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NATALIE SARRAUTE'S *TROPISMES* AND THE METAPHOR OF *TISSU*

When Elaine Showalter writes in her 1986 essay "Piecing and Writing," "The repertoire of the Victorian lady who could knit, net, knot, and tat, has become that of the feminist critic, in whose theoretical writing metaphors of text and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web, abound" (224), she might be commenting on representations of knitting, sewing, fabric, and handicrafts in Nathalie Sarraute's 1939 novel *Tropismes*. A text filled with depictions of women engaging these crafts and materials, *Tropismes* follows the pattern Showalter analyzes in linking questions of gender and the female body to needle arts and crafts. As an extended meditation on the unconscious and the nature of human interiority, *Tropismes* must find a way to probe the gendered human psyche. What does a distinctly female unconscious look like? What is its texture, its relationship to the female body, and its material makeup? How does a woman access it?

In approaching potential answers to these questions, I would like to present a metaphor through which we can tease out some of the issues at stake here. Dubbing the metaphor *tissu*, I contend that both understandings conveyed in the meaning of this French word are crucially at work in Sarraute's novel. Firstly, in its understanding as "fabric," *tissu* points to the ways in which women use fabric in the novel to practice their art, construct something useful, and ultimately transform raw materials into something new. The equally relevant second meaning of *tissu*, its understanding as bodily tissue, points to the very materiality of the human body: its textures and substances and its composition of fibrous parts of a living, breathing whole. Metaphorically stitching together the fibrous materials that make up a garment and the fibrous materials that make up a body, *tissu* presents an effective way to think about how fiber arts relate to the unconscious as the material reality Sarraute theorizes.

By titling her novel with the simple plural noun *Tropismes* [tropisms], Sarraute invites readers to consider each of the novel's numbered chapters as discreet vignettes that come together as a whole under one theme. The first definition the Oxford English Dictionary gives for the word "tropism" is "Movement of an organism or part of an organism, esp. part of a plant, in a direction toward or away from an external stimulus; an instance of this" ("tropism" 1). Working with this definition, each chapter of Sarraute's novel can be thought of as a response to a calling or urge. In describing a biological phenomenon, this definition aligns with the bodily tissue side of the *tissu* metaphor. The often fraught living characters populating the early vignettes in Sarraute's text behave much like plant matter responding to a stimulus; they move and turn to respond to what affects them at the intrinsic level of their fundamental materials.

The term has other meanings that extend beyond direct application to biological tissues, however. The second definition the OED lists for "tropism" is "With reference to people: a natural or innate instinct, tendency, or impulse. Now more generally: a preference, an inclination" ("tropism" 2). The term thus applies

not only to material tissues but also to more abstract ideas like human wants, desires, and likings. This version of the concept implies something that comes from within, thoughts and urges whose source lies not in some external stimulus but inside the subject who experiences them. Thus the tropism becomes a phenomenon firmly located in the tension between the concrete and the abstract, between physical science and philosophy or anthropology in its uncanny and slippery ability to approach simultaneously from without and from within, a part of our biology and something deeply rooted in our thoughts and minds.

Indeed, this very tension illuminates the larger argument at stake in this essay, that *tissu* reveals to readers an unconscious that is as deeply material for Sarraute as the organs and tissues inside us. Though the dreamlike nature of each tropism Sarraute presents to readers may at first glance suggest that the tropism should be located in the realm of abstract ideas, the material world crucially emerges in Sarraute's imagery to remind readers that the unconscious is part of them, a living part of the material body they experience every day. In doing so, Sarraute creates long lists of concrete, tangible spaces that are familiar to readers in order to invoke the link between felt sensations and the material world. For example, in the fifth chapter/tropism, Sarraute writes about "les façades des maisons, les boutiques, les vieilles femmes et les petites enfants qui marchaient dans la rue" (23) [the façades of the houses, the boutiques, the old women and little children who walk in the street]. Calling on readers to picture each item mentally, Sarraute challenges readers to turn inwards as they consider the material world's ability to conjure physical sensation. As mind and body react to and process these images they face the effect their reading has on their physicality; they question what these images do to their bodies. Perhaps, then, the unconscious too can take on this set of material dimensions and properties—as physical as that which makes up the body and like that which makes up the buildings and bodies one encounters in human communities.

For Sarraute, a tropism thus becomes a turn or movement inwards, towards the stimulus of a material unconscious located inside the subject, as part of the subject as the bodily tissues and the fluids that keep that tissue alive. Like photosynthesizing plants turning to face the sun, the human subject faces the unconscious's penetrating rays that only so often rise up to the surface of human awareness. Also like rays of sunlight, the rays of the unconscious project from a material substance, a distant and often enigmatic entity that one can never directly physically touch yet remains tangible.

Accepting that the tropism responds to a material source, questions then arise as to the nature of that material source. What materials make it up? What is its texture? It is in answering these questions that the metaphor of *tissu* becomes most crucial to understanding Sarraute's novel. The easiest answer to any question seeking a description of the texture or materiality of the unconscious is simply to state that it is sticky, slimy, and gooey. After all, representations of stickiness abound in the novel. For example, the tenth tropism ends with a meditation on the practice of women kneading: "Les pétrissant, roulant sans cesse entre leur doigts

cette matière ingrate et pauvre qu'elles avaient extraite de leur vie [...] la pétrissant, la roulant jusqu'à ce qu'elle ne forme plus entre leurs doigts qu'un petit tas, une petite boulette grise”(43). [Kneading, rolling incessantly between their fingers this thankless and miserable material they had extracted from their life [...] kneading it, rolling it until it only forms between their fingers a little mound, a little grey pellet” (43). Access to one's own interiority occurs here like the touch of one's fingers onto the sticky surface of a ball of dough that, if not treated carefully, will attach itself glue-like to anything and everything it touches. The unconscious then seems like the trap of a substance that holds onto the objects it encounters and incorporates them into its own unruly, amorphous form. Using negative adjectives to describe the material, Sarraute here depicts in the image of women kneading negative associations with domestic space as another kind of trap, one in which women are confined potentially to tedium and endless labor. Here the unconscious, like gendered domestic labor, appears boundless and all-consuming. In describing the women rolling the dough into a little gray ball, Sarraute also invokes an image of a beetle rolling a ball of dung. The unconscious becomes repugnant again here as it becomes excrement in this metaphorical rendering. Human subjects become creeping, crawling insects handling the treasured dung that nourishes them. The motif suggests that women cannot access the unconscious without getting feces on their hands, yet even with these repugnant traces left behind, the unconscious still ultimately crumbles away.

Though pointing to such textures and substances may be distressing or even repulsive to many readers, the sliminess remains necessary to a functioning tropism. Like the essential body fluids that lubricate, nourish, and heal the body such as mucous, blood, and lymph, the viscous, liquid texture of the unconscious supports the tropism, supports this turn inward towards its own stimulus. Yet, like these essential body fluids, this liquid substance is alarming and even abject when uncontained. As the tropism urges a turn inwards to confront the unconscious, it risks encountering the very liquidness that keeps it alive. Just as looking inside the body means encountering blood and other body fluids, looking into the unconscious requires its own encounter with viscous liquids, ooze, and slime.

This, of course, is when the *tissu* metaphor most applies in its sense as bodily tissue. The fabric of the fleshy tissues that make up the human body and its various internal organs and moving parts carries, in its very material interiority, the makeup of a material unconscious. The simultaneous dependence on and repulsion towards bodily tissues and the fluids that keep them alive parallel humans' reactions toward the unconscious when they encounter it. The abject meets the uncanny. Delving into the unconscious means entering highly problematic psychological territory just as the dissection of bodily tissue yields the discovery of a complex body whose natural processes and phenomena are still not fully understood.

Is there a more positive understanding of the human relationship to the unconscious? Does this relationship between subject and interiority always have to be one of confusion at best and fear, repulsion, or even abjection at worst? Working

alongside *tissu* as bodily tissue, the metaphor of *tissu* as fabric affirms the materiality of the unconscious but challenges the former metaphor's assertions about texture. According to *tissu* as fabric, the unconscious does not always remain a slimy concoction of ooze. As a twofold metaphor, *tissu* allows the unconscious to embody, paradoxically, two textures at once. On the one hand, its texture can be described as a viscous liquid, but, on the other equally important and relevant hand, its texture can also be described as fibrous and fabric-like. Just as *tissu* as biological tissue posits the unconscious as a nourishing fluid on which the body depends, *tissu* as fabric points to the unconscious as something akin to material that clothes the body, something soft that warms the body, protecting and concealing it from harm.

Though it is easy to become mired in the novel's many representations of slime, *Tropismes* is brimming with representations of *tissu* as fabric. Sometimes, Sarraute even positions the fabric texture alongside the novel's arresting fascination with wetness. The short, one-sentence opening paragraph of the eighteenth tropism reads as follows: "C'est aux environs de Londres, dans un cottage aux rideaux de percale, avec la petite pelouse par-derrière, ensoleillée et toute mouillée de pluie" (69) ["It' in the vicinity of London, in a cottage with percale curtains, with the little lawn at the back, sunny and wet with rain" (69)]. Here, Sarraute introduces a scene that places two contrasting textures side by side. The percale curtains, percale being "a closely woven cotton fabric with a smooth finish originally manufactured in France" ("percale" A), frame a scene of wet grass outside. Thus the unconscious can contain a sense of home as well as abjection; the stimulus to turn inwards can be a positive calling towards a warm sensation or ray of sunshine. In this depiction, the confining domestic space feels suddenly less suffocating and restrictive, while the wetness of the mud and gunk of earlier portrayals becomes dew drops sparkling in the sunshine. For just this brief moment, Sarraute lets readers into a potential for positive feelings about the unconscious and its slip into our awareness. Indoor or domestic spaces can, at least momentarily, feel comforting, soft, and even beautiful like curtains framing an attractive view. The damp and the mud can come from a spring rain on a sunny day. Furthermore, the unconscious is rooted as much in the fabric of the percale curtains as it is in the damp view they frame.

The percale curtains provide a glimpse of the possibilities of the metaphor of *tissu* as fabric. These possibilities in Sarraute's imagination become even more essential as we unpack the metaphor's more positive and empowering implications for the unconscious in depictions of women working directly with fabrics. When Sarraute's fabrics move from curtains on the walls to garments women knit, sew, put on, and take off, Sarraute's women suddenly become empowered in relation to their bodies and their unconscious and even possess agency enough to shape it themselves. When they can grab hold of the unconscious and encounter attractive and pliable threads in their hands rather than crumbling dough or dung, women have the power to shape this essential part of their own interiority in entirely new ways.

As Sarraute's women shape threads and fabric with their own hands, they use that fabric as an access point with which to reach their own interiority and unconscious. A key example occurs in the figure of the knitting woman who opens the fourteenth tropism. In characteristically artful use of narrative skill, Sarraute describes the woman's attitude:

Bien qu'elle se tût toujours et se tînt à l'écart, modestement penchée, comptant tout bas un nouveau point, deux mailles à l'endroit, maintenant trois à l'envers et puis maintenant un rang tout à l'endroit, si féminine, si effacée (ne faites pas attention, je suis très bien ainsi, je ne demande rien pour moi) (57).

[Although she was still silent and standing aside, modestly bent down, counting each stitch, two knit, now three purl, and now a knit, so feminine, so lowly (don't pay any attention, I'm just fine, I ask nothing for myself)] (57).

Here, describing the woman weaving a fabric with her yarn as she counts the stitches on her knitting needles, Sarraute herself weaves in and out of the woman's mind in her narration. Sometimes the narrator speaks as if directly from the woman's mind, portraying her thoughts and demeanor from the knitter's point of view, yet in the same long sentence the narrator can also step outside the realm of this woman's mind and describe her as an outside observer would. In this fractured, dream-like play with the technique of free indirect discourse, Sarraute mimics the way a knitting woman participates in a meditative act when she picks up the needles. While playing with narrative technique, Sarraute toys with the stereotype of self-deprecating, self-effacing women who practice domestic labor. Instead, in my reading, women can wield power when they perform this labor as fiber artists crafting access to their own unconscious. Though the woman in this vignette urges onlookers to pay no attention to her and claims to have no personal needs, she is deceptively powerful in this moment of meditation. Lost in her stitches, she also gets lost inside herself and begins to touch the unconscious within as she touches the fabric emerging on her needles. The frustrated women kneading the sticky dough only to watch it crumble away after leaving unpleasant gunk on their hands may never reach the unconscious in the way that they seek, but this knitting woman has a much better chance as she touches the unconscious in the spirit of *tissu* as fabric. Fondling each soft stitch in her fingers, this woman finds something she can hold onto as she touches the unconscious.

Fabric garments according to this thinking emerge as a site of contact between the woman agent and an unconscious she can choose to stroke and soothe, to twist and wrinkle, or to tear and shred—and any combination thereof. Sarraute's fabrics become living, breathing frontiers that women craft as the dividing line between the conscious self and the unconscious within. Sarraute's female fiber artists are ready for gendered battle on this site of their own making. In the hands of Sarraute's crafting women, knitting needles become tools with which to construct their battleground and weapons with which to fight their battle. Sarraute depicts the attitude of such women when she describes how “les concierges lèveraient la tête au-dessus de leur tricot” (79) [“The concierges raised their heads over their knitting” (79)]. Interrupted as she accesses her interiority and the unconscious contained within it, the knitting woman here faces the source of this rupture with

pointed needles in hand. The same patriarchal demands that pressured the knitting woman in the fourteenth tropism to take on a self-deprecating attitude interrupts this woman and urges her to adhere to demands dictating that women remain fractured—distanced from and out of touch with their interior selves. Sarraute’s empowered knitting concierges do not accept this, however. Instead, this group of women bands together, and each woman grasps her interiority firmly and adroitly.

The woman who fights her battle at the site of her fabric makes one last appearance in the final tropism. She appears in her own tiny one-sentence paragraph, looking for someone to sew a garment for her: “Certains se délectaient à découper l’annonce du journal révélant que sa mère avait besoin d’une couturière à la journée” (89). [“Some delighted in cutting out the newspaper advertisement showing his mother needed a seamstress” (89)] In this last iteration of Sarraute’s pattern of pairing women and fabric, Sarraute points briefly to the possibility of a feminist network, of a world in which one woman can call upon another to assist her in the work of uncovering, accessing, and shaping the unconscious. The woman who searches for a seamstress in a newspaper advertisement steps into the public world of print culture, frequently characterized by its ties to the male-dominated publishing world, in order to seek out a connection to another woman. Through such a connection, the two can work together to access an interiority common to them both and can collaborate on a design by which they will shape that interiority. As they design and sew a garment together, they invoke a shared creativity and create a shared battleground on which to enact their resistance to patriarchal influence on their bodies as well as their unconscious. Sadly, readers only get to see the woman calling out for such a female partner in her tropism—and then only in relation to what this means for her son—without ever seeing the women actually united and working together. When the novel ends, this vision of women finding empowering connections to one another through fabric and craft, through turning inwards in a feminist tropism together remains in many ways a dream. *Tissu*, in its power to bring together fabrics and bodies, also has the power to bring women together, Sarraute’s novel suggests, even if, for now, one must leave such a vision to the imagination.

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See Also

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