



Dr Scott Taylor

'Reconfiguring Character: Machinic Semiosis and Autopoeitic Subjectivity in Sarraute's *Pour un oui ou pour un non*.'

Online publication, ISSN 2045-8541.

Abstract

This paper examines the transformations that have taken place in contemporary notions of dramatic character, particularly as portrayed in the theatrical work of Nathalie Sarraute. It begins by contextualizing the theoretical evolution of character in French theater as discussed in the critical works of Abirached, Ubersfeld, and Ryngaert, - an evolution that ultimately reflects a movement of liberation from 'psychologising' and mimetic notions of character to one without an 'essence,' where character is arguably a product of what Guattari called 'machinic semiosis' and 'autopoeisis'. Building on this critical discourse, it then offers a close reading of Sarraute's famous one-act, 'Pour un oui ou pour un non', and draws parallels between her notion of character and Guattari's 'ethico-aesthetic' model of subjectivity. It argues that both Sarraute, in her creative writing, and Guattari, in his psychoanalytic work, present a Subject/Character that reflects a chaotic and fluctuating state of affairs where thoughts, words, Self, and Other are not fixed entities, but instead struggle interminably against each other, - an existential state that can only be mediated through an ethico-aesthetics that requires spontaneously generated and intentional engagement, combined with active and artistic intervention. In this way, Subjectivation/character development becomes an art, a creative process, much like writing a poem, in that it involves the absorption of a multiplicity of materials taken from an infinitesimal significational chaos and then assembles constellations of Self with refrains that provide a sense of consistency.

Reconfiguring Character: Machinic Semiosis and Autopoietic Subjectivity in Sarraute's *Pour un oui ou pour un non*

Scott Taylor
(Western Washington University)

The notion of character in theatre has undergone significant changes in recent decades. Influenced by radical shifts that took place in literary studies, – a shift that is generally marked by an evolution from author-centered criticism to reader reception theory and Materialist approaches, – contemporary French Theatre has, in turn, echoed this transformation in its own way, by moving away from what Ryngaert termed a psychologising¹ understanding of character to one that reflects the participatory nature of modern French theatre, and that draws upon insights from contemporary psychoanalytic theory concerning the formation of Subjects and Subjectivity. Among the many contemporary French playwrights who have experimented with this new understanding of character, Nathalie Sarraute, in particular, was quite innovative at incorporating such ideas into her work. In her plays, she presents shadows of characters at best, vague entities that have been stripped of practically all identification markers; they have no names, no descriptions, and even the lines they speak are fraught with ambiguity and polyvalence, making it impossible to ascertain a motivation or intention, much to the chagrin of actors and directors. Instead, hers is a theatre that challenges the audience to a game of conscious engagement, requiring them to actively participate in the production of character and content, and thus bringing the audience out of its traditional role of passive consumer.

Her short one-act, *Pour un oui ou pour un non*, is exceptionally illustrative of this new understanding of character; it moves away from the traditional notion of full and rounded characters to a more nuanced and abstract portrayal that reflects many of the basic principles of Guattari's chaotomic conception of subject formation, and in particular, his ideas of machinic semiosis and autopoietic subjectivity.² This connection between Sarraute and Guattari has been noted by other researchers, particularly John Rothenberg, who claims that the imagery in the play, which runs along what he calls 'horizontal and vertical axes, [...] maps out the relationships between self and other in gradients of distance and hierarchy, providing what Deleuze and Guattari call "territorialities".³ More succinctly, Sarraute's play reveals how the building of character is an artistic and dialectical process that takes place in a contingent space of conflict, chaos, and interminable transition. In this way, character is not something to be defined, but rather, continually added to, refined and reconfigured according to ever-changing stimuli. In order to evaluate this dynamic more clearly, and understand its implications for and challenges to contemporary theatre practitioners and audiences, let us first re-examine the critical discourse surrounding the notion of character as it has evolved in recent decades within the context of French theatre theory, focusing on the critical works of Robert Abirached, Anne Ubersfeld, and J.P. Ryngaert.

Robert Abirached and the "Crisis of Character"

In *La Crise du personnage dans le théâtre moderne*, Robert Abirached explores the nature and evolution of the role of character throughout the history of Western Theatre from Antiquity to the

Post-Modern Age. In this work, he ultimately establishes that character, at least before the twentieth-century, and under the guise of mimesis, underwent a transformation from the general to the specific, from the impersonality of the Greek mask (*persona*) to the intimacy of the slice of life reflected on the Naturalist stage of the nineteenth-century. On the Greek, Roman, Elizabethan and Italian Commedia stages, it was the *persona* that reigned:

l'acteur perd ... son identité pour devenir tout entier comme un idéogramme en mouvement; son masque, beaucoup plus qu'un emblème d'illusion, s'offre au spectateur pour le signe d'une réalité différente de la vie quotidienne.⁴

Over the course of time, however, character became more and more associated with the individual actor, psychologically and morally resembling the individual members of the audience, and ultimately resulting in an effect of identification. Such an aesthetic of individualized characters emerged when the actor took off his mask, and thus, created what Pavis calls a 'symbiosis between character and actor,' coinciding with the growth of the bourgeoisie and resulting in a new mimetic form. Abirached explains:

Ce qui est avéré, c'est que la bourgeoisie, autour des années 1750, commence à prendre la mesure de sa force et de sa capacité à conduire le changement de la société ... [au milieu du siècle], les spectateurs souhaitent désormais se reconnaître sans intermédiaire dans les personnages de la scène.⁵

Psychologically speaking, character had become a substitute for the consciousness of the bourgeoisie in a new mimetic aesthetic of identification.

This new mimesis continues to influence much of the popular, commercial and mainstream theatre of today, although it was challenged by the counter cultural movements of Symbolism, Surrealism and Absurdism during the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, movements which threatened to dissolve the character, placing him in shadowy, claustrophobic, abstract, and unstable settings, – fragmenting the character, and stripping him of meaning, significance, and of a cohesive and unified sense of Self. Indeed, mimesis was ultimately abandoned on these new, experimental and revolutionary stages, causing the theatre to take on a hypertheatrical and self-conscious characteristic: the only reality being reflected was the reality created by the theatre in and of itself without reference to a greater, outside social condition or *grande histoire*:

le théâtre se donne d'emblée pour ce qu'il est, comme un jeu sans commencement ni fin, réglé dans ses moindres détours et à jamais enfermé dans sa propre reproduction. C'est ce que j'appellerais un théâtre du théâtre.⁶

However, character did not completely deteriorate or dissolve; instead, it became an actant in a new language of theatre, a language that was further elaborated by Anne Ubersfeld.

Anne Ubersfeld and the Actantial Model

Covering a wide variety of subjects from the *actantial model* to *reception theory*, Ubersfeld played a pivotal role in advancing a more holistic approach in the field of theatre semiotics, and in articulating the function of character within a global structure of theatre. As Marvin Carlson points out, Ubersfeld's focus was primarily on analysis of the written text, but it was always conducted with a view to performance in mind because for her, 'the dramatic text is *troué*, marked with holes, which in

performance are filled by another text, that of the staging, the *mise en scène*. Opposed to psychologising approaches to the study of character, whereby the *dramatis personae* are considered as having what Elam calls ‘a more or less complex and unified network of psychological and social traits,’ a notion which lends itself to a view of character as having a personality or an essence, Anne Ubersfeld prefers an actantial orientation that privileges the structural function of character over psychological essentialism.⁷

The actantial model, which was initially theorized by Propp and Greimas, refused to separate character from action, and instead, insisted on revealing the dialectics between them. It offered a universal perspective of character that linked it to a larger textual and signifying system, dividing it into a number of spheres of actions in narrative that included, at least for Greimas: Sender, Object, Receiver, Helper, Subject, and Opponent.⁸ An important distinction, however, between Ubersfeld’s actantial model and that of Greimas is that for her, ‘There is no autonomous subject in a text, only a subject-object axis’. In this schema, character is both subject and object of a play’s discourse, a discourse that consists of four voices – author, character sender, character receiver, and audience.⁹ Thus, for Ubersfeld, character is a sort of nexus that mediates various semiotic flows of energy within theatrical signification; it bridges the gap between the written text and performance, between director and playwright, and perhaps even more importantly, between performer and audience, a relationship which is the privileged topic of her second book, *Lire le théâtre II*. Ubersfeld shifted the field and began to apply, not a psychological, but a psychoanalytic dimension to her actantial model; she signaled an awareness and incorporation of Lacanian psychoanalysis, where lack, desire, and pleasure define everything: ‘pleasure of discovery..., of invention ..., of experiencing temporarily the impossible or the forbidden ...,’ combined with the condition of unfulfilled desire, of a lack of presence, of the textual object/character being that which it is not.¹⁰

J-P Ryngaert: Decomposition and Recomposition of Character

Finally, in his discussion of character in *Introduction à l’analyse du théâtre*, Jean-Pierre Ryngaert begins by revisiting criticism of psychological approaches that are based on the idea of character as an autonomous conscience, as ‘une enveloppe qu’il faudrait occuper et dont l’acteur se déclarerait propriétaire’, as something that is ‘une figurine aux contours déjà tracés dans le texte et qu’il s’agirait de colorier au fil des répétitions’. He explains how the notion of building character is linked inevitably to mimesis where the character ‘est joué par un acteur vivant qui lui prête son corps, ses traits, sa voix, son énergie’, and where the actor serves as ‘le creuset d’émotions communes à l’interprète et au public’.¹¹ In accordance with his contemporaries, Ryngaert cautions the danger of assigning character the status of being the flesh and blood in the name of representation as it was in bourgeois theatre.

However, it is his insistence on the wide variability of characters over time and cultures that motivates his most recent work, *Le Personnage théâtral contemporain: décomposition, recomposition*, in which he responds directly to Abirached’s seminal work and focuses exclusively on the question of character in French theatre since roughly 1980. He affirms that contemporary characters exhibit an array of forms that are informed by two primary heritages. The first of these heritages is that which is reflected in the post-war Absurdist theatre where character was depersonalised: ‘ils conçoivent moins le personnage comme un fantoche que comme une présence anonyme, un simple être-là traversé de paroles’; and also as ‘modes de désignation désindividualisés, strictement fonctionnels, qui n’ouvrent aucun horizon herméneutique et n’engagent aucune projection de la part du spectateur’. This stands in opposition to a second heritage represented in works like those of Jean Genet or Michel Vinaver, which are not ‘un retour au personnage bourgeois honni par leurs contemporains, dans la mesure où le monde, dans son actualité parfois la plus immédiate, n’est pour

eux un modèle à reproduire, mais un matériau à traiter. Accordingly, in today's theatre, contemporary authors may indeed offer more concrete, more easily identifiable characters, but the so-called Age of Suspicion that Sarraute once wrote about still remains in techniques and in:

procédures de désillusion, de distanciation, d'invalidation du personnage ... mises en œuvre de manière ludique par les auteurs, qui jouent, déjouent, se jouent des conventions d'écriture par lesquelles, spontanément, on assimile le personnage à un probable individu.¹²

And very often, this so-called 'assimilation to a probable individual' that character has undergone is the result of a technique of hypertheatricality – the self-conscious interplay between a fictionalized representation and its theatricalization.

À l'encontre des lois du drame absolu, qui veulent que soit évincé de l'écriture tout ce qui pourrait rappeler au spectateur la réalité de sa situation, il est aujourd'hui assez fréquent que les auteurs l'avouent et jouent de sa duplicité, en se resserrant sur l'élément minimal du fait théâtral: l'énonciation au présent. Dans leurs textes, la question de la dialectique entre représentation et réalité engage alors non seulement le monde de référence tel qu'il est représenté (logique mimétique), mais aussi le procès effectif, la réalité de la situation d'énonciation, ici et maintenant.¹³

The effect of such interplay is that it blurs the lines between reality and representation, between actor and character, creating a theatre in which everything is and is not what it is simultaneously, an idea that is akin to the linguistic concept of negative determination, where, simply put, words are not the thing itself, and where meaning is the state of not being something else. This concept has also been explained in psychoanalytic terms as well where, since Lacan, Absence is viewed as an integral component of the Subject whose epistemology and composition are of a heterogeneous nature, an idea inferred poetically by Rimbaud in the 19th century when he famously declared: 'Je est un autre'.¹⁴ Contrary to how it might otherwise seem, when we look into the mirror, what we see is not an entirely unified Self; instead, Essence is an illusion; character is an act of autopoeisis and machinic semiosis.

Autopoeisis, Machinic Semiosis, Subject Formation, and Theatrical Character

Now that we have examined how the notion of character in French theatre has changed in recent decades, we can now elaborate further on the role that psychoanalytic theory has played in this evolution, which will then allow us to understand more clearly how Guattari's ideas on the Subject and Subjectivity apply to the characters presented in Sarraute's *Pour un oui ou pour un non*. Ever since Freud first conceptualized the role of the Subconscious in the processes of Subjectivation, psychoanalytic theory has continued to refine its understanding of the emergence of Self and of the various biological, social, economic, and historical factors that contribute to its production, and thus, to the creation of a sense of identity, or more precisely, to the establishment of discourses that carve out a so-called Subject. In his discussion of the emergence of the Self in infants, Félix Guattari criticized Structuralists for 'reducing the psyche to the complete control of the linguistic signifier,' and affirmed that a 'dialectic between shareable and non-shareable affects structures the emergent phases of subjectivity'.¹⁵ These Existential Territories and Incorporeal Universes are a part of a Transversalist Model of a heterogeneously produced Subjectivity that combines the semiotic and the psychological. Consequently, Guattari argued that Freudianism, at least in its early stages, was characterized by a rebellion against positivist reductionism, a philosophical view that considers the only true knowledge to be scientific knowledge, based on

clearly identified, observable and empirical data that that can be measured, quantified, and articulated. This anti-positivist attitude is an important distinction as it, consequently, serves to re-invoke the inherent emptiness at the basis of all identity, an emptiness that literally gives life to the Subject.¹⁶ Ultimately, Guattari concluded that Subjectivity is ‘the product of individuals, groups and institutions’, and that the ‘semiotic registers that combine to engender subjectivity do not maintain hierarchical relations fixed for all time.’ Instead, subjectivity is plural and polyphonic with ‘no dominant or determinant guiding instance issuing from some sort of univocal causality’.¹⁷

But what are the implications of such an understanding of the Subject in relation to the role of character in drama and performance? More specifically, how does Guattari’s ethico-aesthetic paradigm offer a more cohesive reading of the characters in Sarraute’s *Pour un oui ou pour un non*? Firstly, the importance placed on the negatively determined Subject was literarily expressed by Sarraute in her affective notion of *tropismes*, a term she described as a kind of brief, intense, and fleeting sentiment, but ultimately inexplicable. In her collection of essays, *L’Ere du soupçon* (1956) for instance, she stated that what intrigued her most was ‘cette matière anonyme qui constitue toute vie, au-dessous de la pensée consciente, à la limite de la conscience, là où il n’y a plus que des images, des sensations, des impressions’. Stylistically speaking, Sarraute’s characters were ‘des mouvements, des forces obscures à figure humaine plutôt que des êtres humains complets’.¹⁸ The creative freedom and prosaic possibilities provided by this understanding of character and Subjectivity offers practitioners (directors, actors, designers) great liberty when deciding how to present her tropistic world in an art form like theatre that is inherently naturalistic. In fact, *Pour un oui ou pour un non* has been theatricalised in numerous styles from the realistic to the abstract. One of the most famous productions was directed by Jacques Lassalle at the Théâtre National de la Colline, where music was inserted between the long pauses of the dialogue and where a window illuminated by sky lights marks the progression of time by fading from bright to dark throughout the course of the play. ‘This subtle indication of the passage of time adds texture, and the strange tropistic world is made tangible’.¹⁹

Patrice Pavis describes Sarraute’s short 1982 one-act as ‘la plus brillante mise en forme des idées de l’auteur sur les *tropismes*, exposées dès 1939,’ in that the play requires the receiver to make a decision as to whether or not it is to be read ‘comme une pièce psychologique sur l’amitié ou un logodrame dans lequel le langage joue le rôle de détonateur’.²⁰ It is on this deeper, more abstract level of play, on the level of the logodrame, a type of drama where action is replaced by language, that one finds an important parallel between Sarraute and Guattari’s perspectives on subjectivity, a parallel that is based on the principles of participation and engagement. Sarraute does not simply content herself with dramatizing a theory, as Pavis affirms, but instead, invites the reader to participate in a process, to become an active agent, a co-collaborator in the signifying and existentialising production. Sarraute wants us to fill in the blanks, to connect the dots, but to understand that this filling in, this identification, requires action, commitment, and conscious decision-making. Guattari, in turn, in his *ethico-aesthetic paradigm* of subjectivity, makes a similar argument concerning the nature of the Subject by aligning himself with the Dadaists and Surrealists, and favoring ‘pragmatic interventions oriented toward the conscious construction of subjectivities’ via the ‘poetic function,’ which results in a sense of auto-referentiality and auto-valorization. Like Sarraute, his emphasis is on action, on active construction of Self and meaning, where ‘time is not something to be endured, but activated,’ and where the Subject is not something to be discovered, but created.²¹

In order to logodramatically realize this activation, Sarraute uses intonation as one of many dramaturgical strategies to engage the reader/audience in a non-mimetic, auto-referential theater, to offer us a story about the language of language, and consequently about the nature of Self. Accordingly, Sarraute presents a minimalist script in terms of written stage directions, character

descriptions and setting. Her characters are simply named H1, H2, H3 and F. The plot is simple, and revolves around an abstract dispute between H1 and H2, while H3 and F are brought into the scene only very briefly, and just as an effort on behalf of the two protagonists to seek outside, objective judges who might weigh in on the ensuing conflict between them, a task which H3 and F are ultimately incapable of performing. The play begins:

H1: Écoute, je voulais te demander ... C'est un peu pour ça que je suis venu ... je voudrais savoir ... que s'est-il passé? Qu'est-ce que tu as contre moi?

H2: Mais rien ... Pourquoi?

H1: Oh, je ne sais pas ... Il me semble que tu t'éloignes ... tu ne fais plus jamais signe ... il faut toujours que ce soit moi ...²²

From the opening lines (and indeed, from the very first line), Sarraute quickly draws us into the dispute that will drive the play along its dramatic course; there is no exposition, no rising action, just an immediate and decisive catapult into a moment of confrontation between the two protagonists. Additionally, Sarraute's brevity and her use of ellipses not only allow us to fill in what is being unsaid, but this economy of language furthermore provides for entry into the subjective space of tropismes, of the ambiguous attractors, as Guattari would call them, that conglomerate to become individuated experience.

Notably, the play ends as abruptly as it begins, in a state of unresolved conflict and disagreement between the two protagonists.

H1: Pour un oui ... ou pour un non??

A silence. Un silence.

H2: Oui ou non? ...

H1: Ce n'est pourtant pas la même chose ...

H2: En effet: Oui. Ou non.

H1: Oui.

H2: Non!²³

H1 concludes with a definitive yes, symbolizing a will to progression, to forward momentum, to rationalist and fixed meanings, all which stand in opposition to the instability, relativity and ambiguity of H2's no. This polarization, where H1 and H2 remain intransigently fixed, contemplating a separation but ultimately never moving, corresponds to two psychological entities that Guattari argues facilitate the production of subjectivity, and by extension, the production of (non)meaning: (1) Existential Territories, which offer definitions, categorizations, models of understanding, clear and distinct ideas; (2) contrasted with Incorporeal Universes that prefer sensation to nomination, plurality to singularity, ambiguity and polyvalence to definition. And most intriguingly, Sarraute herself has been quoted as saying that the interest of her work should center on 'deux pures consciences qui s'affrontent'.²⁴

So let us recall then that Guattari decenters the Subject in the question of Subjectivity and emphasizes instead the founding instance of intentionality, affirming that the 'existentialising function resides in the reversibility of content and expression'²⁵. In other words, content manifests itself in expression, but then expression then becomes new content that once again seeks form, and so on – a procession. This leads him to offer a new view of semiology that is based on a machinic rather than linguistic order, initiating a shift from a scientific to an ethico-esthetic paradigm, proposing a psychological meta-modélisation, one which infers that humans are faced with an ethical choice concerning subjectivity, here understood in theatrical terms as character: 'We can scientificize it, or grasp it in the dimension of its processual creativity'.²⁶ To understand it in the latter dimension

is to view it as ‘the ensemble of conditions which render possible the emergence of individual and/or collective instances as self-referential existential Territories, adjacent, or in a delimiting relation to an alterity that is itself subjective’.²⁷ Such an idea infers that there are not only internal and external factors contributing to the production of subjectivity, but that the Subject/Character is in fact machinically produced via various social, psychological, and historical modes that pre-date the Self. The emergence of the Subject then becomes a creative process, an act of autopoiesis where the sensation of Self-Unity is an effect of a crafted ‘refrain that fixes me in front of the screen ...’²⁸ Logodramatically, the two protagonists of Sarraute’s comedy (H1 & H2) remain frozen together on stage despite their differences because, in actuality, they are the same Self; they are One; they function concomitantly, tied together by a polarizing refrain; they have a mutually dependent, yet inherently repulsive (in the sense of pushing in opposite directions) relationship; they are drawn toward each other despite the obliterating consequences of their encounter, but they cannot exist without each other.

The dramaturgical effect of this dichotomy results in an element of stasis, which has been noted by other researchers, and described as characteristic of an ‘asocial realism [that] sees the inner-self as a fluctuating space, ... having no definite content, ... an area in which a certain number of actions and reactions are repeated,’ creating a reality that is a ‘partially unexplored but static terrain’.²⁹ John Rothenberg also recognized this element of stasis, and argued that Sarraute presents ‘microdramas ... structured to maintain a tension ... between surface and depths’.³⁰ Additionally, Judith Miller remarked that: ‘patterns of unstoppable advancing and retreating [in Sarraute’s work] communicate ... what might be termed an automated paralysis; ... [they] foreground a pervasive emptiness, a slipperiness of meaning, an insecurity of origins’.³¹ Thus, it is in the silence of Saurrate’s ellipses, in what the actor calls the subtext, in those brief moments of pause and reflection where nothing and everything are said simultaneously that constitute the static elements of the logodrame. These empty spaces and long silences ultimately reveal a Subject that is what it is not, one that, like Guattari’s semiotic model, is based on the Saussurean idea of *negative determination*.

Saussure’s emphasis on differentiation as the basis for signification opposed essentialist concepts of language and the relationship between objects and words. Instead, it followed the ‘Hegelian law that determination is negation,’ that identity is absence, that things are what they are not: ‘[W]e cannot identify a word as a singular masculine noun without at the same time apprehending it as *not* being a plural, or a feminine word, or an adjective’.³² It is H1 who reflects the essentialist desire for presence, and H2 who vocalizes the necessity of absence. H1 seeks precision, reason, and fullness; he desires to give form to the vast and murky sea of content; whereas H2 is preoccupied with the nothingness of meaning.

H1: Si, dis-moi ... je te connais trop bien: il y a quelque chose de changé ... Pourquoi ne veux-tu pas le dire?

H2: Non ... vraiment rien ... Rien qu’on puisse dire ...

H1: Essaie quand même ...

H2: Oh non ... je ne veux pas ...

H1: Pourquoi? Dis-moi pourquoi?

H2: Non, ne me force pas ...

H1: C’est donc si terrible?

H2: Non, pas terrible ... ce n’est pas ça ...

H1: Mais qu’est-ce que c’est, alors?

H2: C’est ... c’est plutôt que ce n’est rien ... ce qui s’appelle rien ... ce qu’on appelle ainsi ...³³

H2 explains that this ‘nothing’ is something that cannot be explained, or rather: ‘rien dont il soit permis de parler’. Yet stubbornly, H1 continues to press for explanation, consequently exasperating H2, who replies: ‘c’est juste des mots’. The ambiguity of H2’s statement provokes confusion for H1 as he does not recall ‘having had words’ with his long-time friend. H2 attempts to clarify by stating that he did not mean ‘des mots comme ça ... d’autres mots ... pas ceux dont on dit qu’on les a ‘eus’ ... Des mots qu’on n’a pas ‘eus’, justement ... On ne sait pas comment ils vous viennent.³⁴ Any attempt at explanation or identification would just be words, words that describe words that describe even more words, never capable of capturing their perpetually fleeting object. As Pavis remarks:

Le pôle du langage [H1] voudrait s’approcher du pôle de la sensation [H2]. Mais en nommant les silences, le langage verbal catégorise tout et fait fuir la sensation ... Les deux pôles, cependant, ne sauraient exister l’un sans l’autre: pas de communication sans mots, mais à quoi servent les mots s’ils sont coupés des racines, des sensations et des mouvements du monde?³⁵

We can now begin to better understand H2’s reluctance when H1 demands that he offer a reason for his distancing, as the very nature of this cause remains ambiguous, the trouble lying in what has been left unsaid rather than what was said. Explaining that he had once in conversation dare boast about one of his achievements, H2 was wounded by the response of his long-time friend, H1, when he responded simply with: ‘C’est bien ... ça!’.

H1: Écoute, dis-moi si je rêve ... si je me trompe ... Tu m’aurais fait part d’une réussite ... quelle réussite d’ailleurs ...

H2: Oh peu importe ... une réussite quelconque.

H1: Et alors je t’aurais dit: “C’est bien, ça?”

H2: (*soupire*) Pas tout à fait ainsi ... 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.³⁶

H1 is dumbfounded by H2’s reasoning, finding it incredible that his friend would end their relationship over such a thing. H2 explains, however, that he did not end it, as such an action ‘... n’est pas permis ... Je n’ai pas eu l’autorisation?’. Instead, he decided just to distance himself a little after having conferred with others on the matter, and having learned that he was seen by them as ‘celui qui rompt pour un oui ou pour un non’,³⁷ someone who abandons relationships for no clear reason, for anything at all, someone as fickle and inconsistent as, say, words, as Self.

So could it have been a tone of condescendence that provoked H2’s distancing? Sarraute entertains us with this possibility by bringing in the two other characters of her short comedy to weigh in on the matter, H3 and F1, who happen to be H1’s neighbors. Explaining the episode that instigated his rupture, (i.e. C’est bien ... ça), H2 asserts that he fell into a trap launched by his friend that evening. Normally he says that he keeps himself somewhat distanced from the rest of society, marginalized to a certain degree, choosing not to play the traditional roles and games valued by society. However, on this one occasion, H2 dared to play the game. Reflecting on the evening when the infamous statement was made, H1 remembers how he had congratulated H2 on his promotion, and even followed up by offering to talk to someone ‘bien placé’ who might be able to arrange a conference tour, which would allow H2 to pursue one of his passions, that of travel. And although on the surface this seems like a kind gesture, H2 describes feeling trapped by it: ‘J’avais le choix ... je pouvais reculer, dire: “Non, ce n’est pas pour moi.” Ou alors je pouvais me laisser tenter,

m'approcher de l'appât, le mordre ...'; 'C'est biiien ...ça' was H1's response, thus trapping H2. He paraphrases his friend's unspoken thoughts to explain this trap:

H2: Il [H1] m'a tenu dans le creux de sa main, il m'a examiné: voyez-vous ça, regardez-moi ce bonhomme, il dit qu'il a été, lui aussi, invité ... et même dans de flatteuses conditions ... et comme il en est fier ... voyez comme il se redresse ... ah mais c'est qu'il n'est pas si petit qu'on le croit ... il a su mériter comme un grand ... c'est biiien ... ça ...³⁸

What H2 resents is the fixity of his friend's gaze, the way in which it isolates him, pigeonholes him, classifies and categorizes him, indeed entraps him into a role that he must play out. 'Oh mais qu'est-ce que vous pouvez comprendre ...', he laments to his neighbors, fully aware of the abstract, subjective, and nuanced nature of his reasoning. 'Pas grand-chose, en effet ...', responds H3; 'Moi non plus', adds F just before they exit.³⁹

For Sarraute, since language is a 'social institution' and 'cut off from the individual subject,' not only does 'authentic communication' become impossible, self-definition does also.⁴⁰ The Self, then, is a 'territory, unstable and constantly shifting ... as a result of interpersonal maneuvers ... It asserts itself most tangibly at its periphery, where it comes up against the other person. This confrontation limits its expansion, and yet it relies on these limits as its only means of definition'.⁴¹ The push and pull between H1 and H2 logodramatically creates the motif of stasis discussed above, and also echoes a final characteristic of Guattari's concept of Subjectivity, that of *collective mutation*, whereby the existential and psychical movement toward 'liberation' is accompanied simultaneously by more 'conservative' and 'archaic' revolutions, intermingling 'aspirations and retrogressive drives'.⁴²

To explain, Guattari looked to world affairs, and attempted to show how subjective factors play a dominant role in global media by attributing the recent waves of democratization in China as well as in Eastern Europe to a *collective existential mutation*. 'The fall of the Iron Curtain was not an armed insurrection, but the crystallization of immense collective desire annihilating the mental substrate of the Post-Stalin Totalitarian System'.⁴³ However, just as in Sarraute's play, there are two poles to this mutation (H1 and H2); Guattari cites the role of women in the Maghreb and the religious politics in Iran to serve as examples of this other pole. There is freedom and imprisonment, thought and language, sentiment and logic, – H1 and H2. He concludes that it is not only on the ecological, but also on the ethological level that our survival on this planet is threatened; in other words, we are endangered not just by environmental concerns, but by 'a degeneration in the social fabric of solidarity and in the modes of psychical life, which must be reinvented'.⁴⁴ This ethological struggle is represented in Sarraute's play by the friendship between the two protagonists that is threatened with potential annihilation. To resolve the conflict, Guattari called for a mutation in mentality to deal with these new, contemporary issues, and declared the need for 'multiple molecular revolutions' in order to cultivate a subjectivity that has a continuous auto-enriching relationship to the world; it is poetry which has more to teach us about this than other disciplines, he asserts. 'One creates new modalities of subjectivity in the same way that an artist creates new forms from the palette'.⁴⁵ As with Sarraute's theatre, we are asked to create meaning, to consciously engage and invent.

In this way, Subjectivation/character development is an art, a creative process, much like writing a poem, in that it involves the absorption of a multiplicity of materials taken from an infinitesimal signification chaos and then assembles constellations of Self with refrains that provide a sense of consistency. Guattari draws a parallel between subjectivity's production and the autonomisation of poetry, what he calls the 'poetic function,' which 'seizes upon,' among several other factors, what Bakhtin referred to as 'the feeling of a movement in which the whole organism

together with the activity and sound of the word are swept along in their concrete unity'.⁴⁶ The techniques of isolation and detachment, theorized in the early twentieth-century by the Russian Formalists as a means of liberating the word from its content, and thus freeing it from its customary significance and context, are seen by Guattari as a particularly well-suited model on which to better understand the emergence of the Subject. It is from this idea that he derives the aesthetic component of his ethico-aesthetic paradigm, the subtitle of *Chaosmosis*, the last book Guattari wrote before his death. Summarily, he states:

Like Bakhtin, I would say that the [existentializing] refrain is not based on elements of form, material or ordinary signification, but on the detachment of an existential “motif” (or leitmotiv) which installs itself like an “attractor” within a sensible and significational chaos. The different components conserve their heterogeneity, but are nevertheless captured by a refrain which couples them to the existential Territory of my Self.⁴⁷

It is the poetic function that works to establish this frame in which the Self/Text acquires auto-referentiality and auto-valorisation. It is also from this act of creative consciousness, (i.e. Autopoeisis) and its relationship to an understanding of subjectivity, where one finds the most significant parallel between Sarraute and Guattari. Although the Subject/reader is caught up in the dialectical polarities of sensation and language, of Existential Territories and Incorporeal Universes, of negative determination and positivist reductionism, s/he must work toward a stabilization of the Self/Text through a conscious act of autopoeisis. Sarraute offers us tropisms of dialogue scattered on the fringes of the subconscious from which we are to compose. ‘[Je cherche] à percer les apparences, à recréer par des images et par un rythme et à transmettre des sensations, des impressions, des mouvements intérieurs qui relèvent de la psychologie, mais d’une psychologie renouvelée’.⁴⁸ Whereas Guattari theorizes an existential leitmotiv that serves as a poetic refrain in the production of the Subject, claiming:

The existential function of assemblages of enunciation consists in this utilization of links of discursivity to establish a system of repetition, of intensive insistence, polarized between a territorialized existential Territory and deterritorialized incorporeal Universes.⁴⁹

Sarraute, in her creative writing, and Guattari, in his psychoanalytic work, both present a world that reflects a chaotic and fluctuating state of affairs where thoughts, words, Self, and Other are not fixed entities, but instead struggle interminably against each other, shifting and quaking, sliding and shaking – an existential state which can only be mediated through an ethico-aesthetics that requires spontaneously generated and intentional engagement, combined with active and artistic intervention.

¹ Jean-Pierre Ryngaert, *Introduction à l'analyse du théâtre* (Paris: Dunod, 1999), p. 111.

² Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

³ John Rothenberg, ‘Imagery in Sarraute’s *Pour un oui ou pour un non*’, FSB, 41 (Winter 1991/92), pp. 15-17.

⁴ Robert Abirached, *La Crise du personnage dans le théâtre moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 19.

⁵ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 47; Abirached, *La Crise*, pp. 97-98.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 418.

- ⁷ Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 498; Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theater and Drama* (London and New York: Methuen, 198), p. 131.
- ⁸ Pavis, *Dictionary*, p. 5.
- ⁹ Carlson, *Theories*, p. 501.
- ¹⁰ Ubersfeld qtd. IN Carlson, *Theories*, p. 510.
- ¹¹ Ryngaert, *Introduction à l'analyse*, pp. 109-10.
- ¹² Jean-Pierre Ryngaert and Julie Sermon, *Le Personnage théâtral contemporain: décomposition, recomposition* (Montreuil-sous-Bois: Editions Théâtrales, 2006), pp. 61-62.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p. 113.
- ¹⁴ Arthur Rimbaud, *Lettres du voyant*, IN *Poésies*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).
- ¹⁵ Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, pp. 5-6.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 26.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 1.
- ¹⁸ Sarraute qtd. IN Robert Leggewie, *Anthologie de la littérature française*, 3rd edition, Tome II (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 414.
- ¹⁹ Olga Gomez Ormskirk, 'Fleshing out the Text: Lassalle's Production of Sarraute's *Pour un oui ou pour un non*,' *French Studies Bulletin*, 20 (70), pp. 14-15.
- ²⁰ Patrice Pavis, *Le Théâtre contemporain: analyses des textes de Sarraute à Vinaver* (Paris: Editions Nathan, 2002), p. 33.
- ²¹ Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 18.
- ²² Nathalie Sarraute, *Pour un oui ou pour un non*, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 1497.
- ²³ *Ibid*, p. 1515.
- ²⁴ Nathalie Sarraute qtd. IN John Rothenberg, 'Structures of the Unspoken: The Theatre of Nathalie Sarraute', *Orbis Litterarum: International Review of Literary Studies*, 58:3 (2003), p. 189.
- ²⁵ Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 22.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 13.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 9.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 16.
- ²⁹ Celia Briton, 'The Self and Language in the Novels of Sarraute', *Modern Language Review*, 77 (1982), p. 583.
- ³⁰ Rothenberg, 'Structures of the Unspoken', p. 190.
- ³¹ Judith Miller, 'Nathalie Sarraute: How to do Mean Things with Words', *Modern Drama*, 34:1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 118.
- ³² Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 34.
- ³³ Sarraute, *Pour un oui*, p. 1498.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, 1498.
- ³⁵ Pavis, *Le Théâtre contemporain*, p. 41.
- ³⁶ Sarraute, *Pour un oui*, p. 1499.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 1500.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 1505.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 1505.
- ⁴⁰ Briton, 'The Self and Language', p. 578.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 579.
- ⁴² Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 2.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 2.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 20.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 7.
- ⁴⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art', *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Hoquist and Liapunov, eds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 307.
- ⁴⁷ Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, pp. 16-17.
- ⁴⁸ Nathalie Sarraute qtd. IN Rothenberg, 'Structures of the Unspoken', p. 200.
- ⁴⁹ Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 26.