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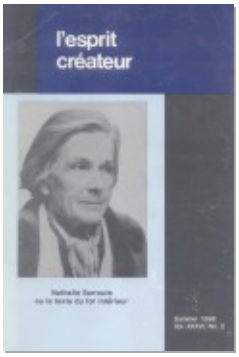

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Endings in Autobiography: The Example of *Enfance*

Sheila M. Bell

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS are crucial elements of structure in any form of narrative. In the autobiographical genre especially, they draw attention to narrative as construct. By definition, birth and death belong to the field of autobiography. By definition equally, they lie beyond the reach of the autobiographer. For existential events which are inaccessible, he has therefore to invent literary equivalents.[1] Where birth and beginning are concerned, Stendhal gets over the ground with an allusion to *Tristam Shandy*: "après tant de considérations générales je vais naître." During the discussions, it is implied, a long-drawn-out birth process has been taking place. In the next sentence, he jumps straight to "Mon premier souvenir est d'avoir mordu à la joue ou au front Madame Pison du Galland, ma cousine." HB, when he is born, is born as fully-fledged monster: "Je me révoltai, je pouvais avoir quatre ans."[2] Where death and ending are concerned, the autobiographer is equally dependent on sleight-of-hand. Graham Greene chooses the title of *A Sort of Life* on the grounds that "if one cannot close a book of memories on the deathbed, any conclusion must be arbitrary." He then finds a way of doing what he says he cannot do: he chooses, as an ending for that first volume, an experience which is the equivalent of death. The publication of his first novel was followed by years of failure of which he says, "Failure too is a kind of death."[3]

Enfance, its author assures us, is not an autobiography: "Je n'ai pas essayé d'écrire l'histoire de ma vie, parce que elle n'avait pas d'intérêt d'un point de vue littéraire."[4] But it belongs—the opening phrases of the text itself make this explicit—to that sub-genre of autobiography, sometimes called the *récit d'enfance* (Jacques Lecarme[5]), the *childhood* (Richard Coe[6]—an abbreviation for what he refers to as "the clumsy Reminiscences of childhood and adolescence") or simply *souvenirs d'enfance* as the text itself has it. Where beginnings are concerned, genre and sub-genre join forces: Bruno Vercier's study of the "premier souvenir" refers us to Leiris and Loti; Lejeune's piece on the "récit de naissance" makes no generic distinctions.[7] What of endings? Jacques Lecarme, in his attempt to define the genre, points to the difficulty of

being at all precise as to where childhood—and therefore the *récit d'enfance*—may be said to end: "La répartition des âges, et les valeurs qui leur sont attachées, apparaissent comme infiniment muables et aléatoires."[8] Where the *childhood/récit d'enfance*—on the model of its parent genre—presents the reader with "l'histoire d'une personnalité," the ending will be crucial, no matter what event is chosen as marker. According to Coe: "The *Childhood* ends with the full realization of the Self as an autonomous *identity*—the identity which will be that of the future writer or poet." We can leave HB in Milan, where his particular form of "la chasse au bonheur" has been revealed; we may even leave Poulou at the age of eleven launched on his "imposture nouvelle." For Coe, then, "The point at which the narrative ends . . . is essential to the formal structure of the *Childhood.*"[9] My intention is to consider the ending or endings of *Enfance* and the ways in which the ending or endings may be read in relation to the text as a whole. Much has already been written on *Enfance* and I should like at the outset to acknowledge my debt to many earlier commentators.[10] By way of excuse for taking up the theme again, I would offer the comment of Philippe Lejeune: "*Enfance* provoque l'exégèse" (*Récits* 31). It is difficult to resist the lures of this particular text.

Where do we say that *Enfance* ends? Suddenly, with the last paragraphs? That answer is both self-evident and unsatisfactory. Its arbitrariness is made explicit in the text by the sequence of sentences: "Rassure-toi, j'ai fini, je ne t'entraînerai pas plus loin... —Pourquoi maintenant tout à coup, quand tu n'as pas craint de venir jusqu'ici?" A blank of several lines suggests hesitation; then comes the tentative reply: "Je ne sais pas très bien... je n'en ai plus envie... je voudrais aller ailleurs..." (276-77).[11] This exchange might suggest an abandonment of the project, as sudden, willful and perhaps unreasonable as its beginning. But a fuller explanation immediately follows. The narrative is about to move outside the sphere of childhood into "un énorme espace très encombré, bien éclairé." If the narrator were to continue, the promise made in the opening dialogue could no longer be kept:

> Je ne pourrais plus m'efforcer de faire surgir quelques moments, quelques mouvements qui me semblent encore intacts, assez forts pour se dégager de cette couche protectrice qui les conserve, de ces épaisseurs blanchâtres, molles, ouatées qui se défont, qui disparaissent avec l'enfance... (277)

Enfance ends then with a reminder that it has presented us with a series

of fragments related to one another neither by number nor by title, each of them retrieved from the cocoon of childhood by virtue of its quality as felt experience, as "ressenti" (17). This is what was promised at the outset:

> c'est encore tout vacillant, aucun mot écrit, aucune parole ne l'ont encore touché, il me semble que ça palpite faiblement... hors des mots... comme toujours... des petits bouts de quelque chose d'encore vivant... je voudrais, avant qu'ils disparaissent... Laisse-moi... (9)

The promise has been kept; as ever, the effort has been made, "tant bien que mal..." (8). All that remains to be done is to stop.[12]

The last section as a whole, then, takes on an important function in firmly marking the end of childhood and in motivating the end of the writing. First of all an encounter with the countryside—rare in this largely Parisian childhood—an encounter which suggests an adolescent eagerness to make contact with the world, a sense of life (her life?) as limitless in its possibilities:

> je colle mon dos, mes bras en croix le plus fort que je peux contre la terre couverte de mousse pour que toutes les sèves me pénètrent, qu'elles se répandent dans tout mon corps, je regarde le ciel comme je ne l'ai jamais regardé... je me fonds en lui, je n'ai pas de limites, pas de fin. (275)

There are reminiscences of the epiphany experienced at a younger age (before the separation from the mother) in the Luxembourg gardens but here the child is more consciously eager and the "je" plays a more important role: the subject pronoun occurs eleven times in fifteen lines (as against five times in thirty-three). With the arrival of autumn and the end of the holidays, this eagerness to live is channelled without protest into the " 'nouvelle vie' " represented by the lycée Fénelon; "ça te changera de l'école primaire..." (276). The last moment of this series of "moments" or "mouvements" to be recaptured is the moment of transition when the new life is about to begin: "Enfin un matin très tôt..." (276). As she gets on the tram to go to the lycée, Natacha sets off on a new journey, a new stage in her life. A rite of passage is being accomplished; Véra's words to the tram conductor make this clear: "Soyez gentil, c'est la première fois que 'la petite' prend le tramway toute seule" (276). The tone is positive, expectant: the work may be difficult, she has been warned about that, but her school-bag is full of new books and she is impatient to begin: "c'est agaçant que le tramway s'attarde tant à

chaque arrêt, qu'il ne roule pas plus vite..." (276). Sarraute here is writing within the conventions of the genre. Many *récits d'enfance* end with just such an educational milestone, marking the end of one phase of life and the beginning of another. There is Duhamel, for example, about to be engulfed by "l'ombre inquiétante de la montagne Sainte-Geneviève,"[13] or Loti, writing the letter which will commit him to naval college.[14] Thus the departure for the lycée serves a double function: on the one hand it marks a decisive moment in the personal history of the child, on the other it marks the fact that the text is complete. It is both symbolic act and textual sign. In the last exchanges, the events of childhood and the present of writing are linked. The alter ego (shall we call him the second narrator or the first?) and the reader are not to be dragged as far as the lycée. The child's desire for new experience is reflected in that of the writer: "je voudrais aller ailleurs..." (277). The link which is made affords a parallel to that which was made in the first fragment: there it was the alter ego's remonstrations which provoked the first memory: "Oui, toi par tes objurgations, tes mises en garde... tu le fais surgir... tu m'y plonges..." (10). So childhood and *Enfance* are ended. The last word of the text—"enfance"—takes us back to its title. We have, as so often with Sarraute, a return to the point of departure; the serpent swallows its tail, the text is complete.

Enfance is, as many critics have argued, more than a series of fragments on which a sort of ending has been imposed in the shape of a conventional *rite de passage*. What the fragments reveal is something between a drama and a quest which is resolved or completed by the end of the book. I wish to examine how the last few episodes of *Enfance*—from the first reunion with the mother (247) onwards—combine to create in the reader a sense of resolution or completion. We must first go further back into the text. *Enfance* is principally concerned with a nexus of interpersonal relationships as experienced by the child Natacha. Chief participants are mother, father and stepmother. The child lives first with her mother in Paris and in St. Petersburg, and then with her father and Véra in Paris. Within and against this network of sensibilities, she develops. There are points in the text when her sense of self seems to be seriously under threat. Evidence of a precarious self are the ideas which invade her mind before she leaves St. Petersburg: " 'mes idées' que j'étais seule à avoir, qui faisaient tout chavirer, je sentais parfois que j'allais sombrer" (135), and the sudden collapse of her handwriting when, in the absence of a reply from St. Petersburg about her return, she starts at the cours

Brébant: "mon écriture, jusque-là tout à fait claire, et devenu subitement méconnaissable" (133). The struggle to survive which follows might seem to be principally against the difficult stepmother and against the stepsister, a sibling rival. Indeed the notion of survival is made explicit in the text in relation to Véra in the context of a subsequent encounter with one of the English governesses engaged for Lili's benefit: "elle a paru agréablement surprise que j'avais réussi à survivre..." (263-64). More significantly, however, it is a struggle against the natural mother: the child's affirmation of self is perceived—and vindicated—as a choice against the mother. In an early interview on the text, Nathalie Sarraute made the following comment: "J'ai voulu décrire comment naît la souffrance qui accompagne le sentiment du sacrilège" (Forrester 20). Why sacrilege? In the early episodes, the small child's sense of allegiance to the mother is absolute: "au sens propre du mot elle me charmait..." (27). Such a view of the mother is supported by the doxa. Earlier *récits d'enfance* explicitly or implicitly present in *Enfance* offer plenty of models of maternal perfection. Both Loti's *Le Roman d'un enfant* (1890) and Tolstoy's *Childhood* (1852) centre the idyllic aspects of their narratives on the figure of the mother. For Loti, she represents tenderness without reserve and a constant loving presence: "je voulais surtout voir ma mère, ma mère à tout prix... La porte s'ouvrit, et ma mère entra, souriante." She belongs to a different order of being from everyone else: "une figure tout à fait unique, que je ne songeais à comparer à aucune autre, d'où rayonnait pour moi la joie, la sécurité, la tendresse, d'où émanait tout ce qui était bon."[15] Tolstoy of course knew his mother only as absence since she died when she was very young. But in his fictional *Childhood,* he replaced the mother he could not remember with an idealized figure: "When I try to recall my mother as she was at that time I can only picture her brown eyes which always held the same expression of goodness and love" (*Childhood* 18). Tolstoy's *Childhood* is one of the rare foreign texts to figure in the *livres de lecture* used in schools at the beginning of the century,[16] all of which, whatever age range they aim at and whether they include Tolstoy or not, offer this consecrated view of the mother figure. One example among many: G. Bruno's *Premier Livre de lecture,* in a section entitled "La Mère de famille": "Oh! qu'il est bon d'avoir une mère! Qu'il est doux de l'aimer et de lui rendre tendresse pour tendresse!"[17] The mother in *Enfance* subscribes to the general view: "Un enfant qui aime sa mère trouve que personne n'est plus beau qu'elle" (95); "Tu n'as au monde qu'une seule maman" (104); and when

the child proposes to call Véra "maman": "Il faut manquer de cœur, être insensible, ingrat, oublier les liens les plus sacrés, ce qu'on doit avoir de plus cher au monde, sa mère, un nom qu'aucune autre femme ne peut porter" (219). In St. Petersburg, the first stirrings of independence on the part of the child are reflected in critical thoughts about the mother: "Elle est plus belle que maman" (94), or "Maman a la peau d'un singe" (99). Such perceptions are disallowed by the mother and the effect on the child is dramatic. She must be a monster, "un enfant qui n'aime pas sa mère. Un enfant qui porte sur lui quelque chose qui le sépare, qui le met au ban des autres enfants..." (98). The child's subsequent history can be perceived in a similar light. Thus the decision to stay in Paris with her father and by implication to make the best of Véra, to work hard at school and take pleasure in doing well, to spend a day going out with friends, all are choices against the mother, all are sacrilegious. The measure of the outrage which is to be described and reenacted in the text is conveyed by the initial episode of the sofa. Thus the conventions of the genre are infringed and the image of the mother dismantled at one and the same time.[18] Liberation from the mother signifies the achievement of an independent literary identity.

In the first of the six episodes where, if I am right, one can detect a movement towards the text's conclusion, the child is reunited with her mother after a period of two and a half years. The dialogue between the two narrators is used here for emphasis: this is one of its most important functions. We are obliged to pause and fully register the length of time involved: "elle m'attend, je vais la voir... il y a si longtemps que je ne l'ai pas vue, je n'avais que huit ans... —Huit ans et demi exactement, c'était en février 1909. —Et le 18 juillet, j'ai eu onze ans... (248-49). The encounter draws on layers of experience on the part of the child; her new awareness of the mother is striking. The old shibboleths are still operative: "je sais que ce que je trouverai est ce que je peux avoir de plus proche sur terre, ma mère, on n'a qu'une mère, qui ne doit préférer sa mère à tout au monde, c'est ma mère que je vais rejoindre..." (249). The repetition of "mère" suggests intensity of expectation, also perhaps a kind of litany, a lesson which has been learned. The old magic reasserts itself: the mother's voice and her scent are rediscovered, as is the soft charm of her skin: "plus soyeuse et plus douce que tout ce qui est soyeux et doux au monde" (251). But there is a measure of detachment, which finds expression in a number of ways. There is, first of all, a critical awareness of certain features of the mother's appearance or deportment.

Here the child is quick to make allowances in a way that the mother does not, thus taking over what might seem to be the mother's role.[19] There is also the refusal to accept the mother's negative comment on Véra. This new judgment—"Cette... Véra n'est pas tout à fait normale... il paraît que c'est une hystérique" (255)—seems more aggressive than the earlier "Véra est bête." Or at any rate that is how the child registers it, and it provokes in her a very different response: "ça soulève en moi, ça fait courir en moi des vaguelettes de terreur..." (255). The child now has a separate life which must be protected against attack, the main elements of that life being school and Véra herself. Perhaps too there is a rejection of such judgments: already the phrase "cette... Véra..." produces an instinctive shrinking: "je sens que de nouveau maman ne sait plus très bien à qui elle parle... maintenant elle ne me voit plus du tout comme un enfant, elle croit qu'elle s'adresse à un adulte... mais je ne suis pas un adulte, *en tout cas pas celui qu'elle voit...*" (254; my italics). Above all, there is the child's ability to read, in the mother's words, those implicit meanings which concern herself:

> Et d'un coup je sens, comme jamais je ne l'avais sentie avant, l'indifférence à mon égard de maman, elle sort à flots de ces mots "Eh bien tant mieux pour toi", elle déferle sur moi avec une telle puissance, elle me roule, elle me rejette là-bas, vers ce qui, si mauvais que ce soit, est tout de même un peu à moi, m'est tout de même plus proche... elle me pousse vers celle qui la remplace, auprès de qui je vais revenir, avec qui je vais vivre, celle avec qui je vis... (255-56)[20]

The next, much briefer text both develops and confirms the patterns present in the preceding one. Here the child is older and a new kind of companionship is briefly evoked: the mother is "toujours prête à s'amuser de n'importe quoi, prompte comme moi aux fous rires..." (259). But this time the interval has been greater still. The opening words of the episode, "Trois ans après, en juillet 1914, ma mère est revenue," mark the lapse of time. The stay is once more cut short in a way which implies rejection of the child: it is August 1914 and the mother is distraught, "affolée," at the idea that she might be cut off from Russia:

> Je l'ai accompagnée à Royan, au train... j'étais déchirée... et ce qui me déchirait encore davantage, c'était sa joie qu'elle ne cherchait même pas à dissimuler... ce beau voyage jusqu'à Constantinople... et puis la Russie et Pétersbourg et Kolia... comme il devait l'attendre... comme il devait être inquiet... (260)

At the end of the section, the familiar elements of the nexus are briefly

sketched for us: the absent mother, the upset fourteen-year-old, and the reactions of the other two participants: "mon air désolé a dû encore cette fois les agacer, mon père était plus froid avec moi que d'ordinaire et Véra plus sifflante encore, plus vipérine qu'elle ne l'était assez souvent dans ce temps-là" (260). This is the mother's last appearance in *Enfance*. The effect of introducing it here, where it constitutes a prolepsis, is to underline her disappearance from the child's world as we approach the end of the childhood: it is the father and Véra who remain to her.

The fragment that follows evokes both the ideal which has evaporated and the reality to which the child is sent back. For the child, Lili's English governesses are associated with images of happy childhoods, "les 'vraies' enfances vécues dans l'insouciance, dans la sécurité, sous la ferme et bienveillante direction de parents unis, justes et calmes..." (262). Like the "beaux souvenirs d'enfance" of Kamenetz-Podolsk, such memories do not belong to her; when Véra returns, she must hurry back to her own room and pretend she has had no contact with the girls. That this reality is not to be too readily labelled as "enfance malheureuse," however, is immediately emphasized by a change of tone: Véra as stepmother becomes the subject of reminiscent laughter. The following episode—the reading of *Rocambole*—maintains this tone. We are reminded once more that the child's bedroom is the setting for activities other than tears, among which one of particular importance: "Tu ne faisais pas qu'y pleurer... Non, je devais lire, comme toujours..." (115).

In this story of survival, the father's role seems crucial. From the opening episode, when he appears as anxious, questioning presence: "Qu'est-ce que tu as fait, Tachok, qu'est-ce qui t'a pris?" (11), the father's rapport with the child is implicitly contrasted with that of the mother.[21] He does not like to speak of his love for her, but the reality communicates itself to the child:

> je sens irradiant de lui quelque chose en lui qu'il tient enfermé, qu'il retient, il n'aime pas le montrer, mais c'est là, je le sens, c'est passé dans sa main vite retirée, dans ses yeux, dans sa voix qui prononce ces diminutifs qu'il est seul à faire de mon prénom: Tachok ou le diminutif de ce diminutif: Tachotchek... et aussi ce nom comique qu'il me donne: Pigalitza... (44)

The child can even tease him about it: "Est-ce que tu m'aimes, papa?..." (57), and the balloon she coaxes from him becomes a metaphor for her bright confidence where he is concerned: "ce gage, ce joli trophée que j'emporte, flottant tout bleu et brillant au-dessus de ma tête" (59). What

is equally important: when she chooses to stay in Paris rather than go back to St. Petersburg, no protestations of affection are asked of her. She does not have to love him: "et même si je ne sentais pas envers lui ce que les autres appellent l'amour, mais ce qui entre nous ne se nomme pas, cela ne changerait rien, ma vie lui serait aussi essentielle... plus peut-être que la sienne?... en tout cas autant..." (175). Throughout the early episodes in which he appears, he is a caring presence: bending down to put on her new gloves, teaching her the days of the week, waiting till she goes to sleep, above all listening and explaining, as with the strawberry jam: "Il m'observe, il hésite un instant et il dit: 'C'était bien de la confiture de fraises, mais ce que tu y voyais, c'était un peu de calomel' " (46). Again the contrast with the mother is striking: "Combien de temps il t'a fallu pour en arriver à te dire qu'elle n'essayait jamais, sinon très distraitement et maladroitement, de se mettre à ta place..." (27). In Paris and married to Véra, he is at first busy and more distant: the diminutives are less in evidence. Nevertheless he understands and responds to the child's misery. Betrayed, it would seem, by the mother's failure to observe their agreement, the child finds support in the father: "A ce moment-là, et pour toujours, envers et contre toutes les apparences, un lien invisible que rien n'a pu détruire nous a attachés l'un à l'autre..." (116). It is with her father in Paris that the sense of self is recovered: she learns to write again and the "idées" which so preoccupied her in St. Petersburg lose their potency. A critical thought about her father—"Papa a mauvais caractère"—can be entertained and debated without a sense of impropriety or shame, without the need for confession or excuses: "Alors?... Alors quoi? Je l'ai pensé et cela n'appartient qu'à moi. Je n'ai à en rendre compte à personne" (136). Her ideas, like anyone else's, are her own property, a sign not of madness but of independence: "Il me semble qu'à ce moment-là, j'ai cru posséder pour toujours une force que rien ne pourrait réduire, une complète et définitive indépendance" (136-37). Subsequently, too, it is the father who encourages her commitment to school and enthusiasm for their adopted country, France, who encourages her, therefore, in the development of a new identity, that of "un bon petit Français."

The father's last appearance in the text culminates in his use of the phrase "ma fille" (270), a phrase which may be read as a response to the mother's parting shot: "Je vous félicite, vouz avez réussi à faire de Natacha un monstre d'égoïsme. Je vous la laisse..." (258). The words come at the end of an episode when the father is seen at work: "mon père

s'efforce de reconstituer en bien plus petit sa 'fabrique de matières colorantes' d'Ivanovo'' (268). His work involves precision and he brings to it a determination to get things right: ''on va refaire ça...'' (269). The setting is unprepossessing but the father's words convey to the child an acceptance of his lot:

> Il dit ''Bon. Alors à demain...'', un ''Bon'' par où s'échappe un peu de sa satisfaction, un ''Bon'' où je perçois Comme c'est bon, comme c'est bien qu'il en soit ainsi, que j'aie reçu aujourd'hui ma part d'efforts quotidiens, que je la reçoive encore demain... Sans cette part, comment est-il possible de vivre?... (270)

The father is addressing the Florimonds, two ''characters'' whom the child accepts without question as the embodiment of certain qualities which the father admires, qualities perfectly rendered by their physical appearance: the husband, all industry and intelligence, and the wife, ''l'image du dévouement, de la modestie, mais aussi de la fermeté...'' (270). Under the influence of the Florimonds, the father too takes on the guise of an ''image de piété,'' an image of determination and energy. But where the father is concerned, the ''image simple et nette'' is not allowed to stand. The father's words—''ma fille''—are received by the child not as the Florimonds will understand them, ''de simples mots usuels, banals, tout naturels et allant de soi'' (271), but as heavy with the history of their shared experience. There is a common knowledge of rejection, a renewed promise of support and a challenge to the mother: he for his part has established his right to use the phrase. If the child can read the words in this way, it is because she accepts what they contain and reaffirms the choice which she made earlier of life with the father. To infer from this that she in some degree identifies with the father would therefore not seem inappropriate. The child derives comfort from her *dictée* and other tasks in very similar fashion: is there perhaps some acceptance of the father's recurrent advice: ''ne t'en fais pas... ...rien dans la vie n'en vaut la peine... tu verras, dans la vie, tôt ou tard, tout s'arrange...'' (116)?[22] It is not that the child compares herself to the father, or that she imitates him; as she suggests earlier, ''J'essaie seulement de retrouver à travers ce que je percevais en lui ce qui se passait en moi quand mon cartable au bout de mon bras je dévalais l'escalier, courais vers l'école'' (165).

The second from last text of *Enfance* is devoted to Véra, the substitute mother: ''celle qui la remplace, auprès de qui je vais revenir, avec qui je vais vivre, celle avec qui je vis...'' (256). All kinds of factors play a

part in the child's rapport with Véra: her own status as uninvited guest, Véra's passion for Lili and the latter's difficult temperament, Véra's homesickness and her poor health and, above all perhaps, the phrase passed on to the child by the mother, "Véra est bête," and which she in her turn repeats to Véra. We are not at first encouraged to speculate about these aspects of Véra but, as time goes by, the child begins to have access to them. Thus, the repeating of the comment to Véra finds its place in the narrative not when it happened, "peu de temps après ton arrivée" (189), but at a much later stage, when the child has a better understanding of "le caractère de Véra" (184) and of other aspects of her experience. Véra as the perpetrator of phrases which crystallize the child's hurt—"Ce n'est pas ta maison" or "Tiebia podbrossili"—is set against a Véra who is part of the child's daily life, rolling cigarettes for the father, covering schoolbooks for Natacha, sharing extra noodles with her, teaching her to ride a bicycle, or a Véra who is discovered in tears and who accepts the child's gesture of comfort. In subtle ways, each woman's view of the other impinges on the child. As life with Véra has (probably) been modified by the mother's phrase, "Véra est bête" (at least until the label loses its meaning for the child), so the reunion with the mother takes place under the aegis of Véra. The mother's visit coincides with a trip to Versailles of which Véra is the originator. The outing may be seen as an attempt (extremely successful in its way) to compete with, or perhaps just to aggravate the natural mother. When the child worries that the mother may be annoyed, Véra is reassuring: "elle sera ravie de savoir que tu t'amuses... —Tu crois? —Mais j'en suis sûre, quelle mère ne le serait pas?..." (248). Whatever Véra's intention, the reader feels the irony. As time goes by, there is interference between the two figures in the child's awareness, suggesting a gradual modification of her relations with each. The adjectives associated with the mother have already been transferred to Véra in the episode when the child finds her in tears—Véra's head is perceived as "soyeuse et douce" (203)—and in the reunion with the mother, the child is put out to see that her mother has adopted a new hairstyle: "ces deux rouleaux lisses et foncés de chaque côté du front, *comme ceux que porte Véra*... ils ne lui vont pas, ils donnent à son visage qui ne ressemblait à aucun autre, quelque chose de banal, d'un peu dur..." (251; my italics).

Whatever the manifold and mysterious causes, Véra is difficult where the child is concerned, intermittently hostile, and the last text explores this central feature of their rapport—"ces brusques fureurs rentrées, ces

bouillonnements, ces sifflements qui te viennent on ne sait où... peut-être de ma seule présence..." (273)—and the way it is received by the child. The child's question, "est-ce que tu me détestes?" expresses a need for reassurance, perhaps an attempt at closeness. But there is no communion and here the contrast with the father is striking.[23] Véra's reply, "Comment peut-on détester un enfant?" is received as a rejection. Each element is unpacked one after the other, down to the final twist: "mais quand je ne serai plus un enfant... mais si je n'étais pas un enfant... ah, alors là..." (274). Thus we finish this account of childhood with an episode concerning the child's awareness of the substitute mother. The reference to "soupe," however passing and unemphatic, sends us back to the second fragment in which the child's allegiance to the natural mother was evoked. The episode offers us at the same time a perception of the child altogether at odds with the "beaux souvenirs d'enfance," as belonging to "cette catégorie de pitoyables pygmées aux gestes peu conscients, désordonnés, aux cerveaux encore informes..." (274). Thus, an episode which might seem to belong with other manifestations of a hostile Véra earlier in the text finds its proper place here and serves in a number of ways to round off the exploration of the child's experience.

There are then, in these last few texts, certain features which we would wish to emphasize. The child's awareness of each of the central figures in her childhood is given full and final expression. The mother's indifference, the father's solidarity, Véra's hostility, they are all conveyed to us not as a series of labels, but as moments of felt experience. The experience is as varied as it is intense. Another leitmotif is that of the child's development. The first reunion with the mother, disappointing though it is, is accompanied by the adventure of setting out to go to the hotel alone. The scene in the factory recalls a previous one in Ivanovo which encompasses the same coloured dyes, the same abacus, the same father in his white overall. The parallel not only suggests the stability of the father figure but also marks the child's progression. Then she had to be sat on a pile of books in order to reach the desk and she did not know what to do with the abacus; now she can be appealed to regarding the precise shade of a dye. Even the end of the Véra episode looks forward, however negatively, to a time when she will no longer be a child. The notion of maturity is linked to greater awareness of psychic undercurrents; family tensions are seen as productive of a mode of perception and, ultimately, through the agency of the adult narrator(s), of a mode of writing. These last few episodes culminate—in the scene with Véra—in

a very fine example of a Sarrautean text, in which the discourse of the other is unpacked with great confidence and skill.

If we look at the last episode of all and read it against these few which precede, we see that it suggests a resolution of conflict and a sense of an independent self. The father is internalized: it is "ma fille" who goes off expectantly to school. Véra, "celle qui la remplace..." (256), is confined to the practical supporting role in which she has sometimes been seen. The mother is wholly absent. The departure for the lycée is properly at the centre of the episode. Whatever its new demands, the lycée is still school, a place where the child knows the rules and can shine, a place where she has learnt to be an ordinary child again: "un enfant parmi tous les autres, un enfant comme tous les autres" (96).[24] When the narrator refers to the *école primaire* as "cette nouvelle vie, ma vraie vie...," the alter ego protests: "Fais attention, tu vas te laisser aller à l'emphase..." (166). The blanket statement—"nouvelle vie," "vraie vie"—is out of keeping with Sarraute's more tentative, more modest way of describing experience, but still the importance of school has been indicated. The "nouvelle vie" of the last section—again the expression is toned down here by inverted commas; these are someone else's words, not Natacha's —reminds us of this aspect of the child's experience and what it signifies. So this ending leads us back into the text and suggests the achievement of a certain relationship with the world, the confirmation of "une complète et définitive indépendance" (137). The act of sacrilege has been committed and vindicated; the child has survived.

With *Enfance,* we have an example of the *récit d'enfance* which is singularly self-contained. Sarraute is not concerned with an adult self to which this infant self might correspond. There are, it is true, references to an adult self—the dislike of strawberry jam (46), the scars from the diptheria injection (224)—but they are really not much more than rhetorical devices which, by linking child and adult, establish the fact that the narrator knows what she is talking about. There is none of the questioning as to present identity which is found in *Brulard* or in *L'Age d'homme.*[25] There are also references to an adult writer, author of a previous *œuvre,* to which it is hoped that *Enfance* will measure up. Relative to the child, however, the adult presence which matters in *Enfance* is that of the narrator, or rather the two narrators, who combine to articulate the child's developing awareness and who are a function of the text itself. *Enfance,* so it seems to me, can best be seen as one in a series of works from the 1980s—"sister-texts"[26]—in which Sarraute explores,

through a variety of generic structures, the "for intérieur." In each case, the discovery of the appropriate form is what matters: "Chaque fois il faut trouver une forme qui convient, une forme autour de laquelle se rassemble toute la substance du livre."[27] Coherence of substance and form in the final episodes of *Enfance*: that is the feature which I have tried to emphasize.

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Notes

1. Louis Marin has defined the autobiographical endeavour in terms of this particular issue: "toute auto-bio-graphie est une auto-bio-thanato-graphie. Le récit de sa vie par celui qui l'a vécue tente, par l'écriture, de conjoindre le récit de sa naissance et celui de sa mort"; "Ecriture, images, gravures dans la représentation de soi chez Stendhal," in *L'Auteur et le manuscrit,* ed. Michel Contat (Paris: PUF, 1991), 119. See also, by the same author, *La Voix excommuniée* (Paris: Galilée, 1981). Concerning the same issue, Philippe Lejeune gives examples of the various strategies adopted by writers, "pour boucher comme on peut le trou de la naissance ou le trou de la mort" (93); "Peut-on innover en autobiographie?" in *L'Autobiographie, Les Rencontres psychanalytiques d'Aix-en-Provence 1987* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1988), 67-100. See also Philippe Lejeune, "Récits de naissance," in *Récits de vie: modèles et écarts. Cahiers de sémiotique textuelle,* 4 (1985): 7-31.
2. *Vie de Henry Brulard, Œuvres intimes,* II (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1982), 550-52.
3. *A Sort of Life* (London: The Bodley Head, 1971), 9.
4. Pierre Boncenne, "Interview: Nathalie Sarraute," *Lire* (June 1983): 90.
5. Jacques Lecarme, "La Légitimation du genre," *Le Récit d'enfance en question. Cahiers de sémiotique textuelle,* 12 (1988): 21-39.
6. Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller. Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1984).
7. Bruno Vercier, "Le Mythe du premier souvenir: Pierre Loti, Michel Leiris," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France,* 75 (1975): 1029-46.
8. Lecarme, 21. Tolstoy concludes the text of his (fictional) *Childhood* with the death of the mother: "With my mother's death the happy period of my childhood ended for me and a new epoch began—the epoch of boyhood," *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 101. Youth begins at "nearly sixteen" (179). A more recent practitioner of the genre refuses to see any such distinction as meaningful: "Puis-je au moins dire que j'étais à la fin de l'enfance, de l'adolescence? Ces mots sont vides. Il me semble que j'ai été adolescent très jeune, que j'ai été enfant très vieux," Guy Bechtel, *Mensonges d'enfance* (Paris: Laffont, 1986), 205. For Bechtel, however, all those who speak of their childhood are in any case "des escrocs" (207).
9. "Stendhal, Rousseau and the Search for Self," *Australian Journal of French Studies,* 15-16 (1978-79): 30.
10. *Enfance* has attracted some of the most consistently interesting work on Sarraute, among which, in order of publication: Françoise van Roey-Roux, "*Enfance* de Nathalie Sarraute ou de la fiction à l'autobiographie," *Etudes littéraires,* 17 (1984): 273-82; Gretchen Besser, "Sarraute on Childhood—Her Own," *French Literature Series,* 12 (1985): 154-61; Bruno Vercier, "(Nouveau) Roman et autobiographie: *Enfance* de Nathalie Sarraute," *French Literature Series,* 12 (1985): 162-70; Valerie Minogue, "Fragments of a Childhood: Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance,*" *Romance Studies,* 9 (1986): 71-83, and "Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*: From Experience of Language to the Language of Experience," in Robert Gibson, ed., *Studies in French Fiction: Essays in Honour of Vivienne Mylne* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1988): 209-24; Yvette Went-Daoust, "*Enfance* de Nathalie Sarraute ou le pouvoir de la parole," *Les Lettres romanes,* 41 (1987): 337-50; Raylene O'Callaghan, "Voice(s) in

Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance,*" *New Zealand Journal of French Studies,* 9 (1988): 83-94, and "Reading Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*: Reflections on Critical Validity," *Romanic Review,* 80 (1989): 445-61; Philippe Lejeune, "Paroles d'enfance," *Revue des Sciences Humaines,* 217 (1990): 23-38; Monique Gosselin, "*Enfance* de Nathalie Sarraute: les mots de la mère," *Revue des Sciences Humaines,* 222 (1991): 121-42. Sections on Sarraute are also to be found in the following general studies: Leah D. Hewitt, *Autobiographical Tightropes* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography. Devices and Desires* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); and David R. Ellison, *Of Words and the World. Referential Anxiety in Contemporary French Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). For further comment on these and other items on *Enfance,* see my article, "The Conjurer's Hat: Sarraute Criticism since 1980," *Romance Studies,* 23 (1994): 85-103.

11. Page references to *Enfance* are to the Folio edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) and are given in brackets after each quotation.
12. In discussing the text in interviews, Sarraute is repeatedly anxious to stress its fragmentary, incomplete nature. To Viviane Forrester, after publication, she says: "j'ai vraiment choisi certains moments, comme toujours, proches de mon travail, de ma recherche, de mon écriture. ... Il ne s'agit pas d'un rapport sur toute ma vie. Pas même sur toute l'enfance." "Portrait de Nathalie," *Magazine littéraire,* 196 (June 1983): 19. To Pierre Boncenne, "Aujourd'hui comme hier à l'école communale, je n'aime pas ces étalages de soi-même et je n'ai pas l'impression qu'avec *Enfance* je me suis laissée aller. Comme dans *Tropismes,* ce sont plutôt des moments, des formes de sensibilité.... Je n'ai pas essayé d'écrire l'histoire de ma vie" (90).
13. Georges Duhamel, *Inventaire de l'abîme 1884-1901* (Paris: Paul Hartmann, 1944), 237.
14. "Et puis, il me semble que mon enfance première a vraiment pris fin ce jour où j'ai ainsi décidé mon avenir," Pierre Loti, *Le Roman d'un enfant* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1988), 252.
15. Loti, 55, 56. Loti is of course cited as possible model for "Mon premier chagrin"; in the second *devoir de français,* written at the *lycée,* we might detect another echo of *Le Roman d'un enfant* and of "une certaine petite armoire jamais ouverte," in which are stored "mes jouets d'enfant conservés" (58).
16. See, for example, A. Mironneau, *Choix de lectures. Cours moyen* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1908).
17. G. Bruno, *Premier Livre de lecture et d'instruction pour l'enfant. Cours élémentaire* (Paris: Belin, 233rd edition, 1898), 17. Bruno's most famous work, *Le Tour de France par deux enfants* (Paris: Belin, 1877), is used as reference text by Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet in her study of the influence of primary school models on the writing of non-literary autobiography, "La Doxa scolaire dans les récits de vie," *Récits de vie: modèles et écarts. Cahiers de sémiotique textuelle,* 4 (1985): 79-94.
18. Valerie Minogue's argument that a link exists between the silk of the sofa and "the peau soyeuse of Maman" is incontrovertible: see "Fragments of a Childhood," 80.
19. On a number of occasions, the mother appears to Natacha as childlike: "toujours un peu enfantine, légère..." (19); "La courbe que formait sa paupière ... avait cette pureté, cet air de candeur qu'elle a parfois chez les enfants" (93); she too likes playing "Le quatuor des écrivains" (71) and her cards to the child are "ces récits enfantins," inappropriately young for the recipient (126). The characteristic is part of her charm; viewed negatively, it would account for her self-absorption.
20. In her study of languages at work in *Enfance,* in "Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*: From Experience of Language to the Language of Experience" (222), Valerie Minogue comments on another sign of the mother's detachment in this episode, her playing with the two words for rage, the French and the Russian.
21. Monique Gosselin emphasizes the extent to which the father is shown as adopting a "maternal" role and argues that the text may be seen as a "monument pour ce père." She also suggests—less convincingly—that it embodies a reconciliation with the mother (140-42).
22. We are not concerned here with searching for parallels with the adult Sarraute but it is tempting at this point to quote Sarraute's conclusion to her article on "Le Bonheur de l'homme": "Ainsi débarrassés de la hantise de cette image illusoire et débilitante du bonheur, pourrions-nous arriver à travers les souffrances assumées et les sacrifices, les tristesses et les joies, à vivre une vie digne de ce nom." In *Digraphe,* 32 (March 1984): 62 (the original Japanese version dates from 1970).

23. Question and answer here may be compared with the earlier exchange involving the father, where the question, "Est-ce que tu m'aimes, papa?" receives, after some insistence, the reply, "Mais oui, mon petit bêta, *je t'aime*" (57-58).
24. Again we are sent back to the second episode where loyalty to the mother makes of her "un enfant fou, un enfant maniaque..." and the other children are kept away from her: "Ils sont groupés aussi loin que possible de moi, à l'autre bout de la longue table..." (14).
25. Vercier (1985) refers us to the interview with Pierre Boncenne to support the suggestion that both Sartre and Leiris are present in *Enfance* as negative models (170).
26. Ann Jefferson, "Autobiography as Intertext: Barthes, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet," in Michael Worton and Judith Still, eds., *Intertextuality. Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 111. Her argument is that the text may be seen as sister-text, meta-text and hyper-text, as continuing, commenting on and rewriting her previous works.
27. François-Marie Banier, "Un Anti-Portrait de la romancière," *Le Monde* (15 April 1983): 16.