

## **The Novel as Instrument of Observation and Investigation: Nathalie Sarraute**

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### **Introductory Remarks on the Relationship Between Literature and Knowledge**

The subject of the following considerations is the relationship between the novel and knowledge in the œuvre of Nathalie Sarraute (1900-1999). I would like to examine this connection by studying some of her theoretical texts and the eponymously-titled novel *Martereau* (1953), and in doing so also cast a sidelong glance at Marcel Proust, who – along with authors such as Dostoevsky, Kafka and Joyce – plays a central role for Sarraute. A suitable introduction to the topic is furnished by a quotation from a theoretical text by the author entitled “Roman et réalité” [“Novel and Reality”] (1959). In this text, Nathalie Sarraute argues that the novel, like art in general, is the search for a new reality and that it thus becomes an instrument of knowledge:

Surely, by virtue of this search, this effort to make visible an invisible universe, the literary work, like any work of art, is an instrument of knowledge. For this reason, it has been compared to the work of scholars who also try to express an unknown reality, by recreating it in a model, by shaping it into a system, by capturing it in the web of their theoretical constructions. On account of the imaginative creativity, the visionary powers they reveal, their cohesion, their elegance and their strength, these constructions have often been likened to the great poetic works. (Sarraute, “Roman et réalité” 1645)<sup>1</sup>

The task of literature, which it has in common with science, is therefore to produce knowledge by making visible something invisible. However, according to Nathalie Sarraute, there is also a fundamental difference between literature and science:

The reality the work of art reveals is not of a rational nature. In order to be communicated, it must be expressed through a perceivable form. Without this form, no communication is possible, the form being the very movement by which the invisible reality comes into existence. (Sarraute, “Roman et réalité” 1645)<sup>2</sup>

While art and science thus have in common the task of making visible the invisible and being instruments of knowledge, they differ in the way in which they realise this task. The distinction lies in the form of communication; while science produces a model of the reality it observes and describes, theoretically substantiating this model in its systematic aspects, art and thus also literature, is concerned with producing forms that can be perceived by the senses. Hence, the difference between art and science boils down to the following: science is about modelling and abstraction, art is about sensual perception and concreteness. In this respect, Nathalie Sarraute’s reflections manifest an awareness of the tense and contradictory relationship between the realms of art and science. Both fields seek to gain knowledge by making visible the invisible, both can be approximated to each other, they have certain intersections of characteristics; yet, in the final analysis, they confront each other as two separate fields that, despite the affinities and analogies existing between them, do not merge completely.

Sarraute's awareness about the differences between art and science, which persist in spite of the analogies pointed out by her, can be better understood from the perspective of the theory of functional differentiation, which was developed by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann. According to Luhmann, modern Western societies are characterized by the coexistence of different social systems, such as politics, economics, religion, law, science, and art. These systems, which are operationally closed and autonomous, specialize in functions necessary for society which they alone are able to fulfil. For example, the economic system specializes in the distribution of rare goods, the political system in the making of binding decisions. The function of science is to discover new and improbable truths, whereas the art system makes visible what is normally inobservable through the production of symbolic artefacts. As a consequence, art and science, having to fulfil different functions, cannot coincide. The emergence of functional differentiation can be situated in the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the tendency towards functional differentiation is countered in certain literary texts which are conceived by their authors as rivaling science (Thiher); examples to be mentioned here are Goethe, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Musil, and Proust. The relationship between literature and science such as it manifests itself in the writings of Nathalie Sarraute can only be adequately understood when it is considered against the backdrop of this larger historical context.

### **Nathalie Sarraute's Poetics of the Movement or Tropism**

Nathalie Sarraute began writing in the 1930s. Her first literary publication was the text *Tropismes* [*Tropisms*] (1939, *Œuvres complètes* [*Complete Works*] 1-32), whose beginnings date back to 1932. The book consists of short fragments in which there are no clearly recognisable characters, identities or actions; observations and perceptions of movements on the border between consciousness and the unconscious are translated into speech. In the "Préface" of her collection of theoretical essays, *L'Ère du soupçon* [*The Age of Suspicion*] (1956), Sarraute explains the meaning of the term "tropisme" as follows: "These are indefinable movements, which slip by very quickly at the limits of our consciousness; they are at the root of our gestures, of our words, of the feelings that we manifest, that we believe we experience and that it is possible to define. They seemed to me, and still seem to me now, to constitute the secret source of our existence." (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1553-1554.<sup>3</sup> The bibliography on this aspect is quite extensive, as it is crucial to the critical understanding of Sarraute's work: e.g., Lietz, Léonard, du Prel, Michineau, Kemp, Rocchi).

*Tropismes*, like the novel *Portrait d'un inconnu* published in 1948, is considered a precursor and pioneer of the *Nouveau Roman*, which became a dominant paradigm in the French literary scene in the 1950s and 1960s, with authors such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Robert Pinget, Claude Ollier, Claude Simon – and Nathalie Sarraute herself (Coenen-Mennemeier 1-8). Unlike some of the avant-garde movements of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the Futurists or Surrealists, and unlike *Oulipo* ("Ouvroir de littérature potentielle"), which was founded in 1960, the *Nouveau Roman* was more of an editorial label than an actual group of authors. It can be described as a literary current of novels and theoretical writings produced by authors who rejected the traditional narrative conventions of the novel such as plot, character, temporal order or psychological coherence. Many of the authors who are considered as *nouveaux romanciers* published some or most of their works with Éditions de Minuit. In a larger sense, authors such as Samuel Beckett or Marguerite Duras can also be considered as *nouveaux romanciers* (e.g., Schwarze). Nathalie Sarraute was the first author by whom the principles that were later to be considered as those of the *Nouveau*

*Roman* (the term was explicitly used and theorized by Robbe-Grillet) were both theoretically formulated and implemented in novelistic terms, wherein, as she herself rightly points out, practice preceded theory.

A key concept in her poetics is the aforementioned term "movement": thus, she writes in the preface of *L'Ère du soupçon* about her first literary text *Tropismes*:

The texts that made up this first work were the spontaneous expression of very vivid impressions, and their form was as spontaneous and natural as the impressions to which it gave life.

As I worked, I realised that these impressions were produced by certain movements, certain inner actions on which my attention had long been fixed. (Sarraute, "L'ère du soupçon" 1553)<sup>4</sup>

According to Sarraute, the movements that take place at the border of our consciousness underlie our gestures, words and feelings. She wants to bring these movements into a form through her literary writing and thus make them communicable. The term she uses for this is "tropisme", which she borrowed from the field of biology and which, in the words of *Le Petit Robert* (2029), means "Reaction of orientation or of oriented locomotion (movement), caused by physical or chemical agents."<sup>5</sup> In particular, this refers to the movement of plants or immobile animals ("Reaction of orientation of vegetal organisms or of fixed animals under the effect of physical or chemical agents.")<sup>6</sup>

### The Literary-Historical Dimension

A clear awareness of literary-historical contexts manifests itself in Sarraute's poetological reflections. For by programmatically using a technical term taken from the field of biology as the title of a literary work, with the clear aim of shifting the boundaries of the novel, Sarraute marks what she sees as the essential parallelism of art and science, and thus, despite her rupture with the principles of traditional narrative, places herself squarely in a tradition of the novel that goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, despite the tendency to break with tradition that characterises her aesthetics, she simultaneously inscribes herself in an existing tradition. As is well known, the French novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in particular deals intensively with scientific knowledge, especially in the works of Balzac, Flaubert, Zola or Huysmans (e.g., Thiher; Föcking; Klinkert; Klinkert & Séginger). In these authors, elements of scientific discourse are taken up and used as poetological metaphors, for example when Balzac bases the concept of the *Comédie humaine* on the analogy of "Espèces zoologiques" ("zoological species") and "Espèces sociales" ("social species") (Balzac 8), or when Zola refers to Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* [*An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*] in his essay *Le Roman expérimental*. The concept of movement, which is at the centre of Nathalie Sarraute's work, also has precursors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as she herself explains. In a detailed description of a scene from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, she recognises a representation of those "subtle, barely perceptible, fleeting, contradictory, evanescent movements, faint tremors, hints of timid appeals and of retreats, light shadows that glide by, and whose incessant play constitutes the invisible fabric of all human relationships and the very substance of our lives" (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1566).<sup>7</sup> According to Sarraute, Dostoevsky did not yet have the adequate means of observation to perceive these "mouvements sous-jacents" (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1566) as psychic processes situated on the border of consciousness. He therefore had to describe them as external gesticulations.

In addition to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel, Nathalie Sarraute repeatedly engages with the classics of the modern novel, namely Kafka, Joyce, Henry James, and Proust, whom the author, born in 1900, had been reading since the 1920s as immediate contemporaries. In *L'Ère du soupçon*, she speaks of the mistrust that has pervaded the modern novelist, relating to classical components of storytelling such as character and plot, and fed by the knowledge of the unconscious, as it has developed in particular through psychoanalysis, but also through the modern novel:

What he [the novelist] has learned is too well known to be worth insisting on. He has known Joyce, Proust, and Freud; the stream, of which there is no detectable outward sign, of the interior monologue, the infinite abundance of psychological life and the vast, as yet almost untapped regions of the unconscious. He has seen the watertight partitions that separated the characters from each other fall away, and the hero of the novel become an arbitrary limitation, a conventional cut performed on the common fabric that each person contains in its entirety and that captures and holds in its innumerable meshes the whole universe. Like the surgeon who fixes his gaze on the precise spot where his effort must be directed, isolating it from the anaesthetised body, he has been led to concentrate all his attention and curiosity on some new psychological state, forgetting the immobile character who serves as its chance support. He has seen time cease to be that swift current which pushed the plot forward, and become a still water in the depths of which slow and subtle processes of decomposition take their course; he has seen our acts lose their customary motives and accepted meanings, unknown feelings appear and the most familiar ones change their appearance and name. (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1581)<sup>8</sup>

This passage is remarkable in several respects. On the one hand, it is striking that Sarraute places the names Joyce, Proust and Freud in a row, as if they were three representatives of the same discipline. And indeed, the works of these three authors can be credited with conveying and deepening knowledge of the unconscious. Literary works by authors such as Joyce and Proust thus participate in the mediation of knowledge by applying certain narrative forms such as the interior monologue. Moreover, it is noteworthy that a literary exploration of the unconscious has led to further shifts within the structural fabric of the novel. The abandonment of the concept of the literary character and the new function of time, which no longer advances the development of the plot, but in turn becomes an object of observation (the "still water in the depths of which slow and subtle processes of decomposition take their course"), are consequential effects of the focus on the unconscious. A new scientific concept such as the unconscious theoretically developed by Freud is thus not only an object of literary representation, but also an element that changes the very forms of representation. Finally, it is striking that Nathalie Sarraute compares the writer to a surgeon. In this way, she remains clearly anchored in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition, if one thinks, for example, of Achille Lemot's iconic drawing *Flaubert disséquant Madame Bovary* [*Flaubert Dissecting Madame Bovary*] (1869), depicting Flaubert as a surgeon cutting the heart of Madame Bovary out of her body and exposing it to the scientific gaze. Another famous example is Zola's idea of the equivalence of novelist and physician, which he focuses on in the last novel of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, *Le Docteur Pascal* [*Doctor Pascal*]. In this novel, the protagonist becomes an allegory of the author who conceives his stories as unfoldings of the hereditary predispositions and defects of his main characters. With the concept of decomposition, Sarraute also takes up Zola, who in *Nana*, for example, uses this concept programmatically.

### Proust's Analytical Technique and its Further Development by Sarraute

As mentioned, Nathalie Sarraute directs her particular attention to Marcel Proust (on the intertextual relations between Sarraute and Proust, see van der Krogt; Montier; Rocchi 206-216, 279-299, 312-315, 483-498, 619-632, 797-799). In *L'Ère du soupçon*, she speaks of Proust's method, which she contrasts with another mode of writing, namely that of the behaviourist novel. While the latter shifts the genre in the direction of theatre through its predominant dialogue form, it is the merit of Proust's method of analysis "to keep the novel on its own ground and to use means that only the novel can offer" (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1602).<sup>9</sup> What is meant is an "expansion of the experience" conveyed to the readers "not in breadth but in depth" (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1602).<sup>10</sup> Proust achieves this by his "very minute, precise, subtle, highly evocative descriptions of the play of the physiognomy, the looks, the slightest intonations and inflections of voice of his characters" (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1602).<sup>11</sup> According to Sarraute, when Proust reproduces what his characters say, he pays attention to "these innumerable and tiny movements that prepare the dialogue" (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1603),<sup>12</sup> thus becoming the

[...] cartographer who studies a region by flying over it [...] and reproduces only the great immobile lines that these movements compose, the points where these lines join, cross or separate; he recognises among them those that have already been explored and designates them by their known names: jealousy, snobbery, fear, modesty, etc.; he tries to draw general principles from his observations. On this vast geographical map, representing, for the most part, hitherto little explored regions, which he unfolds before his readers, the latter, their eyes fixed on the tip of his pointer with all the attention they are capable of, endeavour to see well, to retain well, to understand well, and feel rewarded for their efforts when they have succeeded in recognising, and following to the end, these often numerous and sinuous lines, as, like rivers flowing into the sea, they cross, separate and mingle in the mass of dialogue. (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1603)<sup>13</sup>

It is clear from this quotation that Sarraute believes she can recognise in Proust an attention to the phenomenon that is at the centre of her own writing, namely the movements, which are situated on the border between consciousness and the unconscious, between language and pre-linguistic perception. Proust notes these movements through his descriptions like a cartographer, i.e. like a scientist who geographically records a territory and transforms it into a visual representation. It is a matter of description, classification, naming of discoveries and the elaboration of general principles. However, according to Sarraute, Proust's analytical technique has to be modernised and further developed:

It is therefore permissible to dream [...] of a technique that would succeed in plunging the reader into the flood of these subterranean dramas that Proust only had time to fly over, and of which he only observed and reproduced the broad, immobile lines: a technique that would give the reader the illusion of re-experiencing these actions himself with a more lucid awareness, with more order, clarity and strength than he can do in life, without their losing that element of indeterminacy, that opacity and mystery that actions always have for the one who lives them. (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1604)<sup>14</sup>

With this postulate of a further development of Proust's analytical technique, Nathalie Sarraute formulates, without explicitly saying it, a description of her own narrative technique, which is characterised by indeterminacy, opacity and mystery. In a contribution entitled "Ce que je cherche à faire" ["What I am Trying to Do"] (1971), the now famous author describes her own writing at the colloquium on the *Nouveau Roman* in Cerisy-la-Salle as an attempt to express something unnamed with the means of language ("invest in language a part, as small as it may be, of the unnamed", Sarraute, "Ce que je cherche à faire" 1702).<sup>15</sup> Unlike some contemporary writers and philosophers (Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jean Ricardou, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva), Nathalie Sarraute is convinced that human perception and experience of the world are not exclusively or mainly determined by language and that the linguistic work of art does not entirely consist of language. Rather, she is concerned with the connection between the linguistic and the non-linguistic, which makes a literary text come into being: "Between this unnamed and language, which is merely a system of conventions, extremely simplified, a code created crudely for the convenience of communication, a fusion must take place so that, skidding against each other, merging and embracing in an ever endangered union, they produce a text." (Sarraute, "Ce que je cherche à faire" 1700)<sup>16</sup>

### **Analysis of *Martereau***

In order to give voice to the unsaid or unnameable in her novels, Nathalie Sarraute dispenses with the components traditionally constitutive of narratives, such as character, plot and, in particular, the orienting and commenting support of a narrator. I would like to demonstrate this by studying the novel *Martereau* (1953). The passages I have selected contain references to the function attributed to the novel as being an "instrument of knowledge" (Sarraute, "Roman et réalité" 1645). This becomes clear on the metaphorical level, where there are numerous lexemes that can be assigned to the field of science.

The novel begins *in medias res* with the first-person narrator's encounter with a woman who tells him that she is in contact with important people. This passage gives an impression of the very specific way in which the novel is narrated:

Nothing about me which might put her on her guard, even remotely arouse her suspicion. No sign in me, not the faintest tremble when she quivers imperceptibly and, in an ironic tone, placing "important people", "big shots" in inverted commas, says: we were obliged to receive loads of "important people". We were received in the homes of a lot of "big shots". I scrupulously observe the rules of the game. I hold the requisite pose. I look at her without batting an eye, even in those moments when you feel a little ashamed, a little hot, and you look away in spite of yourself so that they won't notice that you see; even in those moments I look her squarely in the eye, with an innocent, approving gaze. / So, with me, she can have a field day. They can all have a great time with me. I never put up the slightest bit of resistance. It is probably that, this strange passivity, this docility that I have never quite been able to explain to myself, that excites them, that, upon contact with me, irresistibly compels them to secrete a substance similar to the liquid that certain animals spray to blind their prey... "Loads of 'important' people, big 'shots'. A certain... do you know him? You must have heard of him. I had dinner with him the other day... he told me..." (Sarraute, "Martereau" 179)<sup>17</sup>

The narrator is male, as can be seen from the masculine past participle "parvenu" in the phrase "je ne suis encore jamais parvenu à bien m'expliquer" ("I have never quite been able to explain to myself"), and he meets a woman. Otherwise, we learn nothing about these two characters at the beginning of the novel that would identify them in any standard manner (age, name, profession, relationship to each other or the location of the encounter). It is striking that the first-person narrator speaks in the present tense, producing a simultaneous narration in the form of an interior monologue. Strictly speaking, the narrator does not narrate at all, but verbalises his thoughts and everything that is going through his mind at the moment of utterance. The information conveyed about the situation is thus not arranged in such a way that an observer could grasp it independently of the narrator's perspective of perception. In this way, the reader is drawn directly into the situation, as if he could perceive it through the eyes and through the consciousness of the narrator.

This narrator apparently pays close attention to phenomena that are barely perceptible and that take place in the interaction between the two characters – the tropisms. This interaction takes place according to certain rules ("I scrupulously observe the rules of the game"); these rules of the game seem to presuppose that the woman expects a certain passive consent from her listener, which can be inferred from the fact that the narrator says he does not show any signs that could cause the woman to become suspicious. He also says: "I hold the requisite pose". While the woman talks about the important people she supposedly associates with, the narrator takes note of this approvingly, even if an impartial listener might be embarrassed by this form of bragging. The narrator generalises this in the second paragraph by implying that anyone could put on an uninhibited show ("They can all have a great time with me.") without encountering any resistance from him. He speaks of his passivity and docility, which apparently trigger a reflex in his interlocutors who then attempt to paralyse their prey by expelling a liquid, just as certain animals do.

As becomes clear later in the novel, the person the narrator is meeting here is his aunt. The other main characters of the novel are the aunt's husband, i.e. the narrator's uncle, the aunt's and the uncle's daughter, as well as a character named Martereau, and his wife. The extremely rudimentary plot consists of the uncle investing a certain sum of money in the purchase of a house, but not wanting to appear as the buyer himself, in order not to have to pay taxes. He therefore gives this sum to Martereau, who buys the house as a straw man, with the narrator, accompanied by his cousin, acting as a middleman who hands over the uncle's money to Martereau, but fails to ask for a receipt. After Martereau has bought the house, he moves into it himself, together with his wife. This basic situation gives rise to numerous conflicts and disputes between the uncle, the aunt, the daughter, the narrator and Martereau. The main question is whether Martereau is actually cheating on the narrator's uncle and, if so, who is to blame. The plot is extremely banal, and it is told in such an indirect manner that it becomes clear that plot is not the essential element of this novel. Instead, *Martereau* is about the constellation of relationships between the characters, their verbal and non-verbal interactions, and the extremely subtle perceptions and feelings associated with them. The narrator reflects on the difficulties of verbalisation, for example in the following passage:

All this, and a lot more, expressed not in words, of course, as I must do now, for lack of any other means, not in real words such as those one articulates distinctly, aloud or in thought, but evoked rather by some sort of very rapid signs containing all this, summing it up – like a brief formula which crowns a long

algebraic construction, which expresses a series of complicated chemical compounds – signs so brief and which slip into him, into me so quickly that I could never come to understand them properly, to grasp them; I can only recover by bits and pieces, and translate clumsily into words, what these signs represent, fleeting impressions, thoughts, feelings, often long forgotten, that have amassed over the years and which now, assembled like a numerous and powerful army behind its banners, are gathering, setting out, poised to surge... (Sarraute, "Martereau" 195)<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the text evokes the limits of language and the sayable, postulating an equivalence between what is said in the mode of expression situated on this side of the threshold of language and mathematical or chemical formulae. Here, then, the narrator indicates an affinity between the research he conducts and the notational forms of scientific systems such as mathematics or chemistry. This affinity of his mode of perception and sensitivity with the scientific way of thinking is marked in the novel, unobtrusively but repeatedly, especially at the level of the metaphorical, as for example in the following passage:

I may toughen up, lie to myself, smile at the childish image that her crude pencil strokes have conjured up, this time, I have to admit, she made a good bet: just like the astronomer whose calculations alone allowed him to discover the existence and location of invisible planets, the clues she'd picked up on me without my knowledge (I can see them clearly now, and rage, shame wash over me) allowed her to make a safe gamble. (188)<sup>19</sup>

It is a matter here of reading and interpreting signs that allow conclusions to be drawn, just as an astronomer can discover invisible planets through arithmetical operations. Perception, combined with the interpretation of signs, thus results in a complex semiotic activity that allows conclusions to be drawn with regard to invisible but nevertheless existent sensitivities and states of mind. The paradigm for this is a scientific one: astronomy.

In another passage, the narrator compares himself to a scientist: "What I feel at this moment is like the satisfaction, the excitement of the scientist who sees his hasty hypothesis confirmed by the experiment." (215)<sup>20</sup> It is not a matter here, as with Balzac in *Le Médecin de campagne* [*The Country Doctor*] or Zola in *Le Docteur Pascal*, of a material unfolding of scientific principles or theorems, but merely of the display of a fundamental, scientifically influenced way of thinking or sensitivity. There is further evidence of this in the text, for example when words are metaphorically described by the narrator as "thin protective capsules that encase harmful germs" (250)<sup>21</sup>, or when a communication process between the narrator and his uncle is characterised by the following words: "I could have described in advance, better than he could himself, the chemical operation from which his words: 'And the receipt?' had wafted out, like the gas the chemist prepares to collect in the test tube." (270)<sup>22</sup> Medical metaphors are also used repeatedly, especially that of the tumour:

The words that have humiliated us [...] remain embedded in us, become encysted, and risk forming tumours, abscesses where hatred gathers little by little. (196)<sup>23</sup>

Her voice becomes thin, a thin trickle that struggles to pass through her swelling throat; behind the wall, something heavy also swells and pulls, a heavy, limp



existence, grafted onto her and living its own life with the invincible, sly obstinacy of a morbid excrescence, a proliferating tumour. (209)<sup>24</sup>

And straight away everything that had arisen in Martereau for a moment and then disappeared – all the doubts, hints of suspicions, vague uneasiness, worries that had crept into him in the course of that evening – all of this reappears and gathers into a single point, a swelling, heavy tumour. (299)<sup>25</sup>

The extreme perceptual acuity with which the characters observe their environment and their fellow human beings in communication and interaction leads to impressions of physical concreteness, which, as is clear from the examples, are reflected in the metaphor of the tumour, which expresses a high degree of physical discomfort. This is shown, not in the least, by the fact that in two of the three quoted passages it is said that one feels the urge to palpate the tumour, in order to get to the bottom of the illness associated with it. In this way, the novel contains metaphors of illness and the threat it poses, which on the one hand is part of the scientific modelling of the text, and on the other can be read as a metaphor for the text itself, which not only speaks of discomfort, but also creates it in the reading process.

### Conclusion

The starting point of this article was Nathalie Sarraute's view that the literary text or the work of art is an instrument of knowledge that can make an unknown and invisible reality visible. The difference between science and art is that science develops abstract models, while art produces forms that are sensually perceptible and concrete. Nathalie Sarraute's poetics of the movement or tropism has been discussed in this context. The term tropism is borrowed from the language of biology and refers to those "mouvements indéfinissables, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience" (Sarraute, "L'Ère du soupçon" 1553). Sarraute aims to depict these movements in her works and make them visible. On the one hand, her poetics is linked to the novel's engagement with scientific methods and findings, which developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while on the other hand she refers to the modern novel and its depiction of the unconscious. Reference authors here include Dostoevsky as a major representative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and forerunner of the poetics of the movement, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Freud as a scientist. Other novelists such as Joyce, Kafka and Proust are also considered. In particular, the method of analysis developed by Proust serves Nathalie Sarraute as a model for her own poetics. She describes Proust as a cartographer who makes connections visible and derives and represents principles through observation. Her aim is to further develop this poetics of analysis by trying to express the unknowable with linguistic means. In the final part, Sarraute's writing style was illustrated by analysing the novel *Martereau* with particular emphasis on the narrator's perspective of perception. The beginning of the novel was quoted to show how the reader is drawn into the narrator's consciousness and is encouraged to comprehend barely perceptible phenomena through the narrator's eyes and consciousness. It was then shown that there is a continuous reflection on scientific concepts and elements in the novel, which are tied back to the inherent poetics of the novel. Examples were analysed, in which the situation depicted is short-circuited with scientific figures such as the astronomer or with chemical and mathematical formulae. Nathalie Sarraute's avant-garde narrative style can thus be described as a transformation of scientific principles, an expression of a fundamental sensitivity to scientific perception. In this way, she inscribes herself in the tradition of the modern novel which starts with Balzac and extends to the *Nouveau Roman* of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the avant-garde

aesthetic of breaking with traditional models, long-term continuities also manifest themselves in this literary tradition, as could be shown by studying the specific reference to the knowledge paradigm in Sarraute.

## Notes

1. "Sans doute, par cette recherche, par cet effort pour rendre visible un univers invisible, l'œuvre littéraire, comme toute œuvre d'art, est un instrument de connaissance. Par là on a pu la rapprocher de l'œuvre des savants qui s'efforcent aussi d'exprimer une réalité inconnue, en la recréant dans un modèle, en la façonnant en un système, en la captant dans le réseau de leurs constructions théoriques. Ces constructions, par les dons d'imagination, par les pouvoirs de visionnaire qu'elles révèlent, par leur cohésion, leur élégance et leur force, ont été souvent rapprochées des grandes œuvres poétiques." All translations are mine; I would like to thank Anna Pevoski (Zürich), who has read and corrected this essay stylistically.

2. "La réalité que l'œuvre d'art révèle n'est pas d'ordre rationnel. Pour la communiquer, il faut l'exprimer par une forme sensible. Sans cette forme, il n'y a pas de communication possible, la forme étant le mouvement même par lequel la réalité invisible accède à l'existence."

3. "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, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons éprouver et qu'il est possible de définir. Ils me paraissaient et me paraissent encore constituer la source secrète de notre existence."

4. "Les textes qui composaient ce premier ouvrage étaient l'expression spontanée d'impressions très vives, et leur forme était aussi spontanée et naturelle que les impressions auxquelles elle donnait vie. / Je me suis aperçue en travaillant que ces impressions étaient produites par certains mouvements, certaines actions intérieures sur lesquelles mon attention s'était fixée depuis longtemps."

5. "Réaction d'orientation ou de locomotion orientée (mouvement), causée par des agents physiques ou chimiques."

6. "Réaction d'orientation des organismes végétaux ou animaux fixés, sous l'effet d'agents physiques ou chimiques."

7. "[...] mouvements subtils, à peine perceptibles, fugitifs, contradictoires, évanescents, de faibles tremblements, des ébauches d'appels timides et de reculs, des ombres légères qui glissent, et dont le jeu incessant constitue la trame invisible de tous les rapports humains et la substance même de notre vie".

8. "Ce qu'il [le romancier] a appris, chacun le sait trop bien pour qu'il soit utile d'insister. Il a connu Joyce, Proust et Freud ; le ruissellement, que rien au-dehors ne permet de déceler, du monologue intérieur, le foisonnement infini de la vie psychologique et les vastes régions encore à peine défrichées de l'inconscient. Il 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. Comme le chirurgien qui fixe son regard sur l'endroit précis où doit porter son effort, l'isolant du corps endormi, il a été amené à concentrer toute son attention et sa curiosité sur quelque état psychologique nouveau, oubliant le personnage immobile qui lui sert de support de hasard. Il a vu le temps cesser d'être ce courant rapide qui poussait en avant l'intrigue pour devenir une eau dormante au fond de laquelle s'élaborent de lentes et subtiles décompositions ; il a vu nos actes perdre leurs mobiles courants et leurs significations admises, des sentiments inconnus apparaître et les mieux connus changer d'aspect et de nom."

9. "[...] de maintenir le roman sur le terrain qui lui est propre et de se servir de moyens que seul le roman peut offrir".

10. "[...] un accroissement de leur expérience non pas en étendue [...], mais en profondeur".

11. "[...] descriptions très minutieuses, précises, subtiles, au plus haut degré évocatrices, des jeux de physionomie, des regards, des moindres intonations et inflexions de voix de ses personnages".

12. "[...] ces mouvements innombrables et minuscules qui préparent le dialogue".

13. "[...] cartographe qui étudie une région en la survolant [...] et ne reproduit que les grandes lignes immobiles que ces mouvements composent, les points où ces lignes se joignent, se croisent ou se séparent ; il reconnaît parmi elles celles qui sont déjà explorées et les désigne par leurs noms connus : jalousie, snobisme, crainte, modestie, etc. ; il cherche à dégager de ses observations des principes généraux. Sur cette vaste carte géographique, représentant des régions pour la plupart encore peu explorées, qu'il déploie devant ses lecteurs, ceux-ci, les yeux fixés sur la pointe de sa baguette avec toute l'attention dont ils sont capables, s'efforcent de bien voir, de bien retenir, de bien comprendre, et se sentent récompensés de leurs peines lorsqu'ils ont réussi à reconnaître et à suivre des yeux jusqu'au bout ces lignes souvent nombreuses et sinueuses, quand, pareilles à des fleuves qui se jettent dans la mer, elles se croisent, se séparent et se mêlent dans la masse du dialogue."

14. "Il est donc permis de rêver [...] d'une technique qui parviendrait à plonger le lecteur dans le flot de ces drames souterrains que Proust n'a eu le temps que de survoler et dont il n'a observé et reproduit que les grandes lignes immobiles : 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 ses actions pour celui qui les vit."

15. "[...] investir dans du langage une part, si infime fût-elle, d'innommé".

16. "Entre ce non-nommé et le langage qui n'est qu'un système de conventions, extrêmement simplifié, un code grossièrement établi pour la commodité de la communication, il faudra qu'une fusion se fasse pour que, patinant l'un contre l'autre, se confondant et s'étreignant dans une union toujours menacée, ils produisent un texte."

17. "Rien en moi qui puisse la mettre sur ses gardes, éveiller tant soit peu sa méfiance. Pas un signe en moi, pas le plus léger frémissement quand elle frétille imperceptiblement et dit sur un ton ironique, en plaçant entre guillemets 'gens importants', 'grands manitous' : nous étions obligés de recevoir des tas de 'gens importants'. Nous étions reçus chez des tas de 'grands manitous'. 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 détourne 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 approbateur. / Aussi avec moi elle peut s'en donner à cœur joie. Ils peuvent tous s'en donner à cœur joie avec moi. Je n'oppose jamais la moindre résistance. C'est cela sans doute, cette étrange passivité, cette docilité que je ne suis encore jamais parvenu à bien m'expliquer qui les excite, qui leur fait irrésistiblement sécréter à mon contact une substance pareille au liquide que projettent certains animaux pour aveugler leur proie... 'Des tas de gens "importants", de grands "manitous". Un tel... vous le connaissez ? Vous en avez sûrement entendu parler. J'ai dîné avec lui l'autre jour... il m'a raconté...'"

18. "Tout cela, et bien plus encore, exprimé non avec des mots, bien sûr, comme je suis obligé de le faire maintenant faute 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, je ne peux que retrouver par bribes et traduire gauchement par des mots ce que ces signes représentent, des impressions fugitives, des pensées, des sentiments souvent oubliés qui se sont amassés au cours des années et qui maintenant assemblés comme une nombreuse et puissante armée derrière ses étendards, se regroupent, s'ébranlent, vont déferler..."

19. "J'ai beau me durcir, me mentir, sourire de l'image enfantine que ses coups de crayon grossiers ont fait surgir, cette fois, je dois le reconnaître, elle a misé juste : comme à cet astronome auquel ses seuls calculs ont permis de découvrir l'existence et l'emplacement de planètes invisibles, les indices qu'elle avait relevés sur moi à mon insu (je les vois nettement maintenant et la rage, la honte m'inondent) lui ont permis de jouer à coup sûr."

20. "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."

21. "[...] minces capsules protectrices qui enrobent des germes nocifs".

22. "J'aurais pu décrire à l'avance, mieux qu'il n'aurait su le faire lui-même, l'opération chimique d'où ses mots : 'Et le reçu ?', comme le gaz que le chimiste se prépare à recueillir dans l'éprouvette, se sont dégagés."

23. "Les mots qui nous ont humiliés [...] restent enfoncés en nous, s'enkystent, risquent de former des tumeurs, des abcès où la haine peu à peu s'amasse."

24. "Sa voix se fait toute mince, un mince filet qui a peine à passer à travers sa gorge qui enfle ; derrière le mur, quelque chose de lourd enfle aussi et tire, une lourde et molle existence, greffée sur elle et qui vit de sa vie propre avec cette obstination invincible et sournoise d'une excroissance morbide, d'une tumeur qui prolifère [...]"

25. "Et aussitôt tout ce qui en Martereau avait surgi un instant et avait disparu – tous les doutes, ébauches de soupçons, malaises vagues, inquiétudes qui avaient glissé en lui au cours de cette soirée – tout reparaît et se ramasse en un seul point, une tumeur qui enfle, qui pèse."

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