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Desire in Language: Nathalie Sarraute's Theatre of Interpellation

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In her work for the theatre, Nathalie Sarraute staged the drama of the self in the moment of its being hailed to take up a position within language, to turn away from what Luce Irigaray referred to as 'la première demeure',[1] in order to inhabit what Denis Vasse has called 'la demeure de son nom'.[2] The main line of argument that I will be pursuing here is that the focus of Sarraute's work for the theatre was the moment of *turning* in response to the voice that hails, and that her theatrical exposition of this moment aligns it with hesitation, resistance and loss: a disturbance in the originary moment of interpellation, a failure to sustain the other through the voice that addresses.

As a preliminary to my discussion of Sarraute's theatre, therefore, I shall consider, briefly, some psychoanalytical perspectives on the psychic transition from the pre-verbal to the verbal mode. Judith Butler points to Althusser's 'theory of interpellation' as a doctrine that continues to structure contemporary debate on subject formation, offering as it does 'a way to account for a subject who comes into being as a consequence of language, yet always within its terms'.[3] Althusser's theory of interpellation describes the formation of the subject in terms of a scene in which 'a subject is hailed, the subject turns around, and subsequently accepts the terms by which he or she is hailed'.[4] Butler points out that Althusser's theory presents an exemplary or allegorical scene that may not be realized in quite this way in actuality: 'the

1. Luce Irigaray, 'Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère', in *Sexes et Parentés* (Paris: Minuit, 1987), pp. 21–33 (p. 26).
2. Denis Vasse, *L'Ombilic et la voix* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), p. 213.
3. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 107.
4. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 107.

process literalized by the allegory is precisely what resists narration, what exceeds the narrativizability of events'. In Althusser's reading of the initiatory act of interpellation, the call is figured as a demand to align oneself with the law, 'a turning around (to face the law [...]) and an entrance into the language of self-ascription — "Here I am" — through the appropriation of guilt'.[5] According to this reading of subject formation, identity is conferred through the self-ascription of guilt: 'The turn toward the law is thus a turn against oneself, a turning back on oneself that constitutes the movement of conscience.'[6]

The figure of the 'turn toward the law' is an allegory for the emergence of the speaking subject through the self-ascription of guilt on the threshold of language. The Althusserian figure is useful when it comes to considering Sarraute's theatre, due to its focus on the calling voice, received from and projected towards the other — in the light of Althusserian thinking a subject is constituted by being hailed, addressed, named. Sarraute's theatre stages the initiatory moment of interpellation as an occasion of both longing and resistance — resistance to the naming consciousness is a signature trope of all her writing, but it is the key to her theatre.

The Kristevan notion of thetic rupture between semiotic and symbolic is also apposite for this theatre. Kristeva highlights the significance of the moment of rupture between verbal and pre-verbal in early psychic development, which she terms 'la phase thétique'. For her, the thetic, the place of the break between signifier and signified, is present in all enunciation, as in every speech act there is 'une séparation du sujet de et dans son image, en même temps que de et dans ses objets'.[7] While Sarraute's plays do not ostensibly explore gender issues, they do chart the boundaries of the rift that psychoanalysis has located at the centre of psychic life. The extent to which repressed violence is explored in this theatre is remarkable. The sense of the self's

5. The theory of interpellation, as explored by Butler, is elaborated by Louis Althusser in his essay 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état', in *Positions* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1976), pp. 67–126.
6. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power,* p. 107.
7. Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), pp. 41–42.

terror before the judging eye and the voiced admonition of the other is explored in all the plays, which use the opportunities afforded by the theatrical situation — in particular, dialogue between live bodies — to stage the self's crossing-over into language and the place of the other. And despite Sarraute's avowed difficulty with the presence of the actors' bodies, and her declared difficulty with the theatrical form, I will contend that her writing, concerned as it is with the speaking subject's receptivity to sounds in space — the irrepressible response provoked in the self by the *voiced* words of the other —, found its natural home in the theatre.

What is the relevance of such psychoanalytical and philosophical work to consideration of Sarraute's theatre? As Ann Jefferson has shown in relation to the fiction, what concerned Sarraute above all in her writing was 'the disembodied inwardness of psychology', her lifelong effort to track, in writing, 'the movements of the tropism as it darts along the frontiers of consciousness'[8]. I will show here that Sarraute situates her plays on the point of crossing between body and language — the space of the voice. What is at stake therefore, in the Sarrautean drama, is precisely the issue of interpellation — the difficulty of accepting the terms of the voice that hails, and of responding to it. The space in which this drama occurs is the physical space of the voice, in which body and language are inexorably implicated.

Sarraute's writing for the theatre did not come easily to her. Her first play, *Le Silence*,[9] was only written after some persuasion from a young producer from Radio Stuttgart who wanted a play for radio broadcast.[10] Sarraute was sixty-four years old at the time: her transition to the stage was preceded by a long writing life in the domain of fiction. Between 1964 and 1982 she wrote six plays, and they constitute the

8. Ann Jefferson, *Nathalie Sarraute, Fiction and Theory: Questions of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 79–80.
9. Nathalie Sarraute, *Le Silence* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1964). All references to the plays in this essay are taken from the Gallimard compendium edition, *Nathalie Sarraute, Théâtre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).
10. Sarraute describes her transition from fiction to theatre in her essay 'Le Gant retourné', *Digraphe*, 32 (1984), 51–57.

entirety of her writing for the stage. In numerous interviews she stated that her kind of theatre was based purely on language, and that she was incapable of, or uninterested in, visualizing characters or stage movements.[11] Indeed, the play-texts are almost completely devoid of stage directions, although they do contain detailed directions for tone of voice. One might speculate that she was, therefore, not a natural dramatist, and that her limited output suggests that she was less than comfortable in the genre. When she came to write for the theatre, Sarraute aimed to create a theatre that would be devoid of characters, but which would nonetheless be centred entirely on language:

> C'est un théâtre de langage. Il n'y a que du langage. Il produit à lui seul l'action dramatique... je pense que c'est une action dramatique véritable; avec des péripéties, des retournements, du suspense, mais une progression qui n'est produite que par le langage.[12]

Ceaseless probing of the realm that lies beneath the surface of language — what she referred to as the world of the *tropisme* ('Ce sont des mouvements *indéfinissables*, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience; ils sont à l'origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles […]. Ils me paraissaient et me paraissent encore constituer la source secrète de notre existence.')[13] is the matter of her fiction. In fictional works that take as their sole subject 'l'usage de la parole' — the materiality of the *spoken* word — the qualities of words are described in great detail, and indeed it seems that part of Sarraute's fictional project was to chart and delimit a utopia or paradise of the word on the borderline of self and language. Her exploration probes a place where body and word have not quite separated, where the word is part of self and self is of the word. In

11. See Arnaud Rykner, *Théâtres du nouveau roman: Sarraute, Pinget, Duras* (Paris: José Corti, 1988), pp. 20–21.
12. Interview given by Sarraute in 1967, quoted by Arnaud Rykner in *Théâtres du nouveau roman: Sarraute, Pinget, Duras*, p. 44. Her first published work, a collection of short stories, was entitled *Tropismes* (Paris: Minuit, 1939).
13. Nathalie Sarraute, *L'Ère du soupçon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 8.

L'Usage de la parole, her collection of short stories published in 1980, words in their materiality are the focus.[14] Here, word replaces character and is conferred with corporeality: words are sometimes viscous, sometimes muscular, they are audible and available to the senses of touch and taste, part of the matter that flows in and out of the body — they are both ingested and expressed. The writer describes her task as similar to that of a doctor (Chekhov, in this instance), conducting an operation on a body, on bodies:

> Je vais, moi-même, opérer... ne suis-je pas médecin aussi?... la mise en mots... Une opération qui va dans ce désordre sans bornes mettre de l'ordre. L'indicible sera dit [...] Ce qui en moi flotte... flageole... vacille... tremble... palpite... frémit... se délite... se défait... se désintègre... Non, pas cela, rien de tout cela... Qu'est-ce que c'est? Ah voilà, c'est ici, ça vient se blottir ici, dans ces mots nets, étanches. Prend leur forme. [...] S'immobilise. Se fige. S'assagit. S'apaise.[15]

In her last published work, *Ouvrez*, words are literally, unashamedly, the central characters; words are at last allowed to claim the centrality that had always been their place in her writing: 'des mots, des êtres vivants parfaitement vivants, sont les protagonistes de chacun de ces drames'.[16] According to Ann Jefferson, 'if words have this central status in Sarraute, it is largely because their capacity to produce effects on their recipients far exceeds their capacity to signify'. Jefferson goes on to comment that language in Sarraute's writing 'is performative rather than constative [...] because in her world discourse is always powerfully directed at an other, its recipient'.[17] It would seem therefore, that what Sarraute wished to do in writing was to stage the drama of the body's relationship with words, and to explore how the self is constituted through this relationship.

14. Nathalie Sarraute, *L'Usage de la parole* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).
15. Sarraute, *L'Usage de la parole*, pp. 13–14.
16. Nathalie Sarraute, *Ouvrez* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), preface (written by Sarraute).
17. Jefferson, *Nathalie Sarraute, Fiction and Theory*, p. 63.

Sarraute's plays generally take as their starting-point a small hitch in the smooth flow of conversation between two or more interlocutors, or an infinitesimal crack on the surface of the everyday language of dialogic exchange. The lengthening of the vowel sound in the phrase 'c'est bien, ça', followed by a slight hesitation between 'bien' and 'ça' (*Pour un oui ou pour un non)*[18]; the words 'c'est beau' which the parents in the play of the same name[19] do not dare to pronounce in front of their son; the mispronunciation of the final syllable in words ending in *-isme* that so annoys the male and female protagonists in *Isma*[20] ('Romant*isma*. Captial*isma*. Syndical*isma*.'); a white lie told by a friend in company (*Le Mensonge)*[21]; a group member's dogged silence in the face of persistent requests for his opinion on the matters under discussion (*Le Silence)*[22] — Sarraute uses these seemingly trivial conversational moments in order to bring the characters to the source of the word, syllable, sound or silence, to the place where naming ceases:

> LUI. Isma... quand on le suit jusqu'à sa source... ça nous conduit...
> ELLE (*tout bas)*. A l'indicible. Qui n'a pas de nom. Qui n'est prévu nulle part. Que rien n'interdit.
>
> (*Isma* 115)

In an essay published in 1984, Sarraute told of how she made the move from fiction to theatre, which did not seem at all obvious to her at the outset. She explains that in her fiction she was able to evoke the world of 'la sous-conversation' through rhythm, and above all metaphor. But metaphors do not work on the stage, and in the plays the movement between conversation and 'sous-conversation' had to be communicated

18. Nathalie Sarraute, *Pour un oui ou pour un non* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), hereafter *POPN* in the text.
19. Nathalie Sarraute, *C'est beau* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).
20. Nathalie Sarraute, *Isma ou Ce qui s'appelle rien* (Paris: 1970), hereafter *Isma* in the text.
21. Nathalie Sarraute, *Le Mensonge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).
22. Nathalie Sarraute, *Le Silence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

through dialogue alone:

> Ainsi, le dedans devenait le dehors […]. Les personnages se sont mis à dire ce que d'ordinaire on ne dit pas. Le dialogue a quitté la surface, est descendu et s'est développé au niveau des mouvements intérieurs qui sont la substance de mes romans. Il s'est installé d'emblée au niveau du pré-dialogue.[23]

Dialogue and situation, therefore, retain the form of the quotidian. However, there is always a clash in these plays between characters for whom the 'plongée dans les zones interdites et obscures' seems natural, and characters who

> veulent à tout prix se maintenir à la surface, parmi leurs paysages familiers, sur la terre ferme depuis longtemps connue et prospectée où ils ont l'habitude de vivre. Si on les entraîne vers le fond, ils se débattent, c'est pour eux une descente aux enfers de l'anomalie, de la folie, ils veulent remonter à la surface.[24]

It was according to this basic device that Sarraute constructed her six plays. A very small 'craquelure' appears on the surface of an everyday conversation or dialogic situation, and suddenly, the reassuring forms (definitions, categories) begin to break down, allowing 'cet indéfinissable, cet innommable qui vit dans les profondeurs',[25] to percolate to the surface, causing mayhem among the interlocutors.

Françoise Asso points to a double chronology which becomes apparent in the course of any quest for origins in Sarraute's writing. Sequences of images describing the paralyzing, asphyxiating work of form (the suffocation, coating or covering of that which is moving and inchoate by *idée reçue*, definition, conventional feeling, character or plot) are counterpointed with another meaning. This second meaning

23. Sarraute, 'Le Gant retourné', p. 53.
24. Sarraute, 'Le Gant retourné', p. 54.
25. Sarraute, 'Le Gant retourné', p. 54.

may be inferred from the texts, namely, that it is form which comes first, where the form or image is 'ce contre quoi le sujet comme le texte se heurtent, ce contre quoi ils s'élancent, ce vers quoi ils s'avancent, ce qui les fait bouger'.[26] This suggests that the interest of Sarraute's work lies precisely in the movement between *forme* and *informe*, in what Barthes referred to as *intermittence:* 'la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition'.[27] It is in the coming and going of *forme* and *informe*, in the in-between of body and language — space of the voice — that Sarraute's theatre may be located. This is particularly evident in her last play, *Pour un oui ou pour un non*. External action is minimal: two men, H1 and H2, talk and two other characters — H3 and F — are brought in briefly to act as jury. The dialogue is initiated by H1, who comes to see H2 in order to find out why he has been a little distant of late. H2 is reluctant to deliver any reason other than 'rien', but H1's persistence eventually yields an explanation:

> H2. Eh bien... tu m'as dit il y a quelque temps... tu m'as dit... quand je me suis vanté de je ne sais plus quoi... de je ne sais plus quel succès... oui... dérisoire... quand je t'en ai parlé... tu m'as dit: 'C'est bien... ça'. (*POPN* 12)

Pressed further by an incredulous H1, H2 clarifies that his sense of injury sprang from the way his friend enunciated the three words:

> H2. ... il y avait entre 'C'est bien' et 'ça' un intervalle plus grand: 'C'est biiien..... ça...'. Un accent mis sur 'bien'... un étirement: 'biiien... ' et un suspens avant que 'ça' arrive... ce n'est pas sans importance. (*POPN* 14)

The drama unfolds from this point, and it is the staging of a clash between two worlds:

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26. Françoise Asso, *Nathalie Sarraute: Une écriture de l'effraction* (Paris: PUF, 1995), p. 11.
27. Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 19.

> H1. [...] Il me semble que là où tu es tout est... je ne sais pas comment dire... inconsistant, fluctuant... des sables mouvants où l'on s'enfonce... je sens que je perds pied... tout autour de moi se met à vaciller, tout va se défaire... il faut que je sorte de là au plus vite [...]
>
> H2. [...] Et moi... eh bien, puisque nous en sommes là... quand je suis chez toi, c'est comme de la claustrophobie... je suis dans un édifice fermé de tous les côtés... partout des compartiments, des cloisons, des étages... j'ai envie de m'échapper...

The cut and thrust of the dialogic exchange is rapid and incisive, moving inexorably to H2's passionate declaration that 'entre nous il n'y a pas de conciliation possible. Pas de rémission. C'est un combat sans merci. Une lutte à la mort. Oui, pour la survie. Il n'y a pas de choix. C'est toi ou moi' (*POPN* 48). Form and formlessness are pitted against each other, locked in a binary conflict of opposites — the language of the public domain (a combination of cliché, *lieu commun* and categorical absolute) versus the metaphorical language of intuition and apprehension. However, Valerie Minogue has shown convincingly in her work on this play that it was Sarraute's life's project to develop a form that would maintain 'the fluidity of lived experience',[28] and this effort is indeed apparent in the strategies she uses in this play to undermine, in turn, both positions, to create a polyphony of voices that move in the in-between of the two poles. Minogue demonstrates the extent to which the two characters borrow each other's voices — quote and mimic each other — and take on a range of other voices as they dramatize a number of scenarios in their attempt to convince each other of their own 'rightness'. The result of this is indeed the creation of a sense of volatility of voice, of instability of vocal source and of a multiplication of voices on the stage. For example, about half-way through the play, the characters appear to swop roles: H1 had been the one comfortable with absolutes and public

28. Valerie Minogue, 'Voices, Virtualities and Ventriloquism: Nathalie Sarraute's *Pour un oui ou pour un non*', *French Studies,* 49.2 (1995), 164–77 (p. 174).

language, with definitions and classifications, and H2 adept in the use of images and metaphors which allow for greater fluidity. It is tempting for an audience to accept H2's version of events which places him in the role of helpless victim and H1 in the role of bully. However, at this turning-point, H1 uses the images of traps and cages previously used by H2, in order to demonstrate that H2 is also reliant upon an inherent hierarchy of value judgements, which he too classifies and categorizes according to his own standards. H2 responds in a literal-minded fashion that appears to be out of keeping for him. Thus, the roles of *victime* and *bourreau* are reversed. Minogue concludes that 'the opposition here is between, on the one hand, acceptance of the language of classification and conformism, and on the other, rejection of categorization and a battle with and for language, the battle that keeps language alive'.[29] If Sarraute's theatre has a subject, then, it surely must be 'destruction' or 'demolition': the tearing down, or apart, of that which is smooth, fixed, whole in appearance. The writing is motivated by an urgency to keep things on the move. In developing a form of theatre that erased conventional characters and placed a circulation of voiced word centre stage, Sarraute was creating the ideal conditions for the dramatization of the Barthesian *intermittence*, inviting both actors and spectators to navigate, throughout the course of the play, the in-between of body and language.

This theatre stages the tension between the self's impulse toward address, the need for her/his voice to be heard by the other, for the self's words to be received and accepted by the other (essentially a need for dialogue) and nostalgia/longing for what Monique Wittig, in her essay on Sarraute's writing, referred to as 'le langage premier'[30] (which may be equated loosely with the Kristevan semiotic), a utopian space of plenitude, where the self, freed from the need to use words to communicate, is at play in the pleasure of the rhythms and sounds of language, the palpability and audibility of words, in the exuberant interaction of vocables:

29. Minogue, 'Voices, Virtualities and Ventriloquism', p. 174.
30. Monique Wittig, 'Le Lieu de l'action', *Digraphe,* 32 (1984), 69–75 (p. 71).

> LUI. Isma... quand on le suit jusqu'à sa source... ça nous conduit...
> ELLE (*tout bas*). A l'indicible. Qui n'a pas de nom. Qui n'est prévu nulle part. Que rien n'interdit.
>
> (*Isma* 115)

The protagonists in these plays often conjure, with words, a paradisiacal space constituted by language that has been freed from the requirement to name, to mean, to adopt positions:

> ELLE. Écoutez: romantis*ma*. Capitalis*ma*. Syndicalis*ma*... *ma*... *ma*... ça claque... il fait claquer ses lèvres...
> LUI. Il savoure ça... mm, c'est bon. Isma. [...]
> ELLE, *excitée*: Isma. Isma. Ma. Ma... Capitalisma. Syndicalisma. Structuralisma. Cette façon qu'il a de prononcer isma... Le bout se relève... ça s'insinue... Plus loin. Toujours plus loin. Jusqu'au cœur... Comme un venin... Isma... Isma...
>
> (*Isma* 109)

Thus, Sarraute the dramatist uses conventional situations and language to explore the source of the self, in what she referred to in her seminal essay *L'Ère du soupçon* as 'une matière anonyme comme le sang, dans un magma sans nom, sans contours'.[31] Each of the plays wallows, to some extent, in this paradisiacal place, before exploring the painful moment of splitting from the 'magma' in order to enter into dialogue with the other, the moment of forced departure from the place 'sans nom, sans contours' where there is no naming consciousness, where the self is everything and nothing:

> H1. Un bonheur sans nom?
> H2. Ni sans ni avec nom. Pas un bonheur du tout.
> H1. Alors quoi?
> H2. Alors rien qui s'appelle le bonheur. Personne n'est là pour regarder, pour donner un nom… On est ailleurs... en dehors... on

31. Sarraute, *L'Ère du soupçon*, p. 76.

> ne sait pas où l'on est, mais en tout cas on n'est pas sur vos listes.
> (*POPN* 37)

Theatre is surely the ideal medium for a writer who wants to explore the corporeal foundations of language. The live voice navigates the border between body and language, carrying with it the traces of the actor's personal history, invoking the early memories of the aural foundations of spatial understanding in both speaker and listener, and opening up the audio-vocal spaces between audience, actor and character. A large part of the power of live theatre derives from the physical/corporeal impact of vital words on the bodies of both the players and the members of the audience — the power of the voiced word framed in the representational space to effect bodily reactions in listeners both on- and off-stage.

> H2. Une petite chose, une toute petite chose sans importance vous conduit parfois ainsi là où l'on n'aurait jamais cru qu'on pourrait arriver... tout au fond de la solitude... dans les caves, les casemates, les cachots... quelle clarté... quel ordre... Ah voilà... c'est le moment... c'est la fin...mais moi je ne suis rien... moi je n'existe pas... elle se dégage hors de son enveloppe éclatée... elle s'épand, elle, la vérité même... [...] seule... toute seule... si seule...[32]

Sarraute the writer is drawn to the space where 'I' is nothing, to a level of consciousness that remains outside, before the socialization of the subject, the formation of identity, the assumption of character and the acceptance of the rules of the social game. This is essentially a pre-verbal space. The characters or voices of her plays move into and out of this space, where language is pure sonorousness. In this theatre, the word carries the imprint of earlier selves, of subjectivity at the point of its emergence from the magma of sounded vocables. The break between sound and sense, between signifier and signified — of which

32. Nathalie Sarraute, *Elle est là* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) in *Nathalie Sarraute: Théâtre*, pp. 31–59 (p. 59).

every word bears the mark — is also the rupture or fissure between semiotic and symbolic within the self. According to Wittig, in making what happens to the individual in the exchange of words the sole theme of her work, Sarraute uncovered 'des phénomènes de langage vivant qu'aucun linguiste n'aurait pu mettre au jour'.[33] Wittig reads Sarraute's writing as an archaeology of a borderland, the border between 'l'usage de la parole tel qu'il est pratiqué journellement' and 'les mots d'avant les mots, d'avant les "pères", d'avant les "mères", d'avant les "vous" [...] le langage premier (dont le dictionnaire nous donne une idée approximative) celui où le sens n'est pas encore advenu'.[34] According to this reading, Sarraute's writing prospects the threshold within the self that demarcates the inarticulate from the articulate self — what Kristeva referred to as 'la coupure signifiant/signifié [...] Cette unification toujours scindée, produite par une rupture, et impossible sans elle'.[35] The abstraction of sense from the matter of language, the split in language and in the speaking subject that makes the symbol possible, results in a permanent ambivalence within the speaking subject, an on-going relationship with what Adam Phillips refers to as 'our inarticulate and virtually inarticulate selves [...] these buried, vestigial versions of ourselves [...] the border within ourselves where we struggle or delight to articulate against powerful external and internal resistances'.[36] Wittig contends that it is in the speaking self's interests to forget its knowledge of the nature of language, of where words come from, while Phillips notes that 'it is not quite clear what the limits of language are limits of'.[37]

Psychoanalysis suggests that the border within the self where the struggle with words takes place is also the site where the death drive is forced underground. Kristeva, for example, writes that language is a defensive construction, that it has the capacity 'to store up the death

33. Wittig, 'Le Lieu de l'action', p. 70.
34. Wittig, 'Le Lieu de l'action', p. 71.
35. Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, p. 46.
36. Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 47.
37. Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery*, p. 40.

drive', thereby protecting the body.[38] It may well be, therefore, that writing that chooses to sound the fragile psychic border where the self is born into the place of the other through what Monique Wittig has called, in relation to Sarraute's writing, 'interlocution', is writing that will also uncover 'the insistent presence of drive heterogeneity' within the writing subject, an uncovering of the place where language is less defensive and the self more susceptible to the ambivalence of drive activity. Wittig suggests that Sarraute returns in her writing to the site of perpetration of originary violence, to the place in the self's trajectory where body/breath/voice became separated from language in some painful, radical way, as if accession to the symbolic involved massive repression of parts of the self that would only ever be apprehended subsequently as threatening to the self's survival. She concludes that Sarraute does not simplify the linguistic impasse by describing it as a binary opposition between semiotic and symbolic, between the realm of rhythm, echolalia and intonation and that of the Law of the Father: Sarraute's writerly project extends to an examination of the movement *between* the two realms, of how both modes of relating to language interact within the individual subject — a movement, argues Wittig, which gives rise to an insurmountable conflict within the subject:

> Et c'est dans l'intervalle entre la locution et l'interlocution que le conflit surgit: l'étrange déchirement, la tension dans le mouvement du particulier au général que fait tout être humain quand du je unique de la langue, sans formes, sans frontières, infini, il devient tout à coup rien ou presque rien, tu, vous, il, elle, 'un petit bonhomme plutôt laid', un interlocuteur.[39]

Relationship with the other in Sarraute's writing is very much a question of an appeal to the other, an address — an invocation. Dialogue is what is longed for, desired. According to Françoise Asso, 'ce qui fait courir les personnages de Nathalie Sarraute, c'est aussi bien la recherche de

38. Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, p. 47.
39. Wittig, 'Le Lieu de l'action', p. 74.

la parole de l'autre que la nécessité d'adresser la sienne'.[40] And yet, what ensues is warfare, conducted on a battleground that is linguistic in essence.[41] The plays emerge from a disturbance at the level of interpellation: Sarraute uses the stage to explore blockages in the linguistic exchange as a result of a failure of address, of non-acceptance of the self's words, for example, or because of the self's fear of the oppressive power of the words of the other. The Sarrautean character is nonetheless impelled to seek the other in dialogue, and this dialogic impulse invariably drives the character to have recourse to notions of gamesmanship, and to impose the rules of the game on his or her interlocutor. The greatest pain that the other can inflict is to refuse the linguistic exchange, to offer his or her silence. In Sarraute's writing in general, but in her theatre in particular, interlocution is almost always a relationship of aggression, a test of strength of the one and the other.

Sarraute uses rhythm and metaphor to explore the sense of insuperable distance from the other experienced by the self, the fear engendered by the unknowability of the other, frequently expressed in images of the dark cave of the mind of the other, where a monster, a 'boa constrictor' lurks, ready to attack, to contest the 'purity' and 'truth' of the self's words and ideas:

> H2. Notre idée serait happée, traînée, enfermée là-bas [...] on dirait que là-bas un boa constrictor...
> H3. [...] ce boa assoupi, enfermé dans sa tête.[42]

What is in the head of the other, the expression of the other's subjectivity in sound and rhythm, is threatening to the survival of the self, and is experienced as a death-bearing poison. The words of the other harbour the death of the self:

40. Asso, *Nathalie Sarraute*, p. 63.
41. See Valerie Minogue's *Nathalie Sarraute and the War of the Words* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981).
42. Sarraute, *Elle est là*, p. 49.

> H2. Alors voilà. Et je devrai vivre avec ça près de moi, ça enfoui là, tapi là... savoir que c'est là, toujours là, dans un coin... comme l'idée de la mort, présente à chaque instant, quoi qu'on fasse...[43]
> ELLE (*excitée*). Isma. Isma. Ma. Ma... Capitalisma. Syndicalisma. Cette façon qu'il a de prononcer isma... Le bout se relève... ça s'insinue... Plus loin. toujours plus loin. Jusqu'au cœur... Comme un venin...Isma...Isma.
>
> (*Isma* 56)

Under duress, the self experiences the desire to annihilate the other, to extirpate the noxious thought or expression definitively, to break open the dark cave of the other's mind and flood it with the cleansing light of the self's truth. Sarraute is not above using humour, however, in all the plays, to explore and expose the self's murderous megalomania:

> H2. [...] S'approcher d'elle par derrière avec une cordelette, un foulard... ou alors un poignard, une hachette... Moi, rien que d'y penser, ça me donne des rires nerveux. Vous voyez ça? Une belle petite idée, née en nous, toute fraîche, éclose... toute étincelante de vérité, une libellule, un papillon de toute beauté... elle pourrait en parfaite impunité... sortir, voleter, se poser...là-bas, sur cette tête...
> H3. Morte.
> H2. Voleter devant ces yeux...
> H3. Oui, éteints... pour toujours.
> H2. Pénétrer dans ces oreilles sourdes. Chatouiller cette petite cervelle inerte...[44]

As Jefferson has shown, it is a body in bits and pieces that is represented in Sarraute's fiction,[45] and this is no less the case for the body represented in the metaphorical fabric of her theatrical texts. The Lacanian morselized body that is everywhere apparent in her writing

43. Nathalie Sarraute, *Elle est là*, p. 48.
44. Nathalie Sarraute, *Elle est là*, p. 51.
45. Jefferson, *Nathalie Sarraute, Fiction and Theory*, p. 84.

suggests that the location for the Sarrautean drama is indeed the mirror stage, the threshold of language and the visible world.

In Sarraute's theatre therefore, a fragmented subjectivity that has its origins in rupture, emerges in the interstices between voiced vowels and vocables. The difficulty with this form of theatre lies in achieving a balance between the physical presence of the actors on the stage and the volatile, inchoate nature of the material for which they are the conduits. Sarraute expressed concern on numerous occasions that the force of the actors' presence on her stage would cause the plays to descend into realism, into the clichés of plot and characterization.[46] Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that the plays generally represent groups of ordinary-looking characters in middle-class settings — no characters trapped in urns or buried up to their necks in sand. The characters and settings invite realism, and conventional interpretation. Claude Régy, who directed a number of Sarraute's plays for the Parisian stage in the late 1960s and 1970s, acknowledged that the presence of actors indeed presents a problem in this theatre:

> Je peux même dire que [...] la présence des acteurs est pour moi une gêne, parce que je n'ai pas trouvé comment supprimer cette équivoque qui fait qu'ils sont pris pour des personnages, assimilés à des personnages.[47]

The crux of Sarraute's theatre lies in this *équivoque* or ambivalence between the actor's body and the flux of verbal material that is in motion between the bodies on the Sarrautean stage. She capitalizes on the tension between the vocal and the visible, between the unrepresentable and the mechanisms of representation, where the physical body trapped in the eye of the other/seer perpetually threatens to topple over into character. Again, it is in the stress and strain of the tension, or pull in opposite directions, that her work for the stage is located: the pull to precipitation/solidification into character, on the one hand, and the

46. Arnaud Rykner, *Nathalie Sarraute* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 182.
47. Rykner, *Nathalie Sarraute*, p. 138.

resistance to the Law's determination to codify, classify and categorize, to establish fixed positions, on the other. It is the volatility of the tremors of threat and longing that circulate in the sub-text, on the underside of words and social identities, that was of essential interest to her. The conditions of the auditory, characterized above all by motility and a quality of 'omnipresent simultaneity',[48] would seem to provide a paradigm for the space that Sarraute was attempting to create in her theatre, where a multiplicity of voices detached from the shackles of character would be free to reverberate with echoes of the body on the site of its splitting in two.

In all of her plays, Sarraute works to ensure that the 'figures' on her stage do not harden into characters. In each case, by a series of reversals, she undermines character positions, creating a polyphony of voices that move in the in-between of fixed positions. For ultimately what is being staged is the divided self, the interplay of the voices of self and other within a consciousness. The result is the creation of a sense of volatility of voice, of instability of vocal source, and of a multiplication of voices. The challenge to those staging her plays, then, is to maintain the knife-edge balance between all that is apparently fixed and stable on the stage — notably the visual image — and all that is apparently mobile and indeterminate, principally the excesses of the voiced body spilling over into the murderous hyperactivity of the dialogic cut and thrust that is such a feature of the writing. This is a theatre that calls attention to the voice and its context: the minutiae of physical gesture and facial expression and the horizon of silence both within the speaker, and externalized in the play of light and shade on the stage. Simone Benmussa, who collaborated with Sarraute on a number of projects, indicates in her discussion of Sarraute's work that what fascinated her was Sarraute's persistent attempt to overcome the successive nature of writing in order to communicate the simultaneity of sensation, but through words.

48. In her work on psychic envelopes, Édith Lecourt described the condition of the auditory self as that of 'une simultanéité multiprésente' — see 'L'Enveloppe musicale' in *Les Enveloppes psychiques*, Didier Anzieu et al (Paris: Dunod, 2000), pp. 223–46 (p. 223).

As Benmussa conceives of it, this is a miniaturist's theatre, and one which focuses on the inner life of all the players in an auditorium. As a stage director, she is clearly interested in the possibility of re-transcribing the materiality and vocality of this writing in the stage space. For Benmussa, Sarraute's writing manages to suggest a second layer of hidden/unheard voices pressing behind and beneath the words, the silent voices of impossible selves transmuting themselves into rhythm, tone, inflexion, hesitation. The theatrical space nurtures these impossible voices, in the spaces between vocal emissions and muscular responses to the manipulation of breath. In other words, tropistic activity is communicated in the tension between sensation and meaning that can be seen and heard at every moment in the voices, on the faces, and in the gestures of the actors in this very particular kind of theatre.

It seems that it was the *sound* of her texts that was most interesting to Sarraute, the sound of the words, their rhythms and plasticity, their capacity for mutation through the action of intonation — in other words, their orality. Benmussa agrees that Sarraute manages to capture something of the orality and aurality of the spoken word in writing:

> Une parole, c'est-à-dire la combinaison d'un mot et de son intonation, une intonation faite de souffle, de modulations, de rythmes, donc de charges émotives, d'intentions infimes qui donne au mot son sens, au double sens de ce mot: signification et trajectoire. C'est bien quelqu'un qui est visé.[49]

The aspect of the spoken word that Benmussa refers to here is word as currency of exchange between interlocutors, the appeal to the other that is a fundamental ingredient of Sarraute's writing. The central — perhaps the only — theme of Sarraute's writing, therefore, is the drama of the word circulating between self and other, through the audio-vocal cavities of the interlocutors. Her great talent was to capture in writing the physical energy and force of voiced words — the power of words

49. Simone Benmussa, *Entretiens avec Nathalie Sarraute* (Tournai: La Renaissance du Livre, 1999), p. 26.

to deliver a body-blow — the word lodged in the muscle of the throat, expressed in the muscles of the face, the hand. Her dramatic writing capitalizes on the conditions of the theatre to breathe life into the dialogic exchange by having it voiced by two or more interlocutors who show the effects of the blows and shocks of the language of the other on their faces, in their hands, in the slightest movements of their bodies, and, above all, in the modulations of their voices. Benmussa notes that Sarraute's language is impulsive: each word uttered is charged with the feeling that propelled it to the outside. This is a language of urgency.

Invocation of the other is therefore central, as is the longing to have the self's words accepted, endorsed without contention. But overwhelming anxiety is the corollary of this address; fear of rejection by the other, of isolation and exclusion, but also fear of merging/fusion with the other and suffocation of the self. The crack opened up by the clash of word and intonation is the space in which her dangerous dramas are played out; for they are indeed felt to be threatening to the life of the self that seeks to cloak itself in the language of the commonplace. Both actors and spectators must feel the unease, the threat and the danger that these plays generate. Benmussa and Claude Régy, both of whom specialized, to some extent, in the staging of Sarraute's plays on the Parisian stage, have written about the centrality of fine, close work on sonority by actors in this theatre. In his director's notes for the actors in the 1975 production of *C'est beau*, Régy points out that the 'rupture' brought about in the family group, through the utterance of the phrase 'Tu ne trouves pas que c'est beau', also fissures 'l'air autour d'eux, les vibrations qui les relient'. Utterance of a phrase causes a disturbance between three people that runs so deep that their bodies are in fear for their lives. The scene between them has become a battlefield where 'on est brûlé. Ecorché. La peau morte s'arrache et tombe. On est stérilisé. Impuissant. Tout le système nerveux ébranlé de secousses où la mort se transmet par relais. De cellule en cellule. La chair tombe en poudre'.[50] This sense of physical entropy must be conveyed by the actors through

50. Claude Régy, '*C'est beau*: Théâtre de la violence. Divagations de mise en scène', in *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, 89 (1975), 80–89 (p. 87).

the words alone. The task, according to Régy, is to invent 'un ton pour un matériau inconnu, une sonorité. Passer de l'intérieur à l'extérieur. Faire sentir deux mondes. Leur lutte'.[51] The struggle between two worlds — the disparity between the language of the public domain, of propriety and social conformity, and something as yet unknown, for which no words exist, 'quelque chose qui relie au lieu de séparer, qui fait vivre au lieu de tuer'[52] — must be conveyed through the voicing of the words: 'par périphrases, par phrases interrompues, par trous entre les phrases, par les émanations de l'imaginaire, les silences...'.[53]

Simone Benmussa has also insisted that Sarraute's form of theatre is wholly dependent upon physical, corporeal interaction between the actors, who must really listen and hear the words addressed to them anew in each performance — they must be affected physically by the electrical charge of the words of the text they are inhabiting each time they inhabit it. In this sense, there is no text available in advance, no plot, no characters — the text is written in the playing, which is a re-transcription rather than an interpretation:

> Sur une scène, l'intonation se prépare. Les regards, les déplacements précis, les détournements, les positions d'un personnage par rapport à un autre, la place d'où le mot est envoyé, sa plus ou moins grande puissance, sont autant d'éléments qui contribuent à cette écriture qu'est le jeu.[54]

In voicing the text on the stage, voice and body are inextricably linked, they function together to produce the text, which is inevitably a different text to the one contained in the script, or the one voiced over the airwaves:

> L'hésitation d'une main avant un mot et celui-ci sera préparé pour un léger suspens, un doute. Un poing fermé et l'influx passant par

51. Régy, '*C'est beau*: théâtre de la violence', p. 88.
52. Régy, '*C'est beau*: théâtre de la violence', p. 87.
53. Régy, '*C'est beau*: théâtre de la violence', p. 89.
54. Benmussa, *Entretiens avec Nathalie Sarraute*, p. 33.

> le bras vers le souffle seront déterminants quant au poids de ce même mot et son sens différent, sans insistance, sans expression psychologique particulière.[55]

Benmussa describes the space the actor inhabits when playing in Sarraute's theatre as a 'minefield', and words as grenades launched into the air with fuses alight. In order to survive in this space, the actor must focus on tracking her/his interior emotional and physical responses to the words as they are voiced and heard, must attempt to convey these interior responses to the exterior through intonation, expression and gesture, the face in particular working in tandem with the voice. Ultimately, then, the Sarrautean drama of the self called to enter the language of self-ascription through the appropriation of fear and guilt is the drama of the self in voice. What is at stake is the self's vocal response to the voice of the other calling upon the self to respond, to enter into an interlocutionary pact, to make the transition, through voice, to language as the place of the other.

Contemporary playwright Valère Novarina calls for a new kind of actor, one who will no longer simply be 'le figurant, le montreur de choses, l'agent sémantique'.[56] For Novarina,

> L'acteur a cessé d'être le lieu vivant, le point focal dans l'espace où le texte est brûlé, se change en parole; il a cessé d'être celui que l'on vient voir non manipuler ni représenter, mais avancer son corps comme le lieu où une transfiguration s'opère en vrai.[57]

Sarraute's theatre calls for actors who can perform, through the action of breath and voice, the human drama of people who are, as Novarina describes it, 'à chaque instant surpris d'être captifs à la croisée de la chair et du langage'.[58] In this respect, her theatre both looks back to

55. Benmussa, *Entretiens avec Nathalie Sarraute*, p. 33.
56. Valère Novarina, *Lumières du corps* (Paris: P.O.L., 2006), p. 82.
57. Novarina, *Lumières du corps*, p. 82.
58. Novarina, *Lumières du corps*, p. 50.

Antonin Artaud's visionary concept of a theatre of cruelty, and forward to a form of plot-less, character-less theatre that is only now beginning to develop elsewhere:

> Ce que le théâtre peut encore arracher à la parole, ce sont ses possibilités d'expansion hors des mots, de développement dans l'espace, d'action dissociatrice et vibratoire sur la sensibilité. C'est ici qu'interviennent les intonations, la prononciation particulière d'un mot.[59]

Sarraute's writing for the theatre explores, therefore, the *intermittence* — the coming and going — of the self in language, where *sounded* words play all the parts. In the plays, she uses the opportunities afforded by the theatrical situation to mine the juncture of body and language, namely, the voice. It is voice that creates space, time and the dynamic of exchange between interlocutors in this theatre. Although her theatre never refers overtly to the *maternal* voice, it is nonetheless the drama of the nascent subject on the boundary of Imaginary and Symbolic that is staged. In her plays of and for voice, Sarraute stages an oscillation between the desire to linger in a voluptuous sonorousness, 'un paradis fait de mots visibles audibles palpables palatables'[60], and the desire to answer the call to align oneself with the Law, to enter into the language of self-ascription through the appropriation of guilt. Her theatre never rests in either position.

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59. Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 131.
60. Monique Wittig, 'Le Lieu de l'action', p. 72.