Ils sont comme ils sont. Ni meilleurs ni pires que ne seraient d'autres à leur place. Ils n'y peuvent rien les pauvres petits. Ils sont pris dans l'engrenage. Ecureuils tournant dans leur cage dorée.

(p. 287)

The attitude of placid objectivity shown here is perhaps more disturbing to Alain than mere resentment could ever
be. Alain perceives another negative view of himself in the attitudes of another character, the courtesan to the queen, who was present at the time of his visit with Germaine Lemaire:

Il observe avec attention, assis là devant lui, ce pauvre innocent, cet ignorant... mais d'où sort-il? quel enfant gâté... n'a-t-il donc jamais eu besoin de lutter, ce doux rêveur loin des réalités, ce provincial peu au courant des usages de la ville, ce gros paysan balourd...

(p. 183)

The irony of Alain's relationship with both Germaine Lemaire and her group is apparent at the end of the novel; just at the moment when she has decided to accept him into her intimate circle, he has become disillusioned with her, and, it seems, will eventually sever his social affiliation with her (pp. 309-310).

Alain's wife Gisèle sees herself as essentially identified with her husband; it was he who put order into her world: "C'était curieux, cette sensation qu'elle avait souvent que sans lui, autrefois, le monde était un peu inerte, gris, informe, indifférent, qu'elle-même n'était rien qu'attente, suspens..." (p. 73). Hence, Gisèle vicariously experiences the ups and downs of Alain's struggle for self-definition. She knows that behind the facade they present to the world all is in flux:

Derrière [le paroi], eux deux seuls le savaient, tout était fluide, immense, sans
contours. Tout bougeait à chaque instant, changeait. Impossible de s'y reconnaître, de rien nommer, de rien classer. Impossible de rien juger.

(p. 70)

Gisèle's mother resents Alain's influence on her daughter; he made her aware of psychological subtleties which, previously, she had failed to notice (p. 52).

Gisèle apparently realizes her aversion for unpleasant realities. This is suggested by her recollection of an incident from her childhood. She recalls walking with her mother through a park when a cart containing sulphur started coming toward them along the path: "Elle a envie maintenant, comme cette fois là, de se cacher la tête pour ne pas voir (...)" (p. 67).

Gisèle is caught between her husband and her mother. The latter deflates her idealized image of Alain (pp. 61-65), while showing much affection for her daughter (p. 57). Alain shows his frightened wife how to reduce people to manageable proportions, not excluding Gisèle's parents:

Il était si drôle quand il saisissait les gens, les tenait dans le creux de sa main, les lui montrait, quand il les dessinait d'un trait si juste, si vif, il savait les rendre si ressemblants, il les imitait si bien, elle riait aux larmes... Personne n'y échappait. Pas même les parents.

(p. 71)

To Alain, Gisèle is a fox-cub, an image she finds pleasing:
Elle fait penser à un renardeau, elle ressemble à un jeune loup (...) la convoitise fait luire son oeil. ... c'est cela qu'il aime en elle, cette intensité, cette pureté, quand elle lui échappe tout à coup, toutes ses forces ramassées dans son regard—un petit animal sauvage qui guette sa proie. Il a envie de la capturer, de la tenir toute chaude et soyeuse dans ses mains. . . .

(p. 131)

To her father-in-law, however, she is a voracious and predatory bird (p. 140). There is also a negative aspect to Alain's thoughts concerning his wife. As indicated earlier, he fears that she will be an embarrassment to him (p. 213). Gisèle herself is afraid of appearing pretentious after having told her father that Alain was personally acquainted with Germaine Lemaire (p. 123).

To others, Alain and Gisèle are everything from potential assassins--"'C'est vraiment de la graine d'assassins, vos petits Guimiez. . . .'
(p. 242)--to a charming couple (p. 244).

Gisèle's mother sees herself in the role of the solicitous mother, as, for example, on the occasion when she offers the leather armchairs to her daughter and son-in-law: "Il faut être avec eux comme elle est avec tout le monde: quelqu'un de tout simple, de carré, de franc, ne pas avoir peur: ils accepteront bien ce qu'on leur donne, il ne manquerait plus que ça... et trop contents encore. . . la vie leur apprendra. . . (p. 49). She
considers herself a free-thinker, unconcerned with the opinions of others: "Elle se moque de ce que pensent les gens, elle n'a pas besoin d'être aimée, elle, elle n'a pas peur de froisser leur susceptibilité" (pp. 26-27). When faced with the thought that she may have been cowardly in not confronting her son-in-law when he slighted her, she concludes that it was her "kindness" which motivated her behavior: "Les gens abusent de sa bonté, de sa délicatesse, de ce sentiment d'égalité, de ces égards qu'elle a pour n'importe qui. Bonne. Trop bonne. Voilà ce que c'est" (p. 44).

Alain sees his mother-in-law in the role of a comic stereotype: the vaudeville mother-in-law, according to her:

Il maintient d'une main ferme ce masque qu'il lui a plaqué sur le visage dès le premier moment, ce masque grotesque et démodé de belle-mère de vaudeville, de vieille femme qui fourre son nez partout, tyran qui fait marcher sa fille et son gendre au doigt et à l'œil.

(p. 52)

Alain's view of her is a bit more complex than that. Although he considers her to be tactless--"Cette façon brutale qu'elle a de vous saisir par la peau du cou et de vous jeter là, au milieu de la piste, en spectacle aux gens. . ."(p. 23)--Alain also admires her ability to bounce back after a setback (p. 40). Alain identifies his mother-in-law with a reference group he calls "les
innocents, les inconscients, les instinctifs, ceux qui ne réfléchissent pas, n'hésitent jamais (...)” (p. 27).

Gisèle's father finds his wife embarrassing because of her undiplomatic behavior (p. 25). Gisèle's father is a minor character and the reader is not told what he thinks of himself in any detail. One item stands out, however: he considers himself to be especially normal inasmuch as he makes a clear distinction between himself and old cranks like Tante Berthe: "'Eh bien quoi? Qu'est-ce que vous avez à nous exciter? C'est une maniaque, voilà tout...’” (p. 32). Gisèle's mother finds her husband overly sensitive to what people will think of him (p. 26). She finds him boring: "Avec lui... mais si elle se laissait faire, on mourrait d'ennui” (p. 27). Gisèle is very affectionate toward her father, but his low opinion of Alain's family makes their relationship inharmonious (pp. 127-128). To Gisèle's dismay, Alain views her father as an old fogey: "C'est un pauvre gâteaux. Il fait plutôt pitié. Un vieux jaloux... Elle a mal. Il lui fait très mal” (p. 126).

Alain's Tante Berthe, an important character, is the psychological link between the family and the world of Germaine Lemaire, for the young nephew. Tante Berthe sees herself as a person of refined tastes: "Non, elle n'a pas besoin de s'inquiéter, c'est un ensemble d'un goût parfait,
sobre, élégant. . . " (p. 11). She identifies herself with an aristocratic and idealized past of old castles and cathedrals from which she derives inspiration for her decorating schemes (p. 9). She clearly distinguishes herself from the insensitive workers who deliver her problematic oval door: "(...) des abrutis, des brutes, pas un atome d'initiative, d'intérêt pour ce qu'ils font, pas la moindre trace de goût. . . " (p. 13). She knows that others typify her as a cranky old woman (p. 14), but this does not bother her very much. Occasionally the thought of a less exacting way of life occurs to her, but the idea soon makes her anxious (p. 20). She is also aware of being alone and neglected by others, leading a somewhat futile existence: "Tous ces efforts pour rien. . . . Ces espoirs . . . cette lutte. . . . Pour arriver à quoi? Dans l'attente de quoi? Pour qui, après tout? Personne ne vient la voir pendant des semaines, des mois. . . " (p. 20).

Tante Berthe's brother, Pierre, finds in her a relentless adversary on the issue of Alain's upbringing. He considers her comparable to a force of nature in her unremitting efforts to mold Alain in her own way: "Elle avait la puissance aveugle d'une force naturelle et lui luttait toujours, comme les Hollandais contre l'envahissement de l'eau (...)" (p. 168). Pierre accuses his sister of having made Alain into a spoiled brat: "'Tu l'as rendu comme il est, un enfant gâté, pourri!'"
(p. 258). He says that she yielded to his every request so that she would be liked (p. 236). Pierre sees his sister living the life of an affluent, suspicious old lady (p. 170).

There are a few brief references to Tante Berthe's late husband, Henri. It is apparent that their relationship was not particularly affectionate (pp. 248-249). She seemed to behave in a deferential manner toward him (p. 262). Her wealth is largely due to Henri's sound investments.

Alain's attitudes toward his aunt are somewhat confused and contradictory. There is a strong undercurrent of ambivalence in his relationship with her. Alain feels affection for her because of her generosity when he was growing up, and, at the same time, he feels intimidated by her. A friend supplied Alain with a typification of his aunt which made it possible for him to relate to her more effectively:

Aussitôt on accourt de tous côtés. Elle est cernée, capturée, toute une foule rassemblée autour d'elle la contemple, on la montre du doigt, voyez: elle est dure. Méprisante.

(p. 229)

Alain holds on to the words "hard" and "contemptuous" in order to keep her from making him feel remorseful over his efforts to obtain her apartment. Another typification of the old woman arouses in him a feeling of guilt and remorse, all the same: "Les gens âgés, il ne faut pas les bouger. C'est fragile, vous savez, les vieilles gens. C'est dangereux de les transplanter" (p. 133). Alain does not even remember who said this to him, but it affected him nevertheless.

As indicated earlier, Alain identifies with his aunt's cultivated esthetic taste and also aspires to a life of refinement and grace. Being anxious himself, he sympathizes with his aunt's anguish, thinly disguised by her concern for her damaged door (pp. 32-33). Alain's ambivalence, however, is reflected in comments about how comic his aunt can seem (p. 24). To Gisèle's father, Tante Berthe is nothing but a comic figure (pp. 23-25).

Alain's father, Pierre, is of primary interest in Le Planétarium because of the attitudes he has toward other characters, especially Alain, Tante Berthe, and Germaine Lemaire. Pierre seems to consider himself a handsome and charming fellow, according to Germaine Lemaire:
Elle s'était sentie soudain exposée, rossissant, frissonnant sous ce regard d'où coulait sur elle et la recouvrait une rancune froide, un mépris d'homme choyé, comblé depuis longtemps de grâce, de jeunesse, de beauté, un dégoût d'amateur délicat pour une femme. . .
(p. 200)

Alain's wife finds her father-in-law to be particularly appealing:

C'est une sorte de rayonnement qu'il dégage, comme un fluide, cela coule vers vous de ses yeux étroits, de son sourire de Bouddha, de son silence. . . elle ne sait pas ce que c'est. . . c'est son charme. . . il est charmant ( . . . )
(p. 136)

Pierre's son, Alain, with whom he naturally identifies, both as a parent and a male, is the sensitive part of his self-concept: "(...) cette partie tuméfiée, sensible de lui même ( . . . )" (p. 177). Tante Berthe is keenly aware of her brother's sensitivity on this point and uses it to irritate him. Anticipating her reaction to his appearance, Pierre begins to fear that his sister will consider him poorly attired (p. 170). His sister does in fact find him to be somewhat pitiable and compares him to their father:

Pauvre bougre. Il lui fait de la peine. C'est en s'amusant à prendre ce genre d'attitudes-là, déjà avec leur père autrefois, qu'il a fait de lui-même ce qu'il est: un pauvre homme qui s'est rétréci, qui s'est diminué, qui n'a pas exploité à fond ses possibilités. . .
(pp. 252-253)
At the same time, Berthe feels affection for her brother inasmuch as they are both elderly, alone, and part of the same family: "Elle voyait assis devant elle un vieil homme seul comme elle, abandonné, son frère, son vieux Pierrot. . ." (p. 218). Nathalie Sarraute presents in this relationship between brother and sister, as elsewhere in her works, those manifestations of ambivalence which appear in even the closest of human relationships.

If *Le Planétarium* had a narrator it would probably be Alain, inasmuch as he most closely resembles the narrators of the two earlier novels. Furthermore, if Alain were the narrator, Germaine Lemaire would probably seem as puzzling a character, in the eye of the reader, as Martereau was to the narrator of that novel. Because of the shifting point of view used in *Le Planétarium*, the reader receives an inside look into this very important character, and hence much of the mystery stands revealed.

Germaine Lemaire sees herself, above all, as a successful and worldly writer. This is the nucleus of her self-concept and determines the various social roles she plays: leader of a bohemian coterie, protector of neophyte writers, connoisseur of fine art, etc. We also know that, despite the fact that she is an older woman and never was really very attractive, she would also like to be considered beautiful. This is sharply reflected in the extreme
annoyance she felt toward Alain's father for the attitude she sensed lurking behind his behavior during their meeting in the bookstore (p. 150). At that time she had her presentation of self under control and did not openly reveal the true extent of her irritation and anger toward Alain and his father:

(...) mais elle n'avait pas l'air d'une femme, elle était quelque chose d'informe, d'innommable, un monstre affreux, toute décoiffée, quelques mèches tristes, elle le savait, pendait dans son cou, elle n'avait pas osé lever la main pour les rentrer sous son chapeau, elle s'était sentie toute molle, grise, graisseuse, comme mal lavée. . . le regard impitoyable traquait en elle une faute, la plus grave de toutes, un crime, un sacrilège. . . une sentence terrible la menaçait, elle avait essayé de se défendre avec les moyens dont elle disposait, mais la lutte était inégale, l'homme avait triomphé, elle s'était enfuie, blessée. . . . Et l'autre, à côté, le petit d'homme, avec ce regard de jeune animal que son père entraîne à guetter, à choisir sa proie, voyant tout, lui aussi. Elle les avait haïs. . . .

(p. 200)

At the time of this meeting, Alain, attentive to the subtle social stimuli and his own tropisms, recognized that there was something wrong: "Et elle aussitôt a son air d'impératrice, sa voix aiguë, son accent bizarre, une sorte d'imitation d'accents anglais, et ce ton qu'elle a aussi parfois, d'une politesse trop apuyée. . . ." (p. 153).

Germaine Lemaire's sensitivity on the issue of her appearance is reflected in another way as well. We are told by another character, one of her followers, that she
has few women friends, and also, that she resents hearing any other woman writer lauded in her presence, even Mme de La Fayette or Emily Brontë (p. 185). It is also interesting, in this vein, that Alain himself must make an effort to find beauty in Germaine Lemaire. He searches his mind for images from the art of strange and exotic cultures—the Aztecs and the Etruscans—in order to find some link between her appearance and what is deemed beautiful (pp. 94–95).

A really crucial moment occurs for Germaine Lemaire's identity as a writer when a newspaper article appears in which she is disparagingly compared to Madame Tussaud. The author of the article states that her characters have no more life in them than the wax figures of the famous woman (pp. 188–189). The idea that her work is flawed and lifeless is a shattering experience—at least temporarily—and leaves her with a tragic sense of isolation:


(p. 192)

Alain's admiration for Germaine Lemaire never blinds him to what he considers to be her faults. He admits to her that he admires her casualness, her offhandedness: "'J'adore cette désinvolture. . . .'" (p. 103). It seems likely that the exotic objects scattered about the writer's
apartment are meant to convey exactly that impression.

Alain really feels, however, that she is merely role-playing when she tries to appear nonchalant, and senses that she is in reality demanding, grasping, and possessive. While visiting Germaine Lemaire and speaking with her, Alain has the impression that an arm is reaching out to grasp him: "(...) il a l'impression tout à coup--c'est très rapide--qu'en elle un long bras avide aux doigts prenants se tend, il ne sait pas très bien, il n'a pas le temps de savoir comment il a décelé en elle ce mouvement..." (p. 102). After his visit, Alain tells his wife the following:

Mais pourtant... tu sais... à toi je dis tout... par en dessous, il y a par moments comme un espèce de malaise... tout d'un coup on se sent surveillé... on à l'impression, comment te dire, qu'il faut tout le temps lui donner... il y a quelque chose qu'elle exige tout le temps... . . .

(p. 113)

Alain hesitatingly confesses to Germaine Lemaire that he is afraid of boring her (p. 160). Had she been perceptive enough she would have detected the hidden criticism in this remark, as she had detected it in his earlier comments to the effect that people can suddenly cease to exist for her (p. 158).

Alain sees Germaine Lemaire as an instinctive type, someone who doesn't bother to analyze nuances or trouble herself about psychological subtleties; she reacts
automatically in her own best interests (p. 165).

As Le Planétarium comes to a close, Alain becomes progressively more disenchanted with Germaine Lemaire. This instinctive quality he once found admirable in her comes to be finally associated with the mindlessness of an animal. She fails to notice any flaw in a statue, a Virgin in the gothic style, which Alain has been concerned about:

"J'ai hésité longtemps, je suis revenu plusieurs fois. --Oh, c'était très cher? --Mais non, c'était une extraordinaire occasion, au contraire... Mais j'avais trouvé que là... elle pose sur le bras rapporté un oeil vide, et il bat en retraite aussitôt... Enfin, je ne sais pas, ce bras... c'est peut-être authentique... j'avais cru, moi...' Mais elle ne bronche pas. Elle regarde fixement, elle engloutit avec flegme cette épaule, ce bras, son estomac solide les digère sans difficulté, son oeil conserve l'expression calme, indifférente, d'un oeil bovin... . . .

(p. 303)

Alain becomes particularly exasperated with Germaine Lemaire when she expresses her admiration for Adrien Lebat, a young writer she has been trying to add to her group.

She is totally unaware of what this young man really thinks of her:

Une fureur le prend, un désir de l'arracher de là par la force, il a envie de la secouer, qu'elle revienne à elle, qu'elle efface de son visage, devenu tout lisse et plat, ce sourire béat d'innocence, de demeurée... . . .

Il vous trouve idiote, il a envie de lui crier cela, idiote, vous m'entendez, ennuyeuse comme la pluie, il m'a dit que vous l'assomiez, c'est pour ça qu'il ne vous voit jamais... . . .

(p. 309)
Germaine Lemaire even goes so far as to express her admiration for the oval door, the one which gave Tante Berthe so much distress (p. 300). And so the novel comes to a close, quite ironically in the same room in the same apartment in which it began several months before.

The concept of character, social-psychological or otherwise, is a very limited aspect of Sarraute's work after _Le Planétarium_. In the works which followed, the author concentrated on the dynamics of social interaction and the expanding role of the tropism. Since this discussion has focused on continuing characters and their attitudes and relationships, _Les Fruits d'Or_, which has no continuing characters, will be given a brief consideration. _Entre la Vie et la Mort_, like its predecessor, largely concerns Nathalie Sarraute's ideas on the creative process as experienced by the writer-protagonist. The continuous characters will be studied in this work. In the case of _Vous les entendez?_, social-psychological characterization can be studied in terms of the two main characters and the children, but, once again, the amount of characterization is quite limited here as well.

One author has tried to circumvent the difficulties which the anonymity of character in Sarraute's later works presents by relying on the term "l'être sarroutien" as a catch-all expression. The referent for this term is not
clearly indicated, and, in the opinion of this writer, the
cure may be worse than the disease, inasmuch as all the
characters are rendered anonymous.

In some ways, Les Fruits d'Or resembles Tropismes,
especially in its pronounced anonymity of character and in
the tendency for characters not to continue from one
chapter to the next. A thread of continuity is provided
by the story of the popular rise and subsequent fall of the
novel, The Golden Fruits. The techniques of
characterization discussed in relation to the other works
apply equally here. The reader can catch a glimpse of the
self-concept of an anonymous figure, see another un-named
character in a presentation of self, note the reactions of
a third to typifications made concerning him, and note the
use of reference groups and social affiliations for identifi-
ation of self and others. Some names are occasionally
provided.

The social group and its powerful influence in main-
taining conformity is of paramount interest in Les Fruits
d'Or. The group maintains control by threatening to impose
a pejorative identity on those who do not conform:

Soudés en un seul bloc. Il n'y a et il ne
peut y avoir ici, entre nous, aucun paria.
Aussi, avec une certitude qui tous nous
honore, avec la ferme assurance de ne faire
rougir personne, avec une fraternelle con-
fiance je peux vous regarder droit dans les
yeux et répéter avec force ce que chacun
sait déjà: ceux qui, encore aujourd'hui,
admirent Les Fruits d'Or sont des sots

(p. 190)

The group considers itself above reproach; each member has interiorized its values into his self-concept with unquestioning conformity:

C'est vrai, comment est-il possible de l'oublier? Ne sont-ils pas chez eux, dans leurs pays, un pays civilisé où les vraies valeurs sont respectées, où le mérite est récompensé, où règne la justice, où triomphe le bon droit? Mais comment expliquer à celui qui n'a jamais connu l'arbitraire, l'obscurantisme, la barbarie . . . . Comment pourrait-il comprendre, seulement soupçonner? Comment oser lui confesser?

(p. 26)

In this work, the drama of self-definition occurs against this background of anonymous groups.

Some examples from this novel will serve to illustrate the general social-psychological trends discussed earlier. The use of a reference group allows one character to make an attribution concerning another character:

--Il y a des gens qu'on ne doit laisser approcher de soi à aucun prix. Des parasites qui dévorent votre substance. . . . Des microbes qui se fixent sur vous. . . . Mais je suis sûr que vous, jamais. . . . Vous devez les fuir comme la peste. Pas même fuir, pour vous ils n'existent pas.

(p. 28)

Early in the novel one character hands another character and the latter's apprehensive wife a postcard bearing a reproduction of a painting by Courbet. The gesture is
intended to elicit an expression of admiration from the other character, and, at the same time, confirm an attribution of similarity between the two characters. The effort fails when the receiver does not say anything and passes the photo to his companion (p. 16).

Another character has doubts over his presentation of self:

Non. Ils sont tout contre moi. Si près qu'ils ne peuvent avoir aucune vue d'ensemble, ils perçoivent seulement, cette image de moi que je leur présente en gros plan, ce bon regard ouvert, confiant, que je pose, voilà, tout droit dans leurs yeux... (p. 34)

In the following example, a character employs response inhibition in the presentation of self in order to avoid being pitied by the group:

Mais ne rien laisser paraître surtout, ne pas attirer sur soi l'attention, il faut à tout prix se reressaisir, demeurer impassible. Tête haute. Visage ferme. Oeil vide. Pas un frémissement. Sinon, s'ils voient, ceux qui assistent, pétrifiés, à ce qui est en train de se passer, s'ils perçoivent le plus léger mouvement de désarroi, de souffrance, de honte, ils vont, eux à qui la plus faible vibration aussitôt se communique, en qui elle s'amplifie en ondes toujours élargies, ils vont se mettre à s'agiter, ils vont chercher à s'interposer maladroitement, crier grâce pour eux, pour lui, pitié... (pp. 80-81)

Two supercilious and haughty critics validate each other's identity. The reader receives another character's opinion of these two characters:
J'ai suivi à la trace ce qui sortait de ces regards échangés, de toute cette attitude de distance hautaine, de cet air un peu figé. Je l'ai suivi jusqu'à sa source, jusqu'à ce lieu secret où autrefois, il y a longtemps, cela a pris naissance, et là, j'ai vu s'accomplir sous mes yeux leurs tout premiers mouvements, ceux qu'ils ont dû exécuter il y a très longtemps, quand ils se sont barricadés en eux-mêmes, ont bouché toutes les issues, la plus fine fissure, pour empêcher de pénétrer en eux, de s'insinuer en eux dououreusement ce qui filtrait de chaque regard posé sur eux, de chaque intonation de voix, de chaque ébauche de sourire, pour que ne puisse se projeter en eux la vague petite image négligemment esquissée de pauvres bougres, de gens obscurs, d'auteurs inconnus d'écrits illisibles rejetés partout. Ils se sont enfermés à triple tour. Seuls avec une autre image qu'ils n'ont plus cessé de contempler, une image d'eux-mêmes aux proportions gigantesques, toujours plus énorme, se déployant de tous côtés.

(p. 98)

This ability to penetrate the surface impression, or, as it has been variously called, the mask or presentation of self, is characteristic of Sarraute's usual protagonists. The character, through whose consciousness the previous description is given, has obtained information concerning the inner attitudes of the others by a heightened awareness of social stimuli and tropisms.

In a rather interesting scene, a male character is conversing with a female character who, just before, asked one of the critics present for some tangible proof of the superiority of The Golden Fruits. The male character is later embarrassed when the two haughty critics
condescendingly lump him together with her: "Ils l'ont associé, lui, avec cette demeurée. Qui se ressemble s'assemble..." (p. 111). There is another scene in which a character tries to disassociate himself from a character whom he thought he was like. He concludes finally that this other character is nothing but a false prophet, a carnival king (p. 154).

These examples, it is hoped, capture the general tenor of characterization in Les Fruits d'Or.

Like the preceding novel, Entre la Vie et la Mort is about the literary world. The novel traces the development of the writer-protagonist from his early fascination with words, through his hesitant beginnings as a writer, first success, life as a literary celebrity, to his return to the creative solitude he needs in order to begin his second book.

The writer's inner journey of self-definition includes his relationship with family members, publishers, critics, and other writers. Consideration will be given first to the family relationships.

The writer's mother is quick to notice her son's early fascination with words. Unfortunately, she has a very hackneyed and conventional concept of beauty to which he cannot relate:

Des ondes qu'elle émet... un courant sorti
d'elle le traverse, lui fait étendre la main et la promener sur la fourrure des lapins, sur le duvet des poussins, sur la tête pelucheuse des agneaux, sur la peau sèche et tiède de la plante des pattes des petits chats, des chiots, sur les bourgeois collants ou couverts de poils soyeux, sur les plumes, sur les pétales, lui fait lever les yeux vers les nuages, le ciel, les cimes des arbres, le fait se pencher pour ramasser des feuilles mortes et les lui rapporter, les poser sur sa robe, entre ses genoux écartés, et attendre... elle va lui dire: comme elles sont jolies... regarde ces couleurs... pourpre, cuivre, or, fauve, orange, rouge vif... (pp. 35-36)

The young man resents his mother's repeated attempts to intrude into his private world in order to extract from him the platitudes she expects to hear. They are taking a journey by train—there are four versions of this scene (pp. 28-42)—and the future writer is murmuring a series of words suggested to him by the sounds the train is making. Each series begins with one of two words: Hérault (a department and also a river in France) or "Héraut" (the French word for "herald"): "Hérault, héraut, héros, aire haut, erre haut, R.O., rythmé sur le bruit du train roulant à travers les plates plaines blanches. Les images surgissent l'une après l'autre, tirées de sa collection" (p. 28). The writer's mother is apprehensive:

Héraut... —Mais qu'est-ce que tu marmonnes depuis une heure? Tu parles tout seul. Tu ne regardes rien. C'est pourtant si joli. Combien d'enfants seraient ravis de pouvoir faire un pareil voyage. Mais tu ne vois rien. Je te l'ai dit souvent: l'essentiel, c'est d'être
The little boy does not wish to share his mental associations with his mother—she anticipates hearing all kinds of fairy tales and children's stores, savoring them in advance. Instead, he tells her that he is just murmuring words: "(...) il lui jette juste cet os desséché, rond, lisse, nu... pas le plus petit lambeau comestible dessus qu'elle puisse arracher, qu'elle puisse lécher... Rien. Juste des mots" (p. 38).

It seems that the central character's mother compares him to an uncle who committed suicide. He detects this unverbalized conceptualization of him in her behavior: "Il perçoit en elle le petit crépitement familier: c'est cette paresse inquiétante comme chez son oncle..." (p. 31). There is another possible allusion to this attitude on the part of the author's mother. The writer's first book has come out, but he hasn't told her about it yet. It seems that she would like to cleanse and make respectable whatever seems unwholesome to her way of thinking:

Y a-t-il quelque chose venant de son enfant qui lui fasse éprouver de la rappugnance? Elle vaasperger tout cela avec ses produits désinfectants, répandre sur tout cela ses parfums élegants, tout bien empaqueter, enrubanner—une pièce rare qu'elle pourra
There seems to be an undercurrent of resentment and hostility in the author's attitudes toward his mother. In one of the versions of the train scene, described earlier, he tells her what has been going through his mind. She adds her own images to the list—in a sense, she is competing with him—and his associations take on a decidedly hostile quality:

——Non. R.O. maintenant. Rrrr... le gros bouledogue se tient sur ses pattes écartées... sa gueule est grande ouverte, attention, il va te mordre, il se jette sur toi, tous ses crocs en avant, ouah, ouah, ouah. Non, va, n'aie pas peur. Voilà O. Tout est annulé. Zéro.
(p. 37)

The author, even as an adult, feels somewhat smothered and overwhelmed by his mother:

Il n'y a pas sur toute la terre un recoin... pas dans toutes les collections qui existent un déguisement sous lequel il aurait pu lui échapper, elle aussi les possède tous, un assortiment complet...
(p. 180)

The relationship between the author and his father is reminiscent of that between nephew and uncle in Martereau. The father is adept at asking the same type of disconcerting questions, discovering the same weaknesses:

Il n'a pas besoin de bouger de sa place, il sait, il voit tout. Ses services de renseignements sont les mieux organisés du monde, ses informateurs toujours aux aguets,
ses postes d'écoute placés partout. Il connaît depuis longtemps les plans de l'ennemi, ses projets à longue échéance, ses ruses. Il sait prévoir quels détours prendra pour s'introduire ici, bien camouflé, tous feux éteints, son énorme besoin de conquêtes, de domination. Il le guette depuis longtemps, il sait qu'un jour ou l'autre il ne manquera pas de venir de lui-même, il suffit d'attendre... Et en effet le voici qui déjà tout tremblant d'impatience fièrement s'avance... "J'ai écrit un livre et il a été pris. Il va paraître bientôt..." il est sûr de passer, profitant de notre surprise, contournant nos défenses, et de s'établir ici, chez nous, en conquérant, de renverser l'ordre établi, d'abroger nos lois, de tout mettre sens dessus dessous, nous forcer à abjurer lâchement nos croyances, nous obliger à constater que la paresse, l'ennui, la dépression, la mélancolie, l'égoïsme, le délire de persécution, les ruminations stériles, les obsessions, idées fixes et manies, le vertige de l'échec, la mégalomanie, le goût du suicide lent, le mépris des réalités peuvent se changer en or pur, devenir l'apanage, faire la force des conquérants...

Mais la route est barrée, en une seconde l'ennemi est encerclé. De tous côtés des fusils sont braqués sur lui: "Combien t'a-t-on pris?"

(PP. 166-167)

Although the author fears his father somewhat, he cannot but admire his astuteness expressed in the asking of that question. The father's intuition told him that his son had to pay to get his book printed. The author is, of course, deflated by the question, but also proud of his father and sets him in a higher level of status than even the reference group of fathers of famous writers:

"Combien t'a-t-on pris pour publier ça?"
Il a envie d'applaudir, c'est vraiment superbe. S'il a du génie, il a de qui tenir. Que tous les pères célèbres s'inclinent (...) Combien t'a-t-on pris? . . . . Lequel d'entre eux a-t-il jamais montré de pareils dons? Un tel coup d'œil? Tant de flair? Une si surprenante sûreté de main? Lequel a-t-il su mieux que celui-ci déjouer tous les subterfuges, dévoiler aussitôt ce que cachent tous les déguisements?

(p. 162)

Apart from what is discussed above, there is little else concerning the central character's family relationships in Entre la Vie et la Mort.

The remainder of the novel concerns the writer-protagonist's relations with a large number of anonymous beings. Their effect on his self-concept, particularly that crucial segment of his identity as a writer, is primarily presented. The unnamed author deals with a publisher, the literary world, and some of his readers before he withdraws once more into himself in order to write another work.

A brief look at some of these scenes from the point of view of social-psychological character portrayal seems necessary in order to round out this discussion of this work. In the first chapter (pp. 7-16), the future writer is at a social gathering listening to an already successful writer speak about his background and his approach to writing. He is one of the "nous," the "we" who listen. In the second chapter (pp. 17-27), the protagonist finds a
sympathetic listener in a woman writer. He is telling about his irritation with certain words, especially a certain usage of the verb "faire." He is trying to gain confirmation of his acceptance into the company of writers, but she makes it abundantly clear that he is not one of them. These are her ironic comments to him: "'Ah oui. Je vois. C'était tout ça... Oui, ça faisait... vous faisiez vraiment enfant prédéfini" (p. 23). The third chapter (pp. 28-42), concerns the childhood recollection discussed previously. In the fourth chapter (pp. 43-50), the author hesitates and is unsure of being accepted by the literary people. He is still labeled as a misfit (p. 50). In the fifth chapter (pp. 51-60), the protagonist's reactions to a character who speaks with a peculiar and disturbing accent—-at least according to the central character—are not shared by the others present. He begins to realize that he is not like the others, that his sensitivity and suspicion are greater. In the sixth chapter (pp. 61-67), two little-known writers assure him that, attention to accents notwithstanding, he is still basically like them: "Allons, vous êtes bien des nôtres. Vous n'avez jamais bougé d'ici. Avec nous devant eux [les auteurs connus] au garde-à-vous, chacun notre petit drapeau à la main" (p. 66). In the seventh chapter (pp. 68-84), the writer's gift for mimicry is discussed. He is embarrassed when the others criticize him for his
obsession with "les Ballut" (p. 68). He reacts defensively when one of them asks him: "Mais pourquoi n'écrivez-vous pas? Vous ne faites qu'en parler." (p. 84). The eighth chapter (pp. 85-108), conveys the protagonist's experience in writing fiction. This chapter contains, undoubtably, Nathalie Sarraute's own experiences, and it is an excellent "art poétique."

In the ninth chapter (pp. 109-113), the main character submits his book to a publisher, and it is accepted on the condition that he make some minor revisions. He is accepted as one of the minor writers in chapter ten (pp. 114-124): "Vous voilà donc ici, parmi nous" (p. 114). The use of the "nous" form occurs repeatedly in this chapter, a constant attribution of similarity. The eleventh and twelfth chapters (pp. 124-147), are about the way in which the writer's book is ignored, at first, and then becomes increasingly better known, and even approved by the critics who find things in it which the author had no idea were there. Numerous friends of the author begin to see themselves portrayed in the book, to his chagrin, in the thirteenth chapter (pp. 148-161). The relationship between the author and his father, outlined earlier, is the subject of the fourteenth chapter (pp. 162-173), while the following chapter (pp. 174-183), adds to the reader's knowledge of the author's relationship with his mother. In
the sixteenth chapter (pp. 184-195), the writer, now well-known, receives guests who do not find him to be playing the role they expected, namely that of the famous writer. They are disappointed to find that he is a "Monsieur-tout-le-monde" (p. 189). In the seventeenth chapter (pp. 196-201), the author is boasting that his book has been receiving good reviews. In the next chapter (pp. 202-206), which closely resembles the first chapter of the book, the author feels awkward playing the social role of acknowledged professional writer: "S'ils voyaient en lui un imposteur?" (p. 204). In the nineteenth chapter, the writer is fully aware of his power over his followers, he is akin to a religious deliverer (p. 207-217). In the last three chapters (pp. 218-254), the writer comes to accept the necessity of regaining close contact with his phenomenal self—having paid too much attention to his social performance—in order to revitalize his creative powers and begin another novel.

In a newspaper article, Nathalie Sarraute made the following comments concerning her novel Vous les entendez?:

Pour mon dernier livre, Vous les entendez?, c'est un objet que je voyais au centre, une bête de pierre provoquant toutes sortes de perturbations à l'intérieur d'un groupe de consciences unies par des liens étroits.98

The reader may recall the remarks quoted earlier in which Nathalie Sarraute stated that she always had a geometric
vision of a novel before she began to write. Vous les entendez? could be described as a triangle with a dot at its center. The dot would represent the pre-Columbian statue which is the main stimulant to the tropisms. The three angles of the triangle would represent the father, friend who has come to visit, and the children, respectively. This discussion of the social psychology of character portrayal will conclude with a discussion of these character relationships in Vous les entendez?

Before considering these character relationships, this writer would like to digress briefly on the subject of the problematical statue. A composite picture of this "bête de pierre" reveals the following things about it:

1) It is heavy and made of rough stone (p. 10); 2) It has a thick snout (p. 10); 3) It has heavy flanks and resembles a puma (p. 12); 4) It has enormous ears shaped like conch shells (p. 12); 5) It resembles some kind of mythical beast or religious object (p. 12). Having established this, let us proceed to the characters themselves.

The anonymous father is caught between his friend, a former art professor and admirer of the pre-Columbian figure, and the children, who find the stone animal very comic. The bulk of the novel consists of tropisms and sub-conversation; characterization is kept to an absolute minimum. Since the action of the novel takes up only a
single evening—there are some flashbacks—the scope for character development is extremely restricted. This discussion is necessarily brief. In terms of self-definition, the problem is as follows: The father is reluctant to identify himself with his friend, an old man like himself, inasmuch as he sees himself as being more like his children in terms of sensitivity and fluidity; but, because of his age, he knows he cannot really be one of them, and so resigns himself to the fact that he will never be young again and decides to identify with people his own age.

The father sees himself as having been a very well-behaved and shy child, but the implication is that he missed out on much of the joy of childhood:

Des dociles, des faibles, comme il était, lui, le plus soumis, le plus sage de tous, lui, la joie de ses maîtres, la fierté de ses parents, lui, le bon sujet, si brillant, toujours inscrit au tableau d'honneur, modestement satisfait de ses carnets couverts de bonnes notes, des piles de livres illisibles rapportés des distributions de prix, lourds de leurs rigides reliures de faux cuir, de leur pages épaisses dorées sur tranche. . . .

Fuyant hors d'ici, courant vers eux. . . . Impatient de se joindre à eux, de rejoindre en eux cette parcelle secrète de lui-même qu'il avait toute sa vie aidé à écraser, qu'il avait cru enterrée et qui en eux a ressuscité. . . .se hâtant de retrouver cela, ce qu'il y avait en lui de meilleur . . . .

(p. 54)

In the presence of his children, especially, the father does not wish to be associated with the friend. The
latter implies that he is a collector; he says that he most
certainly is not: "Moi, vous savez, je ne suis pas un
collectionneur. Je dirais même qu'au contraire. . . ."
(p. 14). The father quite emphatically rejects this par-
ticular identity: "Qu'ils ne le mettent pas là, dans le
même sac, pas dans la même section. Ce n'est pas son cas.
Qu'ils ne l'enferment pas avec ceux-là. . . ." (pp. 22-23).
The friend does not understand the father's reaction, but
senses vaguely that something is wrong (p. 25).

The friend makes two disturbing attributions about
the father, namely that he is a collector (p. 14), and even
more significant, that they are no longer young: "Ils
sont gais, Hein? Ils s'amusent. . . . Que voulez-vous,
c'est de leur âge. . . . Nous aussi, on avait de ces fous
rires. . . . il n'y avait pas moyen de s'arrêter. . . ." (p. 7).
Not understanding why the children's laughter irritates
the father so much, he thinks him an irascible old fogey
when he charges up the stairs to find out what they are
doing (p. 16). The father is caught between the upstairs
world of the children and the downstairs world of his
friend, the statue, museums, collectors, etc. When they are
alone the two men feel invulnerable barricaded behind the
pre-Columbian statue which comes to represent established
values (p. 12).

The mother of the children is mentioned a few times.
The reader is given to assume that she is no longer living. The father recollects having marital problems at one time because he and his wife could not agree on certain things. A specialist whom he consults can only give him a cliche with which to console himself—"There's no accounting for tastes." : "'Des goûts et des couleurs'" (p. 81). He accepts the advice melancholically (p. 82).

From the point of view of the children, their father looks pitiful when he tries to disassociate himself from the socially awkward friend: 

"(...) tous ces efforts maladroits, pitoyables, pour s'écarteler, pour se désolidariser de l'inconscient qui tranquillement se lève, s'avance vers la cheminée, étend les bras. . . ." (p. 46).

The children are amused when the father denies being a collector:

Au contraire. Il n'a rien d'un collectionneur... ils le savent bien... . .
Oui, ils le savent. . . . On connaît ça.
Par coeur. On connaît la musique. . .
chaque note. . . toujours le même air.
L'a-t-on assez entendu. . . . Au contraire . . . de savoir que ça m'appartient, voyez-vous. . . Je dois dire que ça ternit, en quelque sorte, oui, ça rend moins parfait . . . mon bonheur. . . ça altère cette sérénité, ce détachement dont j'a besoin . . . enfin, vous voyez. . .

(p. 24)

They resent the trips to museums and art galleries which he has subjected them to, his trance-like state before the works of art (p. 25). They think that their father is
really looking for security, for absolute standards of taste (p. 26). Although the father resents having to play the role of overseer (p. 17), this is how the children see him: "Mais il est toujours là à surveiller chaque geste, à réprimer le moindre élan, le plus léger signe d'insouciance, de liberté, toujours à scruter, à doser, à juger" (p. 17). The father knows that he could put the children in their place by ignoring them, but his ambivalence does not allow him to do this (pp. 19-20).

Since the children are largely anonymous, it is difficult to say what they think of themselves. The use of the pronoun "nous" in the novel is the usual indication of their self-concept. They feel victimized by their father, by his suspiciousness: "Pourquoi, toujours sur le qui-vive, il nous observe comme s'il guettait l'apparition sur nous de signes, de stigmates, de symptômes révélateurs d'un mal caché... un mal que lui seul connaît?" (pp. 75-76). They feel hemmed in by the rules tacitly agreed upon in the home, that they are supposed to appear free, when, in fact, a great deal is controlled: "Tous ceux qui viennent ici doivent être persuadés que chez nous aussi chacun est libre..." (pp. 48-49).

The father attributes to his children a sensitivity equal to his own: "Il n'y a pas en lui un frémissement si infime soit-il qu'ils ne perçoivent aussitôt, instruits,
exercés par lui comme ils le sont (...)" (p. 18). He considers them discreet and reluctant to display their knowledge (pp. 17-18). While suspecting that their laughter is not as innocuous as it is meant to appear, the father tries to convince himself that they are merely amusing themselves and not intentionally irritating him (p. 15). When he looks at the problematical statue from their perspective, he sees "une bête grossièrement taillée dans une matière grumeleuse, d'un gris sale. . . . La ligne du dos trop droite. . . . Les pattes disproportionnées . . . trop courtes? . . . trop écartées?" (p. 33). He blames them for having started the whole unpleasant business; he was not imagining everything—as his friend seems to think—(p. 191):

Vous le savez bien, vous savez que vous mentez. Si endurcis que vous soyez, vous ne pourrez pas vivre en paix si vous laissez condamner à votre place. . . . Vous savez bien que vous avez tout provoqué, tout. . . comme toujours . . . sournoisément. . . .

(p. 195)

By his insistence that the children's laughter is motivated by naughtiness, he provokes the friend into saying that the children must have mean natures—"Des natures médiocres. Oui, c'est ça. . . il se sent tout faible. . . un léger vertige. . . comme avant de perdre connaissance . . ." (p. 116). The father is as totally disconcerted by this type of simplistic typification; he would like things
to be described in their actual complexity. He had a similar reaction to the headmaster of the children's school when the latter summarily classified the children as dunces or loafers—"Des cancrés? Vraiment? vous pensez?... vous croyez, monsieur le proviseur, qu'il n'y a aucun espoir?. . . . Silence qui se prolonge, n'en finit pas. . . ." (p. 51).

Before leaving the subject of the children, it should be mentioned that two of them emerge with some clarity: a younger boy who likes to clown around, and a daughter, presumably the one who refers to the sculpture as a Cretan figure, described as adept at playing roles and catching nuances of people's behavior.

The friend is not a particularly complex character. He was once a professor of art history, we are told, and the children say they feel sorry for his students (p. 34). The friend sees himself as a collector of art objects and prides himself on his finds (p. 21). He is shown caressing the statue with his hand (p. 10). The father thinks of the man in the following ways: "inconscient comme un lunatique" (p. 30); "la pauvre dupe" (p. 26); he has a placid gaze (p. 9), a placid air about him (p. 14); he is tactless—the father compares him to an ice-breaker (p. 14); he has no idea what effect his words have on others (p. 20); his hand is compared to a bear's paw (p. 116); he is referred to as a madman—"l'insensé" (p. 31). At one
point the father thinks of him as "ce noble ami" (p. 47), however, he is generally regarded by the father as a ponderous and artless person.

The children's view of the guest is generally disdainful:

L'amі a un peu trop exhibé sa science
.. ils ne supportent pas ces étalages
.. ce qu'ils tolèrent, c'est quelques mots prononcés sur un ton ironique et comme en s'excusant. .. ils ont ce dédain aristocratique, cette indifférence qui leur donne une grâce, une élégance. .. qu'il n'a pas, ça lui manque à lui, un parvenu encore mal dégrossi. .. il faut, on le sait, plusieurs générations...

(p. 55)

The level of analysis of a novel such as Vous les entendez? is quite different from that of Le Planétarium. The difference becomes apparent if one were to imagine the latter novel as revolving entirely about the bookstore scene. Nathalie Sarraute's achievement in Vous les entendez? has been to bring to light the incredible number of things occurring in the most ordinary situations when viewed with heightened awareness and an open mind.

The discussion thus far has been mainly descriptive, as indicated by the title of this study. The rendering of value judgments has been left to the characters themselves as they express their attitudes toward one another. The following section is written from a different perspective and aims to answer the question: Does Nathalie Sarraute
pass judgment on her own characters? It is presented as a sketch of the ethical framework of the novelist as social psychologist, a framework which reflects—but is not synonymous with—the ethical tenets of Sartrian existentialism.

**Phenomenological and Existential Considerations**

As the title of this study indicates, the subject matter is the novelist, Nathalie Sarraute, as social psychologist. This includes a description of the basic elements of social interaction, the process of social interaction, and the self in social interaction. The overall outlook is intended to be scientific and objective, with the understanding, of course, that psychology is not an exact science, and that in the field of psychology as a whole, social psychology is a recent development. At the same time, this writer has made an effort not to lose sight of the fact that the material being studied consists of works of the imagination which imitate and describe real life. This is particularly important with respect to this discussion of character and characterization in Nathalie Sarraute's novels.

The character of the traditional novel has two main aspects: a psychological one, and a moral one. The first includes a description of the character—traditionally presented as a "personality," but in the case of Sarraute,
presented as a self and self-concept; the second concerns the value judgments which the author states openly, or merely suggests indirectly, concerning the characters depicted. In the case of Nathalie Sarraute, the speaking, interpreting author is absent from the novel. The reader tends to look for a spokesman for the author's views among the various characters. In the case of the works of Sarraute, this writer finds that the main spokesmen for the author's views are two narrators, Alain Guimiez, the dissenters (F.), the writer-protagonist (E.), and the father (V.). Of course, other characters may be partial spokesmen for Sarraute, but the above-mentioned characters seem to reflect the views which the author has expressed in her many interviews, critical essays, and other pronouncements, as discussed earlier in this study.

It is generally acknowledged that phenomenology and existentialism play an important part in the works of Nathalie Sarraute. In the case of phenomenology, the reader may recall that Nathalie Sarraute studied sociology at the University of Berlin when she was nineteen years old. Her studies were under the direction of Werner Sombart, a phenomenologist. The founder of modern phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, had a major influence on the social scientists of that period in Germany. It is probably safe to assume that an exposure to their ideas at that critical early stage of her intellectual development
played a very important part in the direction she was to take as a writer. This can be seen, quite clearly, in *Tropismes*.

The influence of Jean-Paul Sartre appears to have come a bit later; it is especially evident in *Portrait d'un Inconnu* with its viscous imagery and anguished narrator reminiscent of Roquentin in Sartre's *La Nausée*. If there is a moral aspect to character and human relationships, as depicted in Sarrasute's novels, it is surely linked with the ethical aspect of Sartre's form of existentialism, particularly with regard to authenticity.

It is this writer's opinion, that as a philosophy, existentialism is closely associated with considerations of an ethical nature. In the case of Sartre, the issue of authenticity comes immediately to mind, along with the related ideas of freedom and responsibility, and, of course "l'engagement" or commitment.⁹²

If Nathalie Sarrasute judges her characters, it is most likely to be in the area of authenticity to self and others. In his preface to *Portrait d'un Inconnu*, Sartre makes the following observations:

*L'Authenticité, vrai rapport avec les autres, avec soi-même, avec la mort est partout suggérée mais invisible. On la pressent parce qu'on la fuit. Si nous jetons un coup d'œil, comme l'auteur nous y invite, à l'intérieur des gens, nous entrevoyons un grouillement de fuites molles et tentaculaires.*
Il y a la fuite dans les objets qui réfléchissent paisiblement l'universel et la permanence, la fuite dans les occupations quotidiennes, la fuite dans le mesquin . . . . Nathalie Sarraute a une vision protoplasmique de notre univers intérieur: ôtez la pierre du lieu commun, vous trouverez des coulées, des baves, des mucus, des mouvements hésitants, amboïdes. Son vocabulaire est d'une richesse incomparable pour suggérer les lentes reptations centrifuges de ces élixirs visqueux et vivants.93

The characters mentioned earlier, as representing the views of Nathalie Sarraute, all struggle with the problem of authenticity toward the phenomenal self. They are generally willing, despite the pain and unrespectability involved, to maintain contact with their true feelings, in the form of tropisms, and the real nature of their relationships with others, by their suspiciousness concerning their own motives and those of others.

A threat to the individual's authenticity to the phenomenal self occurs in the form of the look of the other person, what Sartre refers to as "le regard."94 The dynamic, fluid, ever-changing inner self becomes fixed in the look of the other. This hellish torture of being objectified by the look of the other is a frequent feature of Nathalie Sarraute's novels, and a constant menace to the authenticity of the self: "(...) ils me voient, pris, enfermé tout entier dans le champ de leur regard" (F., p. 34). By losing contact with his phenomenal self, a
character identifies with the typifications others assign to him and betrays that most vital creative center of his being. Sarraute is continually concerned with this form of psychological alienation, of the falsification of the self which deprives one of the capacity to accept and remain aware of one's own feelings and needs. In Sartre's terms, "l'être-pour-soi" or Being-for-Itself, namely consciousness, tries to become "l'être-en-soi," or Being-in-Itself, i.e., the self-contained being of an object. This occurs as a reaction to an awareness of one's freedom, an awareness which generates anxiety, and in order to fulfill a need for security. Since the union of the "pour soi" and the "en-soi" is an impossibility, the result is what Sartre refers to as "le visqueux" or "stickiness."

The reader may recall that the daughter in Portrait d'un Inconnu was usually referred to as being sticky and clinging, by the male narrator.

Speaking in general, Nathalie Sarraute is more critical of inauthenticity to the self than to others, the second form of this ethical problem. The artist, it seems, must remain faithful to his phenomenal self, to his experience, if he is to be truly creative. This is the basis from which Germaine Lemaire and Brioux, the author of The Golden Fruits, are subject to greater criticism, than a character such as M. Dumontet, not an artist.
As far as the question of authenticity to others is concerned, Nathalie Sarraute seems to view this issue from a relative point of view. The authentic expression of one's attitudes, for Sarraute's characters, exposes them to the possibility of isolation and social ostracism, an eventuality which is highly feared by them:

(...) il serait seul, abandonné de tous dans le désert, sans autre partenaire, sans autre adversaire que lui-même; ne griffant, ne mordant, n'étreignant que lui-même, tournant sur lui-même, chien stupide qui se mord la queue, derviche grotesque.

(M., p. 25)

Dissimulation of the self, as for example in conformity to the social norms operating in a certain situation, seems to be the rule rather than the exception in Nathalie Sarraute's novels. However, excessive dissimulation is probably frowned upon by the author. Martereau, for example, is dishonest in his relationship with the narrator, assuming the former does not really like the latter. It does not seem likely that Sarraute intends for the majority of her characters to be considered inauthentic in an absolute sense; there are gradations of inauthenticity in her characters.

What Sarraute does seem to be condemning in her character's conduct is the psychological violence perpetrated by the strong upon the weak. This was mentioned earlier in this chapter in the discussion on Tropismes. This writer
imagines that she finds this sort of behavior particularly reprehensible when it is disguised as benevolence, as in the case of the nephew's relationship with his aunt and uncle.

On the issue of commitment, Nathalie Sarraute is quite clear. While admitting that many works of literature dealing with social problems, political problems, and moral problems have been authentic and committed, she adds:

_Mais aucune pression morale, aucune considération, si noble soit-elle, ne peut contraindre un écrivain à écrire des œuvres engagées. Ici, la liberté la plus complète, la spontanéité la plus totale, sont indispensables. La volonté ici n'a aucun pouvoir._

The problem, it should be emphasized, does not occur very much in Sarraute's works since there are so few really important decisions made by her characters. The dramatic, existential moment in which an individual's freedom to choose is put to the test turns out to be a decision as to whether or not to buy a Louis XV "bergère."

The question of "bad faith"—i.e., Sartre's "mauvaise foi" is relevant to Sarraute's works. As understood by this writer this term refers to a dishonest evasion of choice and responsibility; freedom is made to appear as necessity. In this sense, a number of Sarraute's characters may be said to demonstrate "bad faith." The daughter in _Portrait d'un Inconnu_ shows bad faith when she considers her dependency on her father to be determined by their family
relationship. Germaine Lemaire demonstrates bad faith when she pretends to unintentionally drop certain people from her coterie.

A number of writers point out the inauthenticity of conversation and social roles in Sarraute's novels: "Le général, l'inauthentique est représenté par le langage, les apparences, les règles de la société et le rôle que chacun y joue." It is patently true, however, that the middle-class society which Sarraute describes, does in fact display a considerable amount of pretense and insincerity, defended in the name of civility and good manners. However, the degree to which this banality extends does suggest another possible interpretation. The blandness or the surface aspect of social interaction in these works balances out the strong imagery of the sub-conversation and tropisms. These delicate movements would simply be lost in a situation in which powerful emotions were to be given expression.

A final point: there is one aspect of Sarraute's thinking which does not agree with the thought of Sartre, and which merits inclusion in this brief section. This is the question of the "fond commun" which Sarraute holds to so firmly. Since this amounts to an essence, it would seem to be incompatible with the Sartrian view in which existence precedes any essence.
An Assessment of Sarrute's
Approach to Character
Portrayal

By portraying character in a social-psychological manner, Nathalie Sarrute makes her readers aware of the elusiveness of other people and the tenuousness of our own identities. The consciousness of the observer is the instrument of the observation of others. No one character is the same for anyone else; the perspectives on a certain character are made up of the attitudes felt toward that character. There is no completely neutral observer. The reader's sense of a stable and coherent world of other persons is upset by the realization that there are no stable reference points in the social universe.

The self-concepts of others, though relatively enduring in themselves, are seen through the screen of one's own attitudes. Our relationships with other people, like those of Nathalie Sarrute's characters, are a multi-dimensional affair in which knowledge concerning our actual relationships to others is purchased at the price of psychological pain, or relinquished in the relative comfort of self-deception. Sarrute's narrators and protagonists know more than many of the other characters, but they also seem to suffer more.

The effort to communicate the self-concepts of a number of characters, as well as their mutual attitudes,
greatly complicates narrative technique in Sarran
te's novels beginning with *Le Planétarium*. The diffi
culties inherent in composing such a complex novel seem to have led
to a de-emphasis on character portrayal in the novels which
followed it. *Le Planétarium* represents the high-water-mark
in Sarran
te's development in the area of characterization.

This chapter considered the character in the drama of
self-definition, a drama which is latent in every social
encounter, as Nathalie Sarran
te brilliantly demonstrates. The tropisms are generated by this drama of self in relation
to others. The character may be made more or less
anonymous—an extreme example would be *Les Fruits d'Or*—
but he cannot be eliminated entirely since he emits social
stimuli expressing attitudes, and registers these emotional
messages in the form of tropisms.

Nathalie Sarran
te's social-psychological character
portrayal, although at times difficult and intricate,
offers the diligent reader a very sensitive, intelligent,
and, above all, convincing portrayal of life in a certain
"milieu."
CONCLUSION

The initial impetus for this study came from this writer's supposition that a meaningful correlation existed between the subject matter of the novels of Nathalie Sarraute and the problems and concerns of social psychologists. Readings in social psychology and related fields provided the necessary theoretical framework for this study, a means of confirming the initial hypothesis.

To insure clarity of presentation and the least amount of overlapping of issues, the subject matter was divided into three broad areas: 1) the basic elements of social interaction; 2) the process of social interaction; and 3) the self in social interaction. The approach of the social psychologist was seen to be relational and dynamic rather than discrete and static.

The importance of attitude was stressed at the outset. Attitude was singled out as the pivotal concept of the social psychologist. The outer manifestations of attitudes were studied in the form of the social stimuli, both verbal and non-verbal, and numerous examples were cited from Nathalie Sarraute's novels in order to indicate their range and variety, and, above all, their importance to her work.
The discussion of social stimuli was the necessary introduction to the analysis of the tropism, Sarraute's own concept, which was seen to refer to the automatic process of psychological adjustment to social stimulus situations. The presentation of the tropism was seen to be the main concern of Nathalie Sarraute in her writing. The tropism was considered both as a psychological reaction process and as an aspect of the text. The study of the latter aspect focused on the author's techniques for communicating the tropisms to the reader; these included: the use of imagery, changes in the temporal aspect of the text, and deviations from standard punctuation.

The idea of the tropism is inseparably linked in Sarraute's thinking with a belief in a common substratum of human experience referred to as "le fond commun." This was the common basis which made it possible for the reader to actively participate in the tropisms of Sarraute's characters.

The tropism was shown to be connected with feelings which might be considered embarrassing or unrespectable; nevertheless, a refusal to attend to these subtle inner states was seen to entail the possibility of self-deception with regard to one's real reactions to others.

The discussion of the tropism led to a consideration of Sarraute's concept of man. The latter was seen to
emphasize man's dependency on social groups for both his feeling life as well as his sense of personal identity. The tropism was seen to be of value in the context of this view of man because it provided a means of ascertaining the authentic nature of one's interpersonal relationships.

In discussing the process of social interaction as depicted in the novels of Sarraute, this writer distinguished three main aspects of this process: perspective, levels, and stages. The first of these was closely related to the author's innovations in point of view; the second concerned the surface and depth aspects of social interaction, especially the distinction between conversation, sub-conversation, and tropisms; the third referred to the plot-like aspect of Sarraute's scenes of social interaction. In their formal aspect, Sarraute's novels were seen to consist of scenes of social interaction connected in a rather loose manner by a kind of surface plot.

A consideration of a main objective behind Sarraute's presentation of social-psychological subject matter led to the idea of a pervasive distrust of appearances and a desire to expose the underlying reality of social interaction. The latter could be seen in the manifestations of a generalized suspicion on the part of Sarraute's characters, particularly the various protagonists of her novels. Their heightened and often painful awareness of their own reactions, as well as those of others, enabled them to see beyond appearances.
The social influence process was seen to range from social chemistry to Machiavellian tactics and micro-politics. The importance of balance was indicated in the study of the developmental aspect of social interaction. Nathalie Sarraute’s presentation of social interaction was seen to demonstrate what actually happens as well as what could happen from one moment to the next.

Nathalie Sarraute’s approach to character was shown to be motivated by a concern with social-psychological issues. Character portrayal, for this author as social psychologist, necessitated a break with the traditions of the past in the direction of anonymity. The traditional character with his fixed personality was replaced by shadowy and indeterminate creatures, whether seen in terms of their own self-concepts or as typifications in the eyes of others. Sarraute’s characters participated in the drama of self-definition in their relations with others. This process was described in terms of phenomenal self and performed self, including social roles. The identification of self and others was shown to rely heavily on the use of language in the form of names and reference groups. The reliance upon others for a confirmation of identity was considered axiomatic and a reason for the universal sensitivity of persons to the mirror response.

The ethical aspect of Sarraute’s writing was associated with the existentialist concept of authenticity,
particularly with regard to a truthful relationship with the phenomenal self, and minimal dissimulation in one's relations with others.

This study of Nathalie Sarraute's novels has led this writer to three major conclusions which appear to be implicit in these works. They are as follows: 1) People are constantly affecting one another whether they choose to realize it or not; 2) There is a common substratum of human experience closely linked with the instinctive reactions of lower life forms; 3) Life can be enriched by directing one's attention to the permutations of tropisms in the phenomenal self; everyday experience is much richer in content than most people realize:

But the tropisms, which make our lives infinitely rich and complex, hide under any commonplace gesture or word. They can be found anywhere at any moment. Why, then, describe exceptional situations, great actions, heroes? Is it not a deception? Why try and persuade the reader that all the richness, the complexity of life is concentrated in certain chosen actions instead of going on in him, whatever he is doing, just as he goes on doing all day long in ordinary life?97

An assessment of Nathalie Sarraute's contribution to the psychological novel would be incomplete without a consideration of the opposing point of view, particularly with regard to the aforementioned issues. To begin with, the "pettiness" of the reactions described can be boring for some readers.98 Depending upon the reader, excessive
attention directed to one's inner states of mind can become a neurotic way of living. As far as "le fond commun" is concerned, it is open to question whether or not different people with different bodies have different and separate minds; at the present stage of history, this can neither be proved nor disproved. Some readers are apt to find Sarraute's characters too passive and too willing to conform, her world view more congenial to women than to men. One critic limits Sarraute's contribution to the "portrayal of the rarefied, narcissistic world of a particular section of the post-war Parisian haute bourgeoisie, the world and language of Passy and Auteuil. . . ."

This writer would like to consider each of these criticisms in turn. As far as boredom is concerned, this is a personal matter; tastes vary, and what is boring to one reader may be quite fascinating to another. With regard to neurosis and tropisms, it is highly probable that Nathalie Sarraute does not intend for her readers to model themselves after the narrator of Portrait d'un Inconnu. The latter's exaggerated sensitivity is an extreme example of this kind of awareness. In all likelihood, Nathalie Sarraute considers the average person too inclined to disregard his subtle feeling reactions. The existence or non-existence of a common substratum of human experience would not add nor detract from the reader's enjoyment, inasmuch as most authors assume that their readers are like
themselves in some ways. The masculine component is certainly understated in Sarraute's novels, but this is largely due to the emphasis on experience and pre-existing conditions rather than on efforts to change attitudes and relationships. The fact that Sarraute has confined her works to a particular socio-economic setting does not necessarily invalidate her conclusions. The tropisms of which she writes are more than likely a universal experience and not confined to any particular class.

This writer can perhaps best explain the social-psychological value of Sarraute's writings by considering the question that comes to mind at the end of every Sarraute novel, namely: What happened? In a sense, nothing; in another, and perhaps more important sense, everything! Sarraute's works are mental events; they capture the ever-changing psychological reality of currents and undercurrents, dimly perceived, but vital all the same. Nathalie Sarraute's characteristic irony can be detected behind these thoughts of the narrator of Martereau: "Il n'y avait rien: rien que bulles d'air, billevesées, mirages, fumée, reflets, ombres, ma propre ombre après laquelle je courais, tournant en rond" (p. 279). The visitor in Vous les entendez? thinks to himself: "Oui, vous voyons, vous êtes de mon avis...il n'y avait vraiment pas de quoi se mettre martel en tête..." (p. 203).
Nathalie Sarraute's novels are the expression of a mind endowed with a fine and delicate apparatus, capable of apprehending what is most fleeting and insubstantial in interpersonal experience: coded messages, violent yet hidden dramas, changes in mood as subtle and as imperceptible as minute changes in the weather, momentary triumphs as well as defeats, a lifetime's possibilities condensed in the space of a few seconds, all ultimately intangible, but real nevertheless.
FOOTNOTES
FOOTNOTES


8. The biographical information contained in this section has been compiled from various sources. The following works were especially useful:


9. To be exact, Nathalie Sarraute (née Tcherniak) lived in France and Switzerland with her mother, Pauline Tcherniak (née Chatavnoisky), until she was three years old. From the age of three to five, she lived in Ivanovo with her father, Elie Tcherniak. She then lived again in
France with her mother, and spent her vacations in Switzerland with her father. When she was six years old, her mother, remarried to a Russian historian, took her to St. Petersburg where she lived for two years. At the age of eight, she settled permanently in France with her father and stepmother.

For detailed summaries of all of Nathalie Sarraute's prose fiction (except for her last two novels), the reader is directed to Mercier, op. cit., pp. 101-164.

Micha, op. cit., p. 7.

The ellipsis is one of Nathalie Sarraute's most frequently-used stylistic devices. It appears in a quotation as part of the original text and does not signify the deletion of any material. An ellipsis enclosed within parentheses--(...)--indicates an omission of material contained in the original text.


Berkowitz, op. cit., p. 48.

Watson and Johnson, op. cit., p. 224.

Stotland and Cannon, op. cit., p. 25.


Abrahamson, op. cit., p. 45.

Theodor Reik, Listening with the Third Ear (New

23 Ibid., p. 136.


25 Ibid., p. 428.

26 Ibid.

27 Micha, op. cit., p. 72.


29 Ibid., p. 429.


33 Sarraute, The Listener, op. cit., p. 428.

34 Fleming, op. cit., pp. 74-98.


37 Fleming, op. cit., p. 78.

38 Sarraute, The Listener, op. cit., p. 428.

40 Tison-Braun, *op. cit.*, Tome II, p. 18.


52 Argyle, *op. cit.*, p. 31.


56 Micha, op. cit., p. 108.

57 Jaccard, op. cit., p. 4.


60 Sarraute, The Listener, op. cit., p. 429.


62 Mercier, op. cit., p. 20.


64 Ibid.

65 Doby, op. cit., p. 6.

66 Goldenson, op. cit., p. 751.


68 Ibid., pp. 80-81.


71 Berger and Luckman, *op. cit.*, p. 50.


73 Lindesmith and Strauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-75.


75 Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 96.


77 Lindesmith and Strauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.


84 Lindesmith and Strauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-84.


86 Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

87 Lindesmith and Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
88 Berger, op. cit., p. 129.

89 Lindesmith and Strauss, op. cit., p. 106.


92 For an extended discussion of the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre on the novels of Nathalie Sarraute, the reader is referred to the works of Elisabeth Eliez-Rüegg and Micheline Tison-Braun, in particular, which are listed in the bibliography.


96 Wunderli-Muller, op. cit., p. 5.


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A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


_____. "Nathalie Sarraute: Portrait d'un Inconnu" [a review] La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française, 54 (1957).


