The Place of the Action

Monique Wittig

What has been taking place in Sarraute’s work since Les Fruits d'or is so total a transformation of the substance of the novel that it is difficult to grasp it as such. As it has the volatility of spoken words, I will call the material with which she works—in order to establish a comparison with what linguists call “locution”—“interlocution.” By this word, infrequently used in linguistics, I imply all that occurs between people when they speak. It includes the phenomenon, in its entirety, which goes beyond speech proper. And as the meaning of this word derives from interrupt, to cut someone short, that which does not designate a mere speech act, I extend it to any action linked to the use of speech: to accidents of discourse (pauses, excess, lack, tone, intonation) and to effects relating to it (tropisms, gestures).

In this perspective, Nathalie Sarraute’s characters are interlocutors: more anonymous even than Kafka’s K., they have the tenor of Plato’s Georgias, Critons, Euthyphron. Called forth by dialogue and the same philosophical necessity, they disappear like meteorites or like people we pass in the street, people who are neither more nor less real than characters of a novel and who are bedecked with a name to satisfy the needs of our inner fiction. But what matters here and above those interlocutors who, for the reader, are ordinary characters, ordinary propositions, is Sarraute’s philosophical matter, the location and the interlocation, what she herself, with regard to the novel, calls “l’usage de la parole” [the use of speech]. Unlike the science of linguistics, which has but one anatomical point of view on language, the point of view of the novel does not have to impose limits on itself for it can collect, gather, in a single movement, causes, effects, and actors. With Sarraute, the novel creates phenomena in literature which as yet have no name, either in science or philosophy.

It must first be noted that all those problems relating to character, to point of view, to dialogue which Sarraute developed in L’Ere du souffron, have been resolved by the fact that the use of speech has become the exclusive theme of her books. The character, totally changed in its form, was still too cumbersome for the needs of the text. This form itself has disappeared. The spatiotemporal universe, which generally constitutes a pregnant element in fiction (description of places, of buildings, of precise geographical spaces) and which was already very restricted in the novels of Sarraute preceding Les Fruits d’or, is now the most abstract that it can be: it is any unspecified place where one speaks or else, perhaps, a mental space with imaginary interlocutors.

Sometimes an interlocutor breaks off, drops the conversation, and withdraws to undetermined places. Sometimes, too, there is a “here” and a “there,” but this indication of distance does not correspond to place, but to a disparity at work in the language: Those people there and these people here are not speaking the same language. The point of view, far from being unique, is constantly and quickly shifting, according to the interlocutors’ interventions, provoking changes of meaning, variations. The multiplicity of this point of view and its mobility are produced and sustained by the rhythm of the writing that is broken up by what is called discourse and its accidents. It is important to emphasize this multiplicity as far as the psychological, ethical, or political interpretation of the characters is concerned, for no interpretation is possible. It is, on the contrary, continually prevented. Not one of the spoken discourses, not even the inner dialogues or the inner discourses, is assumed by the author and, further, there is no privileged interlocutor entrusted with her point of view (contrary to Plato’s Socrates), that which forces the reader to adopt them all successively, as temporary scenarios, as in Marteau, for example. Thus “le lecteur, sans cesse tendu, aux aguets, comme s’il était à la place de celui à qui les paroles s’adressent, mobilise tous ses instincts de défense, tous ses dons d’intuition, sa mémoire, ses facultés de jugement et de raisonnement” [the reader, who has remained intent, on the lookout, as though he were in the shoes of the person to whom the words are directed, mobilizes all his instincts of defense, all his powers of intuition, his memory, his faculties of judgment and reasoning].

I would delight in speaking of the very substance of the text...
Three Decades of the French New Novel

Monique Wittig

meaning. "Par toutes leurs voyelles, par toutes leurs consonnes [les mots] se tendent, s'ouvrent, aspirent, s'imbient, s'emplissent, s'engloient, s'épandent à la mesure d'espaces infinis, à la mesure de beauxheurs sans bornes." [With all their vowels, their consonants, (words) stretch, open up, inhale, become saturated, fill up, swell, spread over infinite space, over boundless happinesses.]

Language exists as a paradise made of visible, audible, palpable, palatable words:

quand le fracas des mots heurtés les uns contre les autres couvre leur sens . . . quand frôttés les uns contre les autres, ils se recouvrent de gerbes éclaterantes . . . quand dans chaque mot son sens réduit à un petit noyau est entouré de vastes étendues brumeuses . . . quand il est dissimulé par un jeu de reflets, de réverbérations, de miroitements . . . quand les mots entourés d'un halo semblent voguer suspendus à distance les uns des autres . . . quand se posant en nous un par un, ils s'implantent, s'imbient lentement de notre plus obscure substance, nous emplissent tout entiers, se dilatent, s'étendent à notre mesure, au-delà de notre mesure, hors de toute mesure?

[when the clash of words colliding with one another drowns their meaning . . . when, rubbed together, they produce a shower of sparks which conceals it . . . when the meaning of each word is reduced to a tiny kernel surrounded by vast, misty spaces . . . when it is hidden under the play of reflections, of reverberations, of scintillations . . . when words are surrounded by a halo and seem to float, suspended at a distance from one another . . . when they settle into us one by one, embed themselves, slowly imbibe our most obscure substance, fill our every nook and cranny, dilate, spread to our measure, beyond our measure, beyond all measure?]

But even while the social contract, such as it is, guarantees the entire and exclusive disposition of language to everyone, and while, in accordance with this same right, it guarantees the possibility of its exchange with any interlocutor on the same terms—for the very fact that the exchange is possible guarantees reciprocity—it nevertheless appears that the two modes of relating to language have nothing in common. It is almost as though, suddenly, instead of there being one contract, there were two. In one, the explicit contract—the one where the "I" is made a human being by giving it the use of speech, the one where the practice of language is constitutive of the "I" who speaks it—face to face with words, "I" is a hero (béros—héraut, Héraut, erre haut) to which the world, which it forms and deforms at will, belongs. And everyone agrees
to grant this right to the "I"; it is a universal agreement. Here, I do not have to stand on ceremony, I can put my boots on the table, I am almighty, or as Pinget says in Bag. I am the "roi de moi" [I am my own king]. In the other contract, the implicit one, the very opposite takes place. With the appearance of an interlocutor, the poles are reversed:

"Disons que ce qui pourrait les faire céder à ce besoin de fuite... nous l'avons tous éprouvé... ce serait la perspective de ce à quoi elles seront obligées de se soumettre... cette petite opération... Petite! Mais à quoi bon essayer raisonnablement, docilement, décemment, craintivement de s'abstenir dernière "petite"? Soyons francs, pas petite, pas petite du tout... le mot qui lui convient est "énorme"... une énorme opération, une véritable mue."

"Let us say that what might make them give way to this need to escape... we have all felt it... would be the prospect of what they would be obliged to submit to... that little operation... Little! But what good is it to try—reasonably, docilely, decently, fearfully—to take refuge behind "little"? Let us be frank, not little, not little at all... the appropriate word is "enormous"... an enormous operation, a veritable mue."

That the other advances in his own words is sufficient for the "I" even before it utters a word, to be thrown a robe which is anything but a royal cloak:

"D'elle quelque chose se dégage... comme un fluide... comme des rayons... il sent que sous leur effet il subit une opération par laquelle il est mis en forme, qui lui donne un corps, un sexe, un âge, l'effable d'un signe comme une formule mathématique résumant un long développement."

"[Something emanates from her... Something like a fluid, like rays... under whose effect he feels he is undergoing an operation which gives him a form, which gives him a body, a sex, an age, the ineffable of a sign like a mathematical formula that sums up a long development.]"

Even before "I" knows it, "I" is made a prisoner, it becomes the victim of a fool's deal. What it has mistaken for absolute liberty, the necessary reciprocity, without which language is impossible, is but the surrender, a deal that overthrows the "I" at the mercy of the slightest word. That this word be uttered and

secured, contraint to se relever et à marcher, poussé à coups de crosse, à coups de pied dans le troupeau grisâtre des captifs, tous portant la même tenue, classés dans la même catégorie.

[The center, the secret spot where the General Staff is located and from where he, the Commander-in-Chief, all the maps spread out for him to see, examining the lay of the land, listening to reports, taking decisions, directing operations, a bomb hit it... he is thrown to the ground, his insignia torn off, he is shaken, obliged to get up and walk, pushed forward, by blows from rifle butts, kicks, into the gray flock of the prisoners, all dressed alike, classified in the same category.]

In the second contract, the implicit one, in the interlocution no holds are barred and may the strongest win, he deserves it. To speak of one's right would be inappropriate in this case, for one is the strongest only by taking advantage of the unlimited power over the other granted by language, a power all the more unlimited because it has no recognized social existence. It is, therefore, with complete impunity that the strongest in words can become a criminal. Words, les paroles,

pourvu qu'elles présentent une apparence à peu près anodine et banale peuvent être et sont souvent en effet, sans que personne y trouve à redire, sans que la victime ose clairement se l'avouer, l'arme quotidienne, insidieuse et très efficace, d'innumérables petits crimes. Car rien n'égaie la vitesse avec laquelle elles touchent l'interlocuteur au moment où il est le moins sur ses gardes, ne lui donnant souvent qu'une sensation de chatouillement désagréable ou de légère brûlure, la précision avec laquelle elles vont droit en lui aux points les plus secrets et les plus vulnérables, se logent dans ses replis les plus profonds, sans qu'il ait le désir, ni les moyens, ni le temps de riposter.

[provided they present a more or less harmless, commonplace appearance, can be and, in fact, without anyone's taking exception, without the victim's even daring to admit it frankly himself... often are the daily, insidious, and very effective weapon responsible for countless minor crimes. For there is nothing to equal the rapidity with which they attain to the other person at the moment when he is least on his guard, often giving him merely the sensation of disagreeable tickling or slight burning; or the precision with which they enter straight into him at his most secret and vulnerable points, and lodge in his innermost recesses, without his having the desire, the means, or the time to retort.]

With the turn of a word, one is brought into line and led between two gentlemen, like the narrator in Martereau, for that which, in
accord with the primary pact, establishes the “I” as free, now holds its bound hand and foot. Winged words are also bludgeons, language is a lure, paradise is also the hell of discourses, no longer the confusion of languages as in Babel, or discord, but the grand ordi- nance, the bringing into line of a strict meaning, of a social meaning.

What is taking place between the two contracts? Why is it that, at any moment, no longer almighty subject, no longer king, “I” can find itself rolling in the dust at the foot of the throne? When Sartre spoke in the preface to Portrait d’un inconnu of the “va et vient incessant du particulier au général” [incessant coming and going from the particular to the general], that which is the approach of any science, he was thinking of the tropisms, of this movement of consciousness, of this indicator of a reaction to one or several words, and he was imagining a particular consciousness trying to reach the general. Actually, however, it is just the contrary, since each time “I” is spoken in the singular, it is then, according to Sarraute, that “I” is the general, an “infinite,” a “nebula,” a “world.” And one interlocutor, only one, is sufficient for the “I” to pass from the general to a simple particular in a movement that is exactly the reverse of that attributed to science.

It is there, in the interval between location and interlocution, that the conflict emerges: the strange wrenching, the tension in the movement from particular to general, experienced by any human being when from an “I”—unique in language, shapeless, boundless, infinite—it suddenly becomes nothing or almost nothing, “you,” “he,” “she,” “a small, rather ugly fellow,” an interlocutor. The brutal reduction (a “véritable mue” [true molt]) implies that the so-promising contract was glaringly false. And thus, for Sarraute, it implies not only that the social meaning or the contradictions between the general interest and the particular interest, in exercising a constant pressure over the exchange of language, particularly in the interlocution, are at the origin of the conflict, but also it is toward the entire system that Sarraute turns the interrogation: toward the fundamental flaw in the contract, the worm in the fruit, toward the fact that the contract in its very structure is an impossibility—given that, through language, “I” is at once everything, “I” has every power (as a locutor), and that, suddenly, there is the downfall wherein “I” loses all power (as an interlocutor) and is endangered by words that can cause madness, kill. The social significance, the commonplaces are not the cause: they come after, and are used. It even seems that that is what they are there for, “one has only to draw from the common stock.” Moreover, they are at everyone’s disposal, everyone makes fervent use of them, the weak, the strong, each, in his own way, playing the victim, the cocky one, the model young couple, the self-assured man, without there being any winners or losers. The reductive “you” which levels them, labels them “honteuses et rougissantes dans leur ridicule nudité, esclaves anonymes enchâinées l’une à l’autre, bêtail conduit pèle­mêle au marché” [shamed and blushing in their ridiculous nudity, anonymous slaves chained one to the other, cattle led pell-mell to the market] can, like a boomerang, turn back on the aggressor, as is the case in Martereau, where the powerful one, in turn, becomes impoverished: “tendre faible transi de froid . . . les gamins lui jettent des pierres . . . La face peinte, affublé d’oripeaux grotesques, elle le force chaque soir à faire le pitre, à crier cocorico sur l’estrade d’un beuglant, sous les rires, les huées.” [Tender, weak, numb with cold . . . the streeturchins throw stones at him . . . With his face painted, rigged out in an absurd get-up, she forces him each evening to play the clown, to crow “cockle-doodle-do” on the stage of a cheap cabaret, while the audience howls andhoots.]1

Any social actor makes use of this weapon of commonplaces, whatever his situation, for it is the debased form of reciprocity that has founded the exchange contract. But the conflict due to the confrontation of the two modes of relation to language (location and interlocution) remains, nevertheless, insurmountable, from whatever point of view.

The substance of Sarraute’s novels envelops this double movement, this deadly embrace, with its violent, vehement, passionate words. That is what leads me to say that the paradise of the social contract exists only in literature, where the tropisms, by their violence, are able to counter any reduction of the “I” to a common denominator, to tear open the closely woven material of the commonplaces, and to continually prevent their organization into a system of compulsory meaning.