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A special issue devoted to the work of Roland Barthes

Guest editor:  
Steven Ungar

- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| 339 | <b>Roland Barthes</b><br>Excerpt: <i>Empire of Signs</i>                          |
| 341 | <b>Jay Caplan</b><br>Nothing But Language:<br>on Barthes's <i>Empire of Signs</i> |
| 355 | <b>Tom Conley</b><br>Barthes's <i>Excès</i> :<br>The Silent Apostrophe of S/Z     |
| 364 | <b>Jane Gallop</b><br>"B S"   |

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## Beyond the Empire of Signs

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- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| 387 | <b>Randolph Runyon</b><br>Fragments of An Amorous<br>Discourse: Canon in U <sup>bis</sup> |
| 391 | <b>Steven Ungar</b><br>From Writing to the Letter:<br>Barthes and Alphabetese             |
| 430 | Abstracts of Articles in<br>French, German, and Spanish                                   |
| 430 | General Information   |
| 432 | The Authors   |
| 432 | Index to Volume XI  |

### Visible Language

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Paris, 14 October 1977

Dear Randolph Runyon,  
I was looking forward to writing for *Visible Language* a text which might express my long-standing interest in problems of writing, its gestures, its plasticity, its history. Personal circumstances of a familial nature prevent me at the last moment from writing such a text. I ask that your readers kindly excuse my absence from the issue which you have prepared. I want them to know above all that I have the greatest esteem for the work of *Visible Language*: an incomparable, irreplaceable, even justiciary work because it struggles against the historical repression of which graphic art is presently the victim.

Cordially,

R Barthes

Paris, le 14 Octobre 77

Cher Randolph Runyon,  
Je me réjouissais d'écrire pour *Visible Language* un texte qui explique l'intérêt que je porte depuis longtemps aux problèmes de l'écriture, de ses gestes, de sa plastique, de son histoire. Des circonstances personnelles, familiales m'empêchent au dernier moment d'écrire ce texte. Je souhaiterais que vos lecteurs veuillent bien m'excuser d'être absent du numéro que vous avez préparé. Je souhaiterais surtout qu'ils sachent que j'ai une estime profonde pour le travail de *Visible Language*: c'est un travail incomparable, irremplaçable, justicier même, car il lutte contre le *refoulement* historique dont l'art graphique est aujourd'hui la victime. Bien cordialement,

Roland Barthes

While it is the fate of most writers to achieve a certain degree of posterity, the present issue of *Visible Language* devoted to Roland Barthes points instead to acronymy. At this stage in his career, it seems as though the image of Barthes the literary critic has undergone the most curious of revisions and given birth to someone known as RB, less a critic or real person than a mask or *persona* on a par with fictional characters.

The texts in the present number form no composite image of Barthes's critical evolution, nor do they propose any kind of direct tribute. We would neither bury the man in categories nor offer any premature eulogy. And yet it seems as though his work since the late 1960's has moved away from formalist and structuralist modes of reading toward a different set of attitudes which call in question the very conditions on which the earlier writings were based. For students of literary history, the change in Barthes's attitudes toward language might help to clarify the phenomenon of post-Structuralism in France as well as its impact in the United States. Barthes was undeniably a key figure in the French version of Structuralism in the 1960's. Yet the designations "Structuralist" and "post-Structuralist" are appropriate only to the degree that they affirm the distance or differences between that earlier phase and what has come in its wake. At the point where categories of literary history come to impose an illusion of fixity and completion on what is, in our view, an ongoing and incomplete process, it is necessary to affirm the transitory nature of critical practices as they are marketed under various designations.

Since Barthes is indebted to the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmselv as models for his own readings, it seems appropriate to characterize the collective enterprise of this present issue as a synchronic study of Barthes limited to Barthes's writings since 1970, within and beyond the Empire of signs. ■

Over There

If I want to imagine a fictive people, I may invent a name for them, treat them assertively like part of a novel, found a new *Utopia*, so as to comprise no real country in my fantasy (but then it is this very fantasy which I compromise in the signs of literature). Or I may, without in any way claiming to represent or to analyse the slightest reality (these are the major gestures of Western discourse), I may skim off from somewhere in the world (*over there*) a certain number of *traits*, and with these *traits* deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan.



Photo:

The ceremonious letter.

Woman preparing to write a letter. "Picture side of a postcard which was sent to me by a Japanese friend. The other side is illegible: I do not know who this woman is, if she is painted or made up, what she wishes to write: a loss of the origin in which I recognize *écriture* itself, of which this image is to my eyes the sumptuous and discrete emblem." (RB)

East and West therefore cannot be taken here for "realities" which one might try to compare and contrast historically, philosophically, culturally, politically. I do not gaze lovingly upon an Oriental essence; the East is indifferent to me; it simply provides me with a supply of *traits* whose activation and deployment allow me to "flatter" the idea of a symbolic system hitherto unknown, entirely detached from ours. What can be sought in the Orient is not another set of symbols, another metaphysics, another wisdom (desirable as the latter may be); but rather the possibility of difference, of a mutation in the properties of symbolic systems. Someday someone should write the history of our own darkness, and show the density of our narcissism, someone should tally the few calls of difference which we occasionally managed to hear and the ideological co-optations which inevitably followed, in which known languages (the Orient of Voltaire, of the *Revue Asiatique*, of Loti, or of *Air France*) were used to acclimate our incognizance of Asia. Today a thousand things are to be learned from the Orient: an enormous labor of cognizance is, or will be necessary (its delay can only be attributed to ideological obfuscation). But while leaving immense zones of shadow (capitalist Japan, American acculturation, technical development) here and there, it is also necessary that a thin streak of light seek out, not other symbols, but the very fissure of the symbolic. This



Photo:  
Rain, Seed, Dissemination.  
Warp and Weft, Texture, Text.  
*Écriture.*

Fragment of the Ise-Shu manuscript, known by the name of *Ishiyama-gire*; Indian ink and paint on pasted colored paper; Heian period, beginning of the 12th century. Tokyo, Giichi Umezawa collection (photo: Hans-D. Weber, Cologne).

fissure cannot appear at the level of cultural products: what is presented in this text does not belong (or so I hope) to art, to Japanese urbanism, or to Japanese cuisine. The author has in no sense ever photographed Japan. Quite to the contrary, Japan has spangled him with multiple bursts of light; it has placed him in writing situation. In that situation, personal identity quavers and old readings are overthrown; meaning is shaken, torn apart and extenuated into its unsubstitutable void, while the object never ceases to be significant, to be a signifier, and as such, desirable. In its way, writing or *écriture* is a *satori*: *satori* (the Zen event) is a more or less strong (but in no way solemn) tremor which makes both knowledge and the subject waver: it brings about a void of speech. And it is also a void of speech which makes for writing: from this void proceed the *traits* with which Zen, in the *exception* of meaning, writes out gardens, gestures and houses, banquets, violence.

### Pachinko

The Pachinko is a slot machine. One buys a small supply of metal marbles at the counter; then, in front of the machine (a kind of vertical game-board), with one hand one inserts each marble into a slot, while with the other one uses a clapper to propel the marble through a circuit of deflectors; if the shot is right (neither too strong nor too weak), the propelled marble discharges a shower of other marbles which fall into your outstretched hand, and one has only to begin anew—unless one should prefer to exchange his winnings for a paltry reward (a bar of chocolate, an orange, a packet of cigarettes). There are very many Pachinko halls and they are always full of a diversified clientele (young people, women, students in black tunics, ageless men in business suits). The Pachinkos are said to do as much (or even more) business than all the department stores in Japan (which is probably saying a good deal).

Pachinko is a collective and solitary game. The machines are arranged in long rows; standing before the board, everyone plays for himself, without



**For Roland Barthes "Japan" is a system of distribution (traits), all of which are *mat* (without luster, dead of Signs has no gloss: that is, it neither comments which is why RB calls it "the country of *écriture* (i calls for an absent zero-degree, not of *écriture* (i the word), but of language itself. Reading the "P ment, one experiences the exquisite undecidab —subject and object, active and passive, assim cretion—all of these dichotomies lose their focus. All is translation, ceaseless displacement; subj (among others) get lost.**

Barthes

looking at his neighbor, yet brushing up against him. Only the humming of the propelled marbles is heard (the rhythm of insertion is very rapid); the hall is a bee-hive or workshop; the players seem to be working on an assembly line. The imperious sense of the scene is that of an applied, absorbed labor; never is there a lazy, cavalier, or coquettish attitude, none of that theatrical idleness of our Western players, dawdling in idle little groups around an electric pinball machine, ever so conscious of transmitting to the other clients of the café the image of an expert and disillusioned god. As for the art of the game, it also differs from that of our machines. For the Western player, once the ball has been shot, the path of its descent has to be corrected by degrees (by banging on the machine); for the Japanese player, everything is determined at the moment of shooting, everything depends upon the energy transmitted by the thumb to the clapper; the player's touch is immediate and definitive, and in it alone his talent resides, as he prepares and tends his shot in a single movement; this hand is therefore that of an artist (in Japanese fashion), for whom the (graphic) trait is a "controlled accident." In sum, Pachinko reproduces on the mechanical order the very principle of painting *alla prima*, which demands that the trait be drawn in a single movement, once and for all, and that on account of the very quality of the paper and ink, it

Jay Caplan / Nothing But Language:  
on Barthes's Empire of Signs

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Photo:  
Feed-troughs and latrines.  
Pachinko players (photo: Zauho Press,  
Tokyo).

never may be corrected; just as the little ball set in motion may not be deflected (it would be shamefully rude to ill-treat the machine, as our Western cheaters do): its route is predetermined by the sole flash of its firing.

What is the use of this art? To regulate a nutritive circuit. The Western machine supports a penetration symbolism: by taking a good "shot" at her, one tries to possess the pin-up girl who, all lighted up on the instrument panel, arouses and waits. In Pachinko, there is no sex (in Japan—in that country I call Japan—sexuality is in sex and not elsewhere; in the United States, it is the other way around: sex is everywhere, except in sexuality). The machines are feed-troughs in rows; the player, with a nimble gesture, so rapidly renewed that it seems uninterrupted, feeds the machine with marbles; he crams them in as one force-feeds a goose; from time to time, the machine, gorged, discharges its diarrhea of marbles: for a few yen, the player is symbolically spattered with money. One then understands the seriousness of a game which combats the constriction of capitalist wealth, the constipated parsimony of salaries, with the voluptuous debacle of silver marbles which, all at once, fill the player's hand.

#### The Incident

Western art transforms "impression" into description. Haiku never describes: its art is counter-descriptive, insofar as every state of the thing is immediately, obstinately, victoriously converted into a fragile essence of appearance, into a literally "untenable" moment, when the thing, even though already just language, is about to turn into speech, to pass from one language to another, and takes form as the memory of what thereby becomes a future anterior. For in haiku not only does the event itself prevail,

(I saw the first snow.  
 That morning I forgot  
 To wash my face.)

#### Caplan

What is Japan for Roland Barthes? Not someplace real, he writes, yet not an imaginary place either, but rather "a system of *traits*." Since the French word *trait* means "feature" (of a face, for example), "distinctive feature" (as in phonology), and "stroke" or "line" (in drawing), we can see that Barthes's Japan forms a complex set of visual, linguistic, and spatial markers. In his view, it would be irrelevant to evaluate *Empire of Signs* either as a description or analysis of reality (as ethnography) or as an imaginative transformation of reality (as utopian literature).

In the *Empire of Signs* (by which I mean both "Japan," in the sense defined above, and Roland Barthes's book), signs do not call attention to themselves, they do not ask that we pay attention to them, interpret them or analyze them. A "fragile essence of appearance" distinguishes every moment of Barthes's "semiological adventure" in Japan. He likes to call these moments "mat": that is, "without lustre, dull, 'dead'" (*OED*). Unlike the ("Western") signs we know, the distinctive features, or rather, the *traits* which make up "Japan" have no *gloss*: they neither gleam nor comment, have neither highlights nor sheen. A gloss always reflects (it "throws back"), reflects upon something. Whether commentary or sheen, the gloss always follows (temporally, spatially) what it reflects, and hence is subject to the

but, even what to us seems made for a painting, for one of those small pictures which are so numerous in Japanese art, as in this haiku of Shiki:

With a bull on board,  
A small boat crosses the stream,  
Through the evening rain.

## Caplan

ambivalence which we feel for everything which is not "original": to gloss is to annotate, to interpret, but also to cover (to "gloss") over. Glossy surfaces make objects look valuable, and hence desirable, and yet their very heightening of surface appeal, of "superficiality," simultaneously elicits our suspicion. If we find glossy surfaces suspicious, is it not because they have something, literally, *specious* about them, because they are appearances? Their way of drawing our attention to objects (such as in magazines and photographs) which would probably otherwise have passed unnoticed exemplifies the techniques of "subliminal seduction" with which advertising agencies allegedly try to manipulate consumers. Moreover, glossy surfaces seem to reflect the appearances which, according to our metaphysics, separate us from reality.

"All that glisters is not gold," says the Shakespearean variant of a Western proverb. Recalling this famous casket scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, along with the well-known Freudian gloss upon it (in "The Motif of the Three Coffers")<sup>1</sup>; one may easily establish an analogy between metals and surface finishes, as follows: gold:lead: :glossy:mat. Moreover, since Freud also connects the paleness of the lead coffer with the silence of Cordelia in *Lear*, a third (vocal) link may be added to our analog-

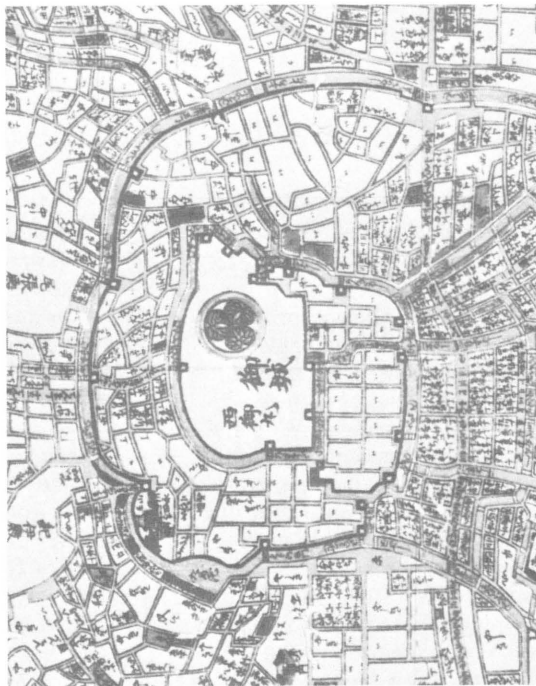
Even this becomes, or is only a kind of, absolute stress (which Zen attaches to every thing, futile or not), a soft crease out of which the page of life, the silk of language is deftly squeezed. Description, a Western genre, has its spiritual counterpart in contemplation, a methodical inventory of the divine predicates or of the episodes of the Life of Jesus (in Ignatius Loyola, the practice of contemplation is essentially descriptive); haiku, on the contrary, articulated upon a metaphysics without subject and god, corresponds to the Buddhist *Mu*, to the Zen *satori*, which is nothing like an illuminative descent of God, but rather an "awakening before the fact," a grasp of the thing as event and not as substance, an arrival at that anterior edge of language, contiguous with the matness (which besides is entirely retrospective, reconstituted) of adventure (that is, what befalls language, even more than the linguistic subject).

The number and varieties of haiku on the one hand, and their brevity and closure on the other, seem to divide and classify the world to infinity, to form a space of pure fragments, a fine dust of events which (through a sort of escheat of meaning) nothing can or ought to coagulate or construct, to direct or terminate. For haiku time has no subject: reading has no other *self* than the totality of the haikai, and this *self*, through infinite refraction, is never anything other than its reading-place; as in an image proposed by the Hua-Yen doctrine, one could say that the collective body of the haikai is a network of jewels, where each jewel reflects all the others and so on to infinity, without there ever being a center to be grasped, a primary nucleus of irradiation (the most appropriate Western image for this reverberation without motor and stop, for

## Caplan

ical chain—gold:lead::glossy:mat::speech:silence. Forging this chain has the effect of locating the thematics of *Empire of Signs* among the *topoi* of Western literature: “eloquent (or golden) silence” is indeed a common oxymoron.

This analogical chain indicates that it is *voice* which, on the level of what Barthes calls “myth” (that is, ideology), provides the link between the two etymologically unrelated meanings (commentary, sheen) of “gloss.” The mythical category of “gloss” underlies Barthes’s assertion that voice is “the stake of modernity” (*l’enjeu de la modernité*). Truly modern writing, he would argue, must manage to lose its gloss: that is, it must become mute (be pronounced with a temporary stoppage of breath—that is, of the soul.) The status of this writing would then be roughly analogous to that of Chinese or Japanese ideograms: for it would appear that, although these characters may be pronounced, their component parts have no coded phonetic basis (which is why the characters are pronounced differently in each language). A modern writing would no longer seek *animation* from all the life-giving qualities which we attribute to the Logos. It would be lacking in luster, in sheen. This new mode of writing, then, will be defined in terms, not of Logos, but of *low gloss* (we shall deliberately disregard the separate origins of these two meanings



these sparkling reflections without origin, would be the dictionary, in which words can only be defined by other words). In the West, the mirror is an essentially narcissistic object: man conceives the mirror only in order to picture himself in it; but in the East, it seems, the mirror is empty; it is the symbol of the very emptiness of symbols (“The mind of the perfect man,” says a Tao master, “is like a mirror. It neither grasps nor rejects. It receives but holds on to nothing.”): the mirror catches only other mirrors, and this infinite reflexion is emptiness itself (which we know is form). Thus haiku reminds us of what has never happened to us; in it we *recognize* a repetition without origin, an event without cause, a memory without anybody, a word without moorings.

What I am saying here about haiku, I could also say about everything which *comes to pass* when one travels in that country which here is called

Photo:  
The City is an ideogram: the Text continues on.  
Tokyo street-plan; around 1800. Document belonging to Nicolas Bouvier, Geneva.

## Caplan

and consider them as one; Barthes, alluding to Nietzsche, calls this procedure, by which one asserts a value without concern for origins, "affirmative philology").

High-gloss writing, like everything dialectical, is essentially continuous; one glosses in order to draw out logical implications; whereas low-gloss, mat writing is fragmentary. The former shines, and the latter just sparkles, but without having anything disruptive or incisive about it. In *écriture*, as in haiku, "what is posited need not be developed either in discourse [in the Logos] or in the end of discourse—what is posited is *mat*, and all one can do is go back over it." Nothing can be made of *écriture*; it is not "about" anything, does not have a hold over anything (from the standpoint of *écriture* there is no metalanguage).

In *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *écriture* meant something very different: it referred to the rhetorical signifiers used by traditional French writers in order to label their work as literature and themselves as writers; while the more recent use of this term rather resembles what in *Writing Degree Zero* was called "style." Strangely enough, no more apt or beautiful definition of *Empire of Signs* can be found than in the concluding sentences of Barthes's first book:

"Feeling permanently guilty of its

Japan. For over there, in the street or in a bar, in a store or on a train, something is always *coming to pass*. This something—which is etymologically an adventure—is of an infinitesimal order: it is an incongruous way of dressing, a cultural anachronism, a lack of constraint in behavior, something illogical in one's route, etc. To count these events would be a Sisyphean undertaking, for they sparkle only at the moment when they are *read*, in the live writing of the street; and the Westerner could spontaneously utter them only by charging them with the very sense of his distance: one would have precisely to make them into haikai, a language denied to us. It can be added that these minute adventures (the accumulation of which, during the course of a day, induces a kind of erotic intoxication) never have anything picturesque about them (the Japanese picturesque is a matter of indifference to us, for it is detached from that which makes up the very specialness of Japan, its modernity). Nor do these adventures have anything novelistic about them (in no way lending themselves to the chatter which would turn them into narratives or descriptions); what they lead one to *read* (over there I am a reader, not a visitor) is the forthrightness of the trace, without wake, margin, or vibration; so many minute ways of conducting oneself (from clothing to smile) which in our part of the world, through the Westerner's inveterate narcissism, are but the signs of an inflated self-confidence, become, among the Japanese, simple ways of moving along, of tracing something unexpected in the street: for sureness and independence of gesture no longer refer to an affirmation of the self (to a "self-satisfaction"), but only to a graphic way of existing. The result is that the spectacle of the Japanese street (or more generally of the public place) appears as stimulating as the product of a secular esthetics, from which all vulgarity is decanted, and never depends upon a theatricality (on an hysteria) of bodies, but, once again, upon this writing *alla prima*, where sketch and regret, manoeuvre and correction are equally impossible, because the trait, freed from the advantageous image which the scriptor wishes to

## Caplan

own solitude, [literary writing] is none the less an imagination eagerly desiring a felicity of words, it hastens toward a dreamed-of language whose freshness, by a kind of ideal anticipation, might portray the perfection of some new Adamic world where language would no longer be alienated. The proliferation of modes of writing brings a new Literature into being in so far as the latter invents its language only in order to be a project: Literature becomes the Utopia of language."<sup>2</sup>

That utopia of language is what Barthes calls "Japan . . . the land of *écriture*." Not another language, but "the possibility of difference, of a mutation in the properties of symbolic systems." The *Empire of Signs* points to a zero degree of language; that is, not an absence of language, but *that which is absent to language*: a state of pure symbolic difference. In order to explain the value of a zero-degree sign, Saussure remarked that, "Language is satisfied with the opposition between something and nothing."<sup>3</sup> A sign such as *watchamacalit* does not mean nothing, but designates a "nothing" opposed to a "something." Likewise, the "nothing" designated by the *Empire of Signs* only has meaning in opposition to the "something" which is language.

Properly speaking, a mat surface does indeed reflect light (only a

convey of himself, does not express, but simply causes to exist. "When you walk," says a Zen master, "be content with walking. When you are sitting, be content with sitting. But do not equivocate!" It is what a young cyclist, carrying a tray of bowls on his outstretched arm, seems, in his way, to be saying to me; or the young girl, who, with a gesture so profound, so ritualized, that it loses all servility, bows before the clients of a department store running off to storm an escalator; or the Pachinko player inserting, shooting, and receiving his marbles in three gestures whose very coordination is a sketch; or the dandy who, at the café, bursts open with a ritual, virile snap the plastic envelope of the warm napkin with which he will wash his hands before drinking his Coca-Cola: all of these incidents are the very stuff of haiku.

## The Three Writings

*Bunraku* puppets are between one and two meters high. They are little men or little women with moveable limbs, hands, and mouth. Each doll is manipulated by three visible men who surround it, prop it up, and follow it around. The master holds the top of the doll and its right arm; his face is bare, smooth, clear, cool, cold like "a white onion which has just been washed" (Basho); his two assistants are in black, a piece of cloth hiding their face; one, wearing gloves but with bare thumbs, holds a large stringed scissors with which he moves the doll's left arm and hand; the other fellow, crawling along, props up the body and steadies its walk. These men move along a shallow pit which leaves their body in view. The scenery is behind them, as in the theater. On the side, a platform supports the musicians and the narrators, whose role is to *express* the text (the way juice is squeezed from a fruit); half-spoken, half-sung, and punctuated by great spectrum strokes of the shamisen players, this text is both measured and thrown away, with violence and artifice. Sweating and immobile, the narrators are seated behind small lecterns on which rests the great writing which they vocalize and whose vertical characters can be glimpsed from a distance

when they turn a page of their libretto. A triangle of stiff cloth, attached to their shoulders like a kite, frames their faces, which are subject to all the throes of voice.

## Caplan

black hole reflects nothing), but its microscopic irregularities cause the light to be reflected in a diffused fashion. The light which a mat surface reflects is therefore not focused, it is dissipated without even calling attention to the reflective surface. A mat surface thus resembles that "vague" literature advocated by Mallarmé: "Le sens trop précis rature/Ta vague littérature." Barthes puts it this way:

[T]he Japanese thing is not hemmed in, illumined; it is not made of a distinct outline, which color, shadow, or stroke would proceed to "fill in"; around it, there is: *nothing*, an empty space which makes the thing mat (and therefore in our eyes: reduced, diminished, small). (p. 59)

Because the mat object does not define or emphasize itself, it can serve very well as an example of value-neutrality: it does not claim to be worth any more (or any less) than anything else. The mat object, the "Japanese" sign, just happens: "So!" ("Tel!"), it says. Philologists tell us that the word "mat" comes from the Latin *mattus* ("stupid, drunk"), which in turn probably derives from the Persian *mât* ("at a loss, helpless": as in the expression *shah mât*, "The king is helpless"). Barthes's blissful ignorance of Japanese language and culture is such that he cannot read what to a Japanese would probably be glossy, ideological signs: for Barthes they are delightfully mat. There is no

So *Bunraku* puts three separate writings into play and leads one to read them simultaneously at three points of the spectacle: the marionette, the manipulator, the vociferator; the effected gesture, the effective gesture, the vocal gesture. Voice, the real stake of modernity, that particular language substance, whose triumph is everywhere promoted. Quite to the contrary, *Bunraku* has a *limited* idea of voice; it does not suppress it, but assigns it a limited, essentially trivial function. In the narrator's voice, there indeed do combine outrageous declamation, tremolo, hypershrill, feminine tone, broken modulations, tears, paroxysms of anger, of moaning, of entreaty, of astonishment, indecent pathos—all the little tricks of emotion openly elaborated at the level of that internal, visceral body of which the larynx is the mediating muscle. For all that, this overflow is transmitted only in the very code of overflow: the voice travels only through a few discontinuous signs of storm. Thrust out of an immobile body, triangulated by the clothing, linked to the book which guides it from the stand, and curtly studded by the shamisen player's strokes—all slightly out of phase (and hence impertinent)—the vocal substance remains written, discontinuous, and coded, subject to an irony (if we agree to divest this word of all caustic meaning); therefore, what voice exteriorizes is finally not what it conveys ("feelings"), but itself, its own prostitution; the signifier astutely does nothing but turn itself inside out like a glove.

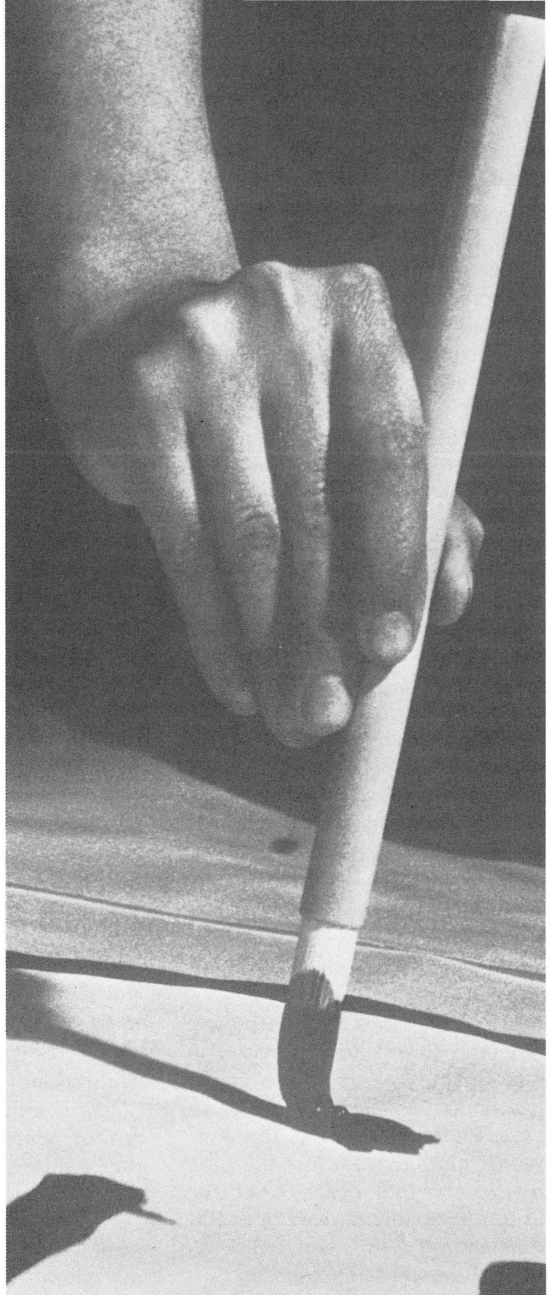
Without being eliminated (which would be a way of censoring it, that is, of designating its importance), voice is accordingly put aside (scenically, the narrators occupy a lateral platform). *Bunraku* provides a counterweight to voice, or better, a countermarch: that of gesture. This gesture is double: an emotive gesture at the level of the marionette (some people weep at the suicide of



## Caplan

more "father tongue" (no more ideology) for him to overhear (people cannot sound stupid, aggressive, pompous), and therefore no reason to be bored. No more reactivity, nothing but affirmation. Everything has become equally desirable. At the end of a day in the *Empire of Signs*, Barthes finds himself spent, checkmated, in a state of "erotic drunkenness."

How many of these "happy mythologies" read like elegant little cultural essays, and yet waver on the brink of obscenity! Take the Pachinko fragment, for example. Entirely composed of description and analysis (which Barthes in his first fragment had labeled "the major gestures of Western discourse"), this fragment (or at least the "well-behaved" side of it) describes the game and its players, and contrasts its art and utility with the way in which pinball is played in the West. So far so good, however. . . . In the first place, the reader is slowly, but forcibly led to identify with the Pachinko player ("one inserts each marble," and later in the same sequence, "a shower of marbles [falls] into *your* hand" [my emphasis]) and thereby to enjoy, first the "shower" and, finally, the "diarrhea" of silver marbles which stream into his hand. Although the reader's position in fact fluctuates (I identify with the Pachinko player at the beginning and at the end of the fragment; in the middle





## Caplan

paragraph I am a comparative anthropologist, observing the differences between Japanese and Western players; occasionally, my "hysteria" vanishes, and instead of identifying with the referents, I savor the sumptuousness of Barthes's language), only such a process of symbolic identification can account for the varying intensity of the reader's pleasure. At the end, I have satisfied the machine (it is *complée*: that is, full to overflowing with food and with sex), and the machine has satisfied me, with a "voluptuous debacle of silver marbles." Machine and player are satisfied, but who has been feeding, who has been satisfying whom? At the beginning of the fragment, we read, "[O]n enfourne chaque bille dans une bouche": *enfourner* means "to place something in the oven"; so that the mouth (*bouche*) becomes an oven, and the marbles, bread or rolls. (I translated this phrase as, "[O]ne



inserts each marble into a slot.") A similar reversal occurs in the last paragraph, where we read that "[T]he machines are feed-troughs," and that the player "crams in [the marbles] as one force-feeds a goose": now are the

the female doll-lover), a transitive act at the level of the manipulators. In our own theatrical art, the actor feigns acting, but his acts are never but gestures: there is nothing but theater on stage, and yet shameful theater. *Bunraku* (this is its definition) separates act from gesture: it shows the gesture, it allows the act to be seen, it exposes both art and work and reserves for each of them its writing. Voice (and then there is no risk in letting it reach the excessive regions of its range), voice is doubled and dubbed by a vast volume of silence, in which other traits, other writings are written with proportionately more finesse. And here, an unheard-of effect is achieved: far from voice and almost without mimic, these silent writings (one transitive, the other gestural) produce an exaltation as special, perhaps, as the intellectual hyperesthesia which is attributed to certain drugs. Speech being, not purified (*Bunraku* has no concern with *askesis*), but, as it were, massaged on the side of play, the sticky substances of Western theater are dissolved: emotion no longer inundates, no longer submerges, it becomes reading; stereotypes disappear, yet for all that without the spectacle's degenerating into originality, into the "find." All of this connects, of course, with the alienation-effect advocated by Brecht. This distance, reputed in the West to be either impossible, useless or ridiculous, and then eagerly abandoned—even though Brecht placed it precisely at the center of revolutionary dramaturgy (and the latter probably explains the former)—*Bunraku* makes us understand how it might function: through the discontinuity of codes, through this caesura imposed upon the different traits of the representation, so that the copy elaborated on stage may be, not destroyed, but as if broken and striated, conveyed beyond the reach of the metonymic contagion of voice and gesture, of soul and body, which ensnares our actor.

A total but divided spectacle, *Bunraku*, of course, excludes improvisation: to return to spontaneity would be to return to the stereotypes of which our "depth" is composed. As Brecht had seen, here *quotation* reigns, the pinch of writing, the fragment

## Caplan

players eating a feed-troughs, or are the machines being fed by the players? The confusion is compounded by the caption to the picture (showing two rows of Japanese men, back to back, playing Pachinko) included in *Empire*; it reads, "Feed-troughs and latrines" (my emphasis). Now, one may ask, who is excreting on whom? Is the goose-machine discharging a diarrhea of marbles into the reader-player's hand, or is the reader-player urinating on (or into) the machine? One really cannot distinguish one end of what Barthes calls Pachinko's "nutritive circuit" from the other (which is quite a sorry state of affairs, since a rational being is supposed to know the difference between those two orifices).

This brief analysis provides us with a sense of what Barthes has been talking about when he writes of *écriture* as a kind of *satori*. In the course of our reading, we may have learned something about Western culture (about who we are), but we also have been taken for a ride, as it were: as Barthes says of Japan, we have been "spangled with multiple bursts of light."

Our experience, however brief, of *écriture* resembles that of Roland Barthes, getting "wasted" by the "graphic mode of existing" (p. 108) in Japan, an experience which is meant by him to be exemplary of the modern reader's relationship to avant-garde texts

of code; for no one of the game's originators can ever accept personal responsibility for what he is never alone in writing. As in the modern text, the braiding of codes, references, detached observations, and anthological gestures multiply the written line, not by virtue of some metaphysical call, but through the play of a combinatory system which opens up in the entire space of the theater: what one begins, the other ceaselessly continues.

## Kowtowing

Why is politeness viewed with suspicion in the West? Why does courtesy imply distance (if not evasion) or hypocrisy? Why is an "informal" relationship (as we greedily say) more desirable than a coded relationship?

The impoliteness of the West presupposes a certain mythology of the "person." Topologically, Western man is reputed to be double, composed of a social, factitious, false "exterior," and a personal, authentic "interior" (*locus* of divine communication). Following this pattern, the human "person" is that place filled with nature (or divinity, or guilt) and girded or enclosed in a social envelope which is more or less looked down upon: the polite gesture (when it is postulated) is the sign of respect which one plenitude exchanges with another through a social limit (that is, in spite of and through this limit). However, when it is the interior of the "person" which is judged respectable, it is logical to recognize the person by denying all interest to his social envelope: it is therefore the supposedly frank, brutal relationship (cut off, so we think, from all social labels, indifferent to any intermediary code) which will best respect the individual worth of the other: to be impolite is to be true, Western morality logically says. For if there were indeed a human "person" (dense, full, centered, sacred), it would probably be that person



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## Caplan

(this is what he means when he remarks [p. 102] that the specialness of Japan resides in its modernity). The reader of a modern text must abandon all hope of mastering that text, and allow the boundaries between those two rival kingdoms which are reader and text momentarily to lose their definition. Reading a modern text, these boundaries (along with their allies: sensible/intelligible, signifier/signified, etc.) briefly lose their focus. Yet Barthes insists that these moments of *satori* are not moments of illumination, but of insemination ("Japan has spangled [the author] with multiple bursts of light") or, better still, of light-headedness: for then, the head suddenly becomes light. Likewise, as a reader of Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, I sense that the writing of this book was indeed for him a "bonheur parfait d'écriture," and I find myself wanting, in turn, to write: *Empire of Signs* has put me *en situation d'écriture*, in a situation to write.

When translating this book, I have been rewriting what is already a translation. It is a translation because, in the first place, it inevitably (like all travel literature) converts the unknown into the known; in fact, Barthes says of those events which compose his Japanese semiological adventure that they "sparkle only at the moment when they are read, in the live writing of the street" (Barthes' emphasis), and that for this reason, "to count

whom we at first claim to "greet" (with the head, lips, and body): but my own person, inevitably joining battle with the fullness of the other, will be able to win recognition only by rejecting all factitious mediation and by affirming the integrity (precisely an ambiguous word: physical and moral) of its own "interior"; then later on, I shall shorten my greeting, and make it look natural, spontaneous, relieved and purified of all code: I shall be scarcely gracious, or I shall be gracious according to an apparently fanciful invention, like the Princess of Parma (in Proust), who draws attention to her ample income and to the eminence of her station (that is to say, to her way of being "full" of things and of forming a person) by the studied "simplicity" of her manners, rather than by being stiff and difficult to approach: how simple I am, how gracious I am, how frank I am, how I am *someone* is what the impoliteness of the Westerner says.



This other politeness, through the minuteness of its codes and the clear graphism of its gestures, appears to us exaggeratedly respectful (that is to say, in our eyes, "humiliating"), because we read it, as is our wont, according to a metaphysics of the person; but this politeness is a certain practice of emptiness (as one might expect from a strong

◁ Photo:  
Who is greeting whom? On the Yokohama dock. Document excerpted from *Japon Illustré*, 1915.

## Caplan

them would be a Sisyphean undertaking." Short of repeating these incidents (which he knows a Westerner can no more accomplish than write haiku), Barthes must rewrite them, translate them.

Moreover, it is characteristic of the modernist activity in which Barthes is engaged (albeit "at the rear guard of the avant-guard")

code, but which signifies nothing). Two bodies bow down quite low before each other (the arms, knees, and head always remaining at a fixed place), according to subtly coded degrees of depth. Or yet again (after an antique image): to offer a gift, I bend down flat, stooping down to the inlaying, and to answer me, my partner does the same: a single low line, that of the ground, joins the offerer, the receiver and the stake of the protocol, a box which perhaps contains nothing—or ever so little. A graphic form (written into the space of the room) is thus lent to the act of exchange, in which, through this form, all greed is cancelled out (the gift remains poised between two disappearances). The greeting may here be put beyond all humiliation or vanity, because literally it greets no one; it is not the sign of a closely-watched, condescending and wary communication, between two autarkies, two personal empires (each reigning over its



to consider writing and translation as one and the same gesture. James Joyce, who more than anyone else in recent years has been a literary model for the *Tel Quel* group and whose *Finnegan's Wake* already reads like a vast and mad translation, seems to have devoted his final writing days to translating an episode of that great novel into Italian. Another exemplary writer for this group has been Maurice

Self, a little domain to which it has the key); it is but the mark of a network of forms where nothing is fixed, tied down, profound. *Who is greeting whom?* Only such a question justifies the greeting, inclines it toward kowtowing, spurs the graphism and not the meaning to triumph in it, and imparts to a posture which we read as excessive the very

## Photo:

The gift is alone: it is touched neither by generosity nor gratitude; the soul does not contaminate it.

Presentation of a gift; document excerpted from *Japon Illustré* of Felicien Challaye, Librairie Larousse, Paris 1915

## Caplan

Blanchot, who has written that a writer must remember:

to be in his turn a translator . . . to make his language [*langage*] undergo the transmutation which must get two languages [*langues*] from one, one language which is plainly understood, and another which remains unknown, unrevealed and inaccessible, and whose absence . . . is all we grasp of it.<sup>4</sup>

In the manner of Blanchot, for whom an "original" text should already read like a translation, Barthes experiences no regret at his capacity to recreate the qualities which someone else might attribute to "the real Japan"; on the contrary, he describes *Empire of Signs* as a "*pur bonheur d'écriture*," and, elsewhere, as "happy mythologies."

From this allusion to his *Mythologies* (1957) we may infer that a different conception of writing separates *L'Empire des signes* from the "unhappy mythologies" of its predecessor. As ideological criticism, *Mythologies* provided an ethical reaction to historical products (detergents, Einstein's brain, toys . . .) to which "myth" had lent a natural appearance. The essays sought to divest these products (signifiers) of the layers of meaning (of signifieds) which had adhered to them. Although he identifies signifiers as cultural products, Barthes has often tended to consider them as a

restraint of a gesture from which all signifieds are inconceivably absent. *Form is Empty* says, and repeats, a Buddhist saying. That is what is stated, through a practice of forms (a word whose plastic and social meanings are here indissociable), by the politeness of the greeting, the bending of two bodies which write themselves but do not grovel. Our speech habits are quite vicious, for if I say that over there politeness is a religion, I convey the idea that there is something sacred in it; the expression should be misread so as to suggest that religion over there is but an act of politeness, or better still: that religion has been replaced by politeness.

Translated by Jay Caplan. From Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes*. Geneva: Skira, 1970. The translator wishes to thank Roland Barthes and the Editions Albert Skira, Geneva, for their kind permission to translate these excerpts. He also would like to express his thanks to Stephen B. Davidson, Charles Sugnet, and Steven Ungar for their assistance with various aspects of this translation.



Caplan

natural substratum. It is as if he sometimes thought that his critical task were essentially caustic, and consisted of dissipating the accumulated layers of mythological (or ideological) film which, according to this view, separate us from the sensuous surface of reality. For example, Barthes asserts in his preface to the 1970 re-edition of *Mythologies* that semiology has become the theoretical locus where "a certain liberation of the signifier [*du signifiant*]" may be carried out, at least in the West. The title, "L'Empire des signifiants," which Roger Laporte gave to his review of the book, finds ample justification throughout the writings of Roland Barthes.<sup>5</sup> Here, Barthes does seem to consider the set of traits which he invents ("Japan") to be truer, ontologically superior to their French translation.

That such an ideal notion of translation (according to which a translation has always lost some of the original's "life") should find its way into an avant-garde text would hardly be surprising, since the very notion of the sign (Beveniste: "the sign is the representative of something else which it evokes as a substitute") is itself a theological proposition (cf. St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*), if not indeed, as Louis Marin has contended, the founding proposition of Christian theology. Nonetheless, the ontological superiority of "Japan" to its French translation is merely

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\*For additional bibliography, see the study by Stephen Heath listed here. ■



## Caplan

apparent. Barthes knows better than most of his younger colleagues that a direct attack upon the theological Enemy, that an all-out attempt to write differently from tradition is almost certain to yield only more of the same thing (and probably more crudely so). Instead of trying to make himself into a "French James Joyce" by ripping traditional French prose to shreds, Barthes strikes the pose of an eminently readable author (his recent *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* seems to have been something of a best-seller), and proceeds, as we have seen, to lead his readers far astray. The signifier cannot be "liberated," but the sign can be perverted.

The question of reference has always been a thorny one for semiologists: at one time, it was thought possible to make a messy discipline somewhat cleaner, more "scientific," by peremptorily excluding reference from consideration; but the referentiality of language did not go away. Rather than close his eyes to the built-in referentiality of the sign, Barthes perversely displays it in his title: the expression "Empire of Signs," like each of the fragments, has a referent (which it comments upon and describes, "typical Western gestures"); but is that referent ("Japan") something or someplace different from the signs which compose it? It is impossible to decide. Once set in motion, the referent of these signs fluctuates from "outside" the

Tom Conley / Barthes's Excès:  
The Silent Apostrophe of S/Z

Despite the elaborate coding of a rhetorical analysis exploiting Marxist and Lacanian views of the printed letter in all its materiality, S/Z represses the hidden *chi* which both generates and destroys the narrative of Balzac's "Sarrasine." Barthes may omit reference to this character of the text because its energies might violate his systems of interpretation. Based as they are on a privilege of castration, they veil the dumbfounding assault of the letters which would otherwise obliterate his interpretive gesture. Through an alternative reading of "Sarrasine," we imply that the *chi* purloined from S/Z indicates how Barthes sees at the basis of all *écriture* at zero-degree a font of repression.

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## Caplan

text to "inside" it, from what Barthes is writing about to Barthes's writing itself (not enough attention has been paid to the latter). The location, the referent of *L'Empire des signes* does not vanish by methodological fiat; reference is postulated, but it never stays in place. Once again, we have "more of the same," and at the same time, "something else": perpetual motion, perpetual translation. This is writing where, happily, something (sign or referent: but which is which?) is always missing, where something has fortunately always been lost in translation.

Something is lost, starting with the subject ("Japan," Barthes, the reader). The subject is translated from the "father tongue" (Fr. p. 13), that is, from ideology and ideological criticism, into a space "... without origin, ... without cause, ... without anybody, ... without moorings" ("The Incident"). In this mobile, indeterminate space, subject and object lose their definition and take on a third dimension: in a word, they get *spaced out*. Barthes's project, his dream of "descend[ing] into the untranslatable" does not signal a romantic desire to transcend language or to express the ineffable; it simply affirms Barthes's desire to explore other ways of getting lost, to invent new perpetual motion games. It is the writing of a happy atheist, of someone who revels in having made a world

*Le chic*, mot affreux et bizarre et de moderne fabrique, dont j'ignore même l'orthographe (H. de Balzac a écrit quelque part: *le chique*), mais que je suis obligé d'employer, parce qu'il est consacré par les artistes pour exprimer une monstruosité moderne, signifie: absence de modèle et de nature. *Le chic* peut se comparer au travail de ces maîtres d'écriture, doués d'une belle main et d'une bonne plume taillée pour l'anglaise ou la coulée, et qui savent tracer hardiment, les yeux fermées, en manière de paraphe, une tête de Christ ou la chapeau de l'empereur.

Baudelaire, "Du chic et du poncif," in *Curiosités esthétiques*

*Chic*, a frightful and bizarre word and of modern stamp, whose orthography is unknown to me (H. de Balzac somewhere wrote: *chique*), but which I am obliged to use, because artists use it to express a modern monstrosity, signifies: absence of model and nature. *Chic* can be compared to the work of these writing teachers, gifted with a fine hand and a pen sharpened for a soft and flowing line and who know how to trace boldly, with their eyes closed, in the manner of a paraph, a head of Christ, or the emperor's hat.

Reste—à savoir—ce qui fait chier.  
Jacques Derrida, *Glas*

Remains—to know—what makes excrete.

Barthes would like to see language. In all his criticism a moral imperative to apprehend words as objects, to cut them out of the air and paste them back in books underscores what he paradoxically senses as a frightful excess. In part because he equates visibility of a word with the void following

## Photo:

Barthes opposing manuscript and the printed page: "Je vois le langage," in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), pp. 164-65

Toujours penser à Nietzsche : nous sommes scientifiques par manque de subtilité. - J'imagine au contraire, par utopie, une science dramatique et subtile, tendue vers le renversement carnavalesque de la proposition aristotélicienne et qui oserait penser, au moins dans un éclair : *il n'y a de science que de la différence.*

## Je vois le langage

J'ai une maladie : je *vois* le langage. Ce que je devrais simplement écouter, une drôle de pulsion, perverse en ce que le désir s'y trompe d'objet, me le révèle comme une « vision », analogue (toutes proportions gardées!) à celle que Scipion eut en songe des sphères musicales du monde. A la scène primitive, où j'écoute sans voir, succède une scène perverse, où j'imagine voir ce que j'écoute. L'écoute dérive en scopie : du langage, je me ~~rends~~ visionnaire et voyeur.

Selon une première vision, l'imaginaire est simple : c'est le discours de l'autre *en tant que je le vois* (je l'entoure de guillemets). Puis, je retourne la scopie sur moi : je vois mon langage *en tant qu'il est vu* : je le vois *tout nu* (sans guillemets) : c'est le temps honteux, douloureux, de l'imaginaire. Une troisième vision se profile alors : celle des langages infiniment échelonnés, des parenthèses, jamais fermées : vision utopique en ce qu'elle suppose un lecteur mobile, pluriel, qui met et enlève les guillemets d'une façon preste : qui se met à écrire avec moi.

## Sed contra

Très souvent, il part du stéréotype, de l'opinion banale qui est en lui. Et c'est parce qu'il n'en veut pas (par réflexe esthétique ou individualiste) qu'il cherche autre chose ; habituellement, vite fatigué, il s'arrête à la simple opinion contraire, au paradoxe, à ce qui dénie mécaniquement le préjugé (par exemple : « Il n'y a de science que du particulier »). Il entre-tient en somme avec le stéréotype des rapports de conrage, des rapports familiaux.

*Chaque fois  
à l'échelle  
cette la répétition  
la première fois  
ou  
à l'échelle  
de la classe  
ouverte*

Nicolas  
à l'échelle  
de la classe  
ouverte

Stéréotype  
de la classe  
ouverte

l'appelle autrement ?  
parce que sans ça, ça devient  
un morceau mort, volent  
d'un raisonnement  
Il n'y a plus d'échelle  
non verbal (classe de langage)

L'idée aventureuse.

Toute chaude, on ne peut rien  
démêler encore de sa qualité : bête ?  
dangereuse ? insignifiante ? à garder ?  
à rejeter ? à démaiser ? à protéger ?

- le stéréotype, à ce point, a  
affaire avec la voix  
à ce point, à ce point  
de la classe ouverte  
pour ce que c'est ?
- le lien non verbal d'un rai-  
sonnement ?
- une chose ? la parole ?  
ou, quelle limite ? quel  
côté ?

## Caplan

without moorings, without ground; for him the "death of God" is not a *fait accompli*, but a task continually to be repeated. To be repeated, not through negation, but through translation (displacement, writing).

In the *Empire of Signs*, then, something is always lacking, and happily so, for something is therefore always to be desired. Something is lacking and remains to be desired precisely because, in the *Empire of Signs*, there is "nothing but language." No desire to return to a maternal, pre-linguistic Nature, no desire for quietude, for an end to desire; Barthes does not react to Culture, as in *Mythologies*, he does not seek to negate the "father tongue": instead he makes of language the locus and medium of his desire, that absence which elicits desire and without which (that is, if the Mother were (present) it would be impossible for him to write. Why is this a modern text? Because in it, language no longer functions like a regrettable but inevitable Paternal intrusion into a pre-linguistic Eden, like culture set off against nature (in sum, like original sin); here there never has been anything but language: "ce langage qui est ma Nature à moi, homme moderne."<sup>6</sup>

Barthes's text has no designs upon such deathless transcendence as most utopias are made of. No attempt is made to banish death from the *Empire of Signs*; nor is

an emasculative thrust, Barthes avows, "I have a sickness: I *see* language. What I ought simply listen to, an odd pulsion, perverse in what desire mistakes for an object [*s'y trompe d'objet*], is revealed to me like a 'vision,' analogous (all proportions born in mind) to what Scipio had in a dream of the musical spheres of the world. After the primitive scene, where I listen without seeing, there follows a perverse scene where I imagine seeing that to which I listen. Listening deviates in scopics: from language, I feel myself visionary and voyeur."<sup>1</sup> This fragment from *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* is situated below a boldfaced heading, JE VOIS LE LANGAGE, which the index classifies twenty-five pages below as one of many *repères* in the text, both sighting points and "re-fathers," fictive origins capping recurred seizures of paternal absence in autobiographical photographs collected in the preface (p. 16) and later agglutinated in fragmentary confessions located between the high and low case of lettered speech. These are marked on one hand, following the schematics of Lacan's *Autre* and *autre*, by the difference between *RB* and *rb* and, on the other, by the play of printed type and photographic copy of manuscript. On the page cited above (p. 164), Barthes admits seeing language in nummular specificity; on the opposite (p. 165), he sets in counterpoint two almost identical illustrations of notes scribbled on the stereotype. The hurried script of flattened whorls in the two pictures shows itself splicing the concept of the cliché to a brutalizing example. "Le stéréotype '*la classe ouvrière*.' Si on pouvait l'appeler autrement? (. . .) le stéréotype, à ce point, a affaire avec la *vérité* (. . .) la classe ouvrière qu'est-ce que c'est?" The literal cliché of his writing—displaying across *RB/rb* a stereotype as a logical denial of the paternal archetype—reconstitutes in his neo-Freudian vocabulary what more than twelve years before, in respect to the play of typeface in Michel Butor's *Mobile*, he termed a "dialectic of difference."<sup>2</sup> In the lapse from 1953 to 1975 we confront a shift in perspective. But the distance between the text and image always disengages the sham of a speciously

## Photo:

Detail of Barthes's notes on the stereotype, "la classe ouvrière," in *Barthes par barthes*, p. 165.

éblouissement

éblouissement  
la rippe tibia  
contre la première fois  
la ~~autre~~ fois

Niveau de l'éblouissement  
de l'éblouissement - Stéréotype  
de l'éblouissement - Stéréotype  
de l'éblouissement - Stéréotype

les stéréotypes la clare  
ou ruine " Si on pourrait

d'appeler autrement ?

Paro que sans ça, ça devient  
un morceau mort, recuit,  
d'un raisonnement.

Il n'y a plus d'éblouissement  
normal (clair de l'éblouissement) →

"natural" language and reveals, like "*la classe ouvrière*," the commonplace of the printed word as banal fantasm.

## Caplan

death dramatized (which would amount to the same thing): death is, literally, mat. In the spaces between the fragments, in the white matting of the page, in the restless translation of meaning, death is silently at work.

"Over there" quotation reigns; every sign is produced like a move on a chess board. The "Japanese" sign is a quotation without irony. Whether the chopsticks pick up rice, vegetables, or fish, they displace familiar traits: speaking of chopsticks, Barthes writes, "The double wand *translates* the food" ("La double baguette *translate* la nourriture" [p. 29; his stress]). Japanese translation moves like desire, it is the very movement of desire. "In the gesture of the chopstick, . . . there is something maternal, the very reserve, exactly measured that goes into displacing a child." Translation again (this time, in the (m)other tongue): readers or writers in *Empire of Signs*, are we not like that translated child?

"The Empire of Signs? Yes, if one understands that the signs are empty." Empty like death, like "form itself," the sign describes an empty space, a crypt. Barthes finds an appropriate image for the sign in an eighteenth-century map of Tokyo, in which the distinctive features of the city make it look like an ideogram whose center (the Imperial Palace and grounds) is empty. "The city is an ideogram. The

The folds of contradiction in the passage and notes on these two pages illustrate a problematic of impressionism and repression in all of Roland Barthes's criticism, especially in that since 1970: no sooner than Barthes ruptures the seeming authority of spoken language by insistence on its materiality, he almost impulsively forces himself to efface the initial act of his imaginary transgression. The sensual moment in his critical gaze is relegated more and more to parenthesis. It is our intention to explore the area of constriction and reticence in the way he occludes himself from really seeing language. By offering an alternative reading of "Sarrasine," we shall demonstrate how Barthes, caught in an Oedipal bind, can only encourage his reader to transgress something he cannot, all this being tantamount to his asking that the reader castrate his own almost castrative example. Our attention is drawn to the typographical error on which his book is based, cited and remarked—*repéré*—on the final page of *S/Z*, where Georges Bataille misspelled Balzac's title in the *Introduction au Bleu du ciel*.

By now it is common knowledge that Barthes builds a specular reading over Balzac's story. The ninety-three chapters of exegesis have a divided center in the forty-seventh, a segment bisecting the book congruent units of forty-six parts. An odd strip in the marquetry, the median paragraph heralds the title of the book in quasi-Gidean *abyme* and explains obliquely why—according to rules of French and Italian onomastics—*Sarrasinè* ought to be spelled *Sarrazine*, precisely in the way Bataille had correctly misprinted it. "Graphically, thrown by the hand, in a slant and a sling, across the white evenness of the page, among the rotundities of the alphabet, like an illegal and oblique slice, [the Z] cuts, bars, zebrifies."<sup>3</sup> The slashmark at the center of its body, between equally apportioned horizontal members, emblemizes Sarra-



## Caplan

text continues. " Thus each sign, in turn, can only be understood by virtue of its implicit difference from other signs, each one infinitely referring to the others, but in patterns which no single term anchors or directs. Each sign is a differential and combinable distinctive feature, a "trait."

Tomb, emptiness, the sign is also a mirror. "The mind of the perfect man,' says a Tao master, 'is like a mirror. It neither grasps nor rejects. It receives but holds onto nothing'. " But the signs in Barthes's "empire" are always plural, and they reflect only other (empty) mirrors, they tender no reassuringly human faces to us. The face of the sign, he writes, "is a fracture which always opens unto the face of another sign" (p. 66). The flashes of cultural insight with which the text abounds never provide more than an "alibi" for self-recognition, shards of understanding, reflections of other fragments: what we see when we look at the *Empire of Signs* is not our face (not *our* death), but bits of other faces, (of other deaths). Barthes asks, "What then is our face, if not a quotation?" (p. 121). And yet it is impossible to say which term quotes which, which face reflects which. When we look at the *Empire of Signs*, are we looking at "Japan" (at the signified/referent), or at the sumptuous art book published by Skira (at the signifier), or yet again, are we looking at ourselves? The question admits of



sine's dilemma. A would-be heterosexual, the artist unrequitedly loves a castrato named La Zambinella and ultimately finds himself visibly barred from resolution of his passion. The gross impossibility of consummation is literally imprinted in the difference between the serpentine *S* and zigzagged *Z*, two letters whose initially opposite shapes can never be reconciled. Optical syncope—blindness, insight, etc.—is the only result. Thus two diagonals reduce the narrative to its most violent mark of negation in a manner that Barthes allows himself to argue for pluralized readings of the story that will lead back to the same difference, and to the same problematic that the two bars trace at their absent axis. Barthes announces how the narrow space between commentary and fiction in the scheme of *S/Z* places

Photo:  
Letter Z in "ABC Trim. Alphabet enchanté,"  
par Bertall. (Paris: Hachette, 1861) illus-  
trated in Massin, *La Lettre et l'Image*  
(Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 108.

## Caplan

no rational answer. All one can say is: yes.

1. "Das Motiv der Kästchenwähl" (1913), in *Gesammelte Werke*, X.
2. *Writing Degree Zero*, trans., Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 88.
3. *Course in General Linguistics*, trans., Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).
4. "Traduit de . . ." in *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 194.
5. "L'Empire des signifiants," *Quinze Variations sur un thème biographique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975).
6. "Le Bruissement de la langue," in *Mélanges Dufrenne* (Paris: 10/18, 1975), p. 242. ■

the reader between two identical mirrors reflecting one another and projecting the image of the critical and narrative body into infinity. In speaking for Balzac and modernity, Barthes announces, "In this ideal text, the networks are multiple and play among themselves without any one having to cap the others; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; it is accessible through several entries of which none can surely be declared the principal one; the codes it mobilizes profile themselves as *far as the eye can reach*" (p. 12, stress his). The loss of the reading self in the mirror, like that of the character Sarrasine expropriating his body in contemplation of the sexual lack he admires in the name and form of *La Zambinella*, makes of the visible language a limpid cacography (p. 139) in which the intentions of reader, character, author, and critic are indelibly confused.

Disquieting is a reticence to carry the play of letters to its outcome. As if caressing a problem of visibility in the manner of a strip-tease artist,<sup>4</sup> Barthes surrounds the antithetical shapes in the center with interruptive, titillating, always self-deferring commentary generally on the stereotypical features of Balzacian narrative. By unveiling what Barthes leaves aside, we discover a crucial, indeed intentional oversight by which his modern position (cited above) obfuscates the textual drive of "Sarrasine."

In the manner of most aspiring artists at the age of 22, Sarrasine, Balzac narrates, followed the road to the Roman academy to study sculpture. Encouraged by a Parisian teacher whom he leaves behind (in the visible center of the story), the protagonist is described contemplating his fortunes:

Sarrasine partit pour l'Italie en 1758. Pendant le voyage, son imagination ardente s'enflamma sous un ciel de cuivre et à l'aspect des monuments merveilleux dont est semée la patrie des Arts. Il admira les statues, les



fresques, les tableaux; et, plein d'émulation, il vint à Rome, en proie au désir d'inscrire son nome entre les noms de Michel-Ange et de monsieur Bouchardon. (p. 242)

Sarrasine departed for Italy in 1758. During the voyage his ardent imagination took flame under a copper sky, and at the sight of marvelous monuments of which the fatherland of Arts is sown. He admired the statues, the frescoes, the tableaux; and, full of emulation, he came onto Rome, prey to the desire to inscribe his name between the names of Michaelangelo and Mister Bouchardon.

Actions refer to a commonplace of art history and touristic literature from Du Bellay to Goethe: the artist must find the authentic models of representation in Roman and Italic heritage. But the ironic contiguity of an anonymous Bouchardon flanking an immortal Michaelangelo—to the detriment of Sarrasine's image of himself—cannot but prompt the reader to follow the toponyms to their *point de repère*. Because the syntax fails to indicate exactly where Sarrasine will inscribe his signature—either between the French and Italian masters or between the syllabic cuts within each of the names—there results an equivocal perspective of catachresis. On one level, Sarrasine wants to stick his Christian name between two masters in an imaginary pantheon of

Michel-Ange (Sarrasine) Bouchardon

and on the other, because of the syntactical ambiguity, he wishes to insert it in that of each patronym:

Michel	(Sarrasine)	Ange
Mi	( )	Sarrasine Ange
Mi	(Michel)	Sarrasine Ange

Bou (Sarrasine) chardon  
 Bouch- (Sarrasine) ardon  
 Bou (~~ch~~- Sarrasine) ardon

### Jane Gallop / "BS"

Roland Barthes weaves a tapestry with the many threads he finds in Balzac's story "Sarrasine." At the center of that tapestry he inscribes the sparsest of emblems, S/Z—not only center (47th of 93 chapters), but also title.<sup>1</sup> In all its simplicity, this emblem, as center and title, is the elegant illustration that the "truth" can be found synechdochically in the smallest fragments torn, imperiously and disrespectfully, from the text. Pruning the story down to the name of its protagonist, and reducing that name to one letter, Barthes elaborates a reading of that letter (the second S in Sarrasine).

That S is no mere empty form, single and available to any passing significance. It is already engaged by its distinction from the letter Z, since "in conformity with the traditions of French onomastics, one would expect the name 'SarraZine'" (S/Z, p. 113). The reader sees not only S, but also not-Z. The reader sees this S/Z, but does not hear it: "Sarrasine" is phonetically identical to "Sarrazine." We face an instance of pure visual signification, graphic expression.

Barthes toys briefly with associations suggested by the morphic differences between S and Z. Z slashes across the whiteness of the page, cutting and slicing "amidst the roundnesses of the alphabet" (p. 113). S is all roundness and sinuous curve: sensual, subtle, gradual swerve of

where his name simply cannot be caulked without precipitating a burst of laughter. Even with near-symmetrical expunction of *ch*(el) from both Michaelangelo and Bouchardon, Sarrasine is left first with an ephebic half-angel, a *mi-ange*, having no acceptable rung on a great ladder of being, and then with an end or residue in *bou* (*bout-boue*) leading to a worthless favor (*don*) reflected by the lack expressed in the first syllable of *Michel-Ange* and *Bouchardon*. The excised *che* can be interpreted as an Italian relative—a "who," "what" or demonstrative "that" revealing the artist's desire to mark the world with an X.

But this end of the onomastic plan reproduces the beginning, as Bou-chardon can only be the prickly spine of a thistle already stereotypical in chiastic humor.<sup>5</sup> In question is also a *Bouche-art-don*, a mouth-art-gift that is in every sense a piece of residue. This play of the letter in Balzac's text finds itself reproduced in the proper names. *Sarrasine* is divided between a toponym and a palynym; the letters overtake the phonic echo of a castrative gesture [*arra-cheer(r)*], an angular *sine* erupting from a Latin sign while doubling an English *seen*); if *Ar-ra* is mirrored within the S-s framing it, the shape alternately affirms and denies a stable nominal status. And in the case of the *Zambinella*, the ambiguity of its sex—neither masculine nor feminine—in the first two syllables is reflected identically across itself in the last two, the shape of articles of opposite gender placed back-to-back: *el-la*. Symmetries of inclusion from the Latin *ambire*, to encircle, lead to the ambition of Sarrasine in the narrative.

One of the more obvious features of Balzac's tale telling of the artist's failure to see the graphic nature of things has its corrective in the reader's sight

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direction. Z is sharp angles: sudden, violent shift in direction. As Barthes says, repeatedly, in several different books, Z is the letter of deviance (*de-via*: away from the road): definitive breaks and switches in path as compared to S which reverses direction without ever knowing a moment of rupture. Not only distinction, but contaminating similarity. Bracketing momentarily the question of curvaceous versus angular, S and Z are in a "relation of graphic inversion"—mirror images.

This compact emblem portrays the story of Sarrasine. Invisibly inscribed in the heart of the protagonist ('s name) is a Z, the initial of Zambinella. In the play between difference (curve vs. angle) and similarity (mirror images) is the drama of Sarrasine's narcissistic love for Zambinella which culminates in Sarrasine's destruction. Zambinella is also already destroyed (literally castrated), bearing explicitly the letter of mutilation which covertly awaits Sarrasine.

So in this musing upon two shapes Barthes fashions a reading that is consonant with the entire book, where he is involved with more "serious" levels and systems (Meaning, Symbolism, Historical Context, Plot, and Hermeneutic Revelation).

The period of production of *S/Z* (seminar, 1968-69; publication, 1970) is encompassed by the

of words before they are heard. Everywhere the text insists on the visible, not simply audible contour of the substantive *voix*. The hero fails to hear it in the opera; but for the reader its letters are disseminated through the text in a way imposing a heavy irony impeding any possible narrative development. From the outset,

Les éclats de *voix* des joueurs, à chaque coup imprévu, le retentissement de l'or, se mêlaient à la musique, au murmure des conversations.  
(p. 227)

The players' flashes of voice, each time unforeseen, the repercussion of gold, were mixed with the music, with the murmur of conversations.

The soprano Marianina's voice enchants those around her (p. 230), while the broken voice of the mysterious old man.

était concentrée sur les choses qu'il se trouvait au milieu du monde sans voir le monde.  
(p. 232)

was concentrated on the things that he found himself in the middle of the world without seeing the world.

It resembles the plop of a stone falling in a well (p. 234). And this

aigre voix, si c'était une *voix*. (p. 236)

tart voice, if it were a voice,

striates the tale. The "young" voice of Marianina is congruent with that of the Zambinella (p. 238); and the sight of voices bursting and murmuring in the orgy (p. 247) where Sarrasine first meets the Zambinella is translated into a frenzy

dans tous les yeux, dans la musique, dans les coeurs et dans les *voix*.  
(p. 249)

in everyone's eyes, in the music, in the hearts and in the voices,

an impression forcing the singer to admit,

"les orgies m'abiment la *voix*."  
(p. 251)

"orgies ruin my voice."

Its "sweet and argentine voice" (p. 252) continues to seduce Sarrasine, and although it is "imprinted with weakness" (p. 252), he, as well as all at once the narrator, listener, and reader wonder if

cette *voix* d'ange, cette *voix* délicate  
eût été un contresens. (p. 253)

this angelic voice, this delicate voice might have been a countersense.

And the beauty of the Zambinella before the inverted transformation into the old man at the beginning of the tale is due to the Cardinal's blackmailing of his voice with

cette tyrannie capricieuse qui, plus tard, ne le rendit pas moins célèbre que son talent et son immense fortune, due, dit-on, non moins à sa *voix* qu'à sa beauté. (p. 255)

this capricious tyranny which, later, made him no less famous than his talent and his immense fortune due, they say, no less to his voice than to his beauty.

At the instant before revelation of the sexual lack, Sarrasine must ask the fatal question in a muffled tone,

d'une *voix* sourde et altérée: "Tu es une femme?" (p. 256)

with a faded and mute voice, "Are you a woman?"

## Gallop

writing of another book by Barthes: *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (first essay delivered as a paper on May 12, 1966; publication, 1971).<sup>2</sup> *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* is a double reading of Sade. The articles on Fourier and Loyola are surrounded by Sade I and Sade II; Sade is given the same space as the other two authors together. The Life of Sade appearing at the end of the book (an eclectic collection of points of fascination for Barthes) is nine pages; the Life of Fourier, two; Loyola has no Life. Having passed through the detours of Fourier and Loyola, Barthes's reading of Sade has swerved. Sade I (1966) is organized, logically centered around a thesis, continuous; Sade II (1971) is fragmentary, choppy, composed of unabashed sharp breaks. Temporally located between the two extremes of this double reading of Sade are not only the readings of Fourier and Loyola, but also the book *S/Z*—its title an elegant emblem for the distinction Sade I/Sade II.

The last paragraph of Sade II presents a hierarchized alternative of two ways of reading Sade: "Of course, Sade can be read according to a project of violence; but he can also be read (and this what he recommends we do) according to *un principe de délicatesse* [delicacy, tact, refinement, sensitivity]" (p. 174). In an attempt to be sensitive to the most delicate nuances of Barthes's suggestion, we propose to read Sade precisely according

Yet in the middle, the classical beauty of the Zambinella's voice resonates from the inner tale told by the narrator, at once to entice Sarrasine to cross the barriers of his sex, to erase the space between himself and the castrato, and finally to seduce the reader. The letter of the voice is unveiled by way of anagram:

Bien mieux, il n'existait pas de distance entre lui et la Zambinella, il la possédait, ses yeux, attachés sur elle, s'emparaient d'elle. Une puissance diabolique lui permettait de sentir *le vent de cette voile*, de respirer la poudre embaumée dont ses cheveux étaient imprégnés, de voir les méplats de ce visage, d'y compter les veines bleues qui en nuançaient la peau satinée. Enfin cette *voix agile*, fraîche et d'un timbre argenté, souple comme un fil auquel le moindre souffle d'air donne une forme, qu'il roule et déroule, développe et disperse, cette voix attaquait si vivement son âme, qu'il laissa plus d'une fois échapper de ces cris involontaires arrachés par les délices convulsives trop rarement données par les passions humaines. Bientôt il fut obligé de quitter le théâtre. (p. 244)

Better yet, there existed no distance between him and the Zambinella, he possessed her, his eyes, attached to her, took hold of her. An almost diabolical power allowed him to feel the wind of this voice, to breathe the embalmed powder of which the hair was impregnated, to see the planes building up this face, to count on it the blue veins nuancing the satiny skin. Finally, this voice *agi/e*, fresh and of a silver timber, supple as a thread to which the slightest breath of air gives a form, that it rolls and unrolls, un-

## Gallop

others to refer to this text), as Barthes reduces the Balzac story

to a *principe de délicat-esse* (principle of the delicate S). What is more delicate (which is to say delicious and subtle) than the sinuous curves of the S? As Barthes states, following Jacques Lacan ("Kant avec Sade"), "the Sadian relationship (between two libertines) is not one of reciprocity but of revenge: revenge is a simple *turn*." Reciprocity produces wholes from halves ( ) → O . The

circle is closed: the relationship stable, peaceful. Revenge implies a staggering in time—the complementary act comes later, too late to close the circle

∞ → S . The doubling (Sadian coupling) leaves us not with a whole, safe and closed, but with two open demands, two half circles, vulnerable to violence: the delicate (which is to say, fragile, overly sensitive) S.

The first item in Barthes's life of Sade is the information that the name Sade derives from the village of Saze. "What has been lost in this lineage is once again the bad letter" (p. 177). *SFL*<sup>3</sup> retells ("once again") the story (to the letter) of S/Z: the suppression of the accursed letter avenged in violence. Sarrasine is a name composed by Balzac: it is reasonable to suppose that the contrary-to-expectations absence of the Z might possibly be intentional. But Sade is an historical name: the loss of the Z, an effect of historical contin-

ravels and disperses, this voice attacked his spirit so vividly that he let escape more than once some of these involuntary cries, ripped away by the convulsive delights given too rarely by human passions. Soon he had to leave the theatre.

## Gallop

gency. If we do not wish to return to the Christian notion of the world as a book authored and rendered meaningful by God (and we do not), how can we justify interpreting external, contingent accidents?

We cannot. Interpretation is always a return to some version of a theological model of knowledge (guaranteeing an immutable truth behind signification). We do not wish to interpret Sade, to reach some final, stable truth about him, but merely to read him, to read with an eye to the S and to certain delicacies. Not because the findings will be "right," but because, out of the plurality of what is conveyed in "Sade" (the name given so that a voluminous multiplicity of signifiers—often captured by the word "text"—might become marketable, usable, discussible, manipulable), we choose to savor certain parts according to taste (the delicate S of the delicatessen).

Roland Barthes finds the individual peculiarities of taste of tremendous interest. In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, he displays a fascination with simple enumerations of his likes and dislikes in their irreducibility to any meaning. "Thus out of this anarchic foam of tastes and distastes, sort of a distracted shading, gradually emerges the outline of a bodily enigma" (RB/rb, 121). The body—bedrock given, *a priori* to any

With all its parody of melodrama, the passage is visibly and stereotypically an image of its own textual veil. "Cette *voi(x)* (agi)*le*" leaves in the space of its folds the fantasy rather than the violence of a chiasm or libidinal exchange. This is why the *vent* of the voice alludes to one of the most classical puns in poetry—banal (hence productive) for poets as a *cheville*, like *encore*—meaning at once deferment and its opposite, entry into the body: from late-medieval times wind in the West has signified not just atmospheric movement caused by uneven heating of the earth's surface—a problem that nineteenth-century scientists and painters like Carnot and Turner would renew from the tradition of hydraulics—but also, as signifier, *vent* embodies an economy of corporal form by which *vent* is a masculine *vente*, its plastic shape a balloon of desire and vanity attached etymologically and visually to *ventouse*, the suction-cup at the edge and vain origin of exchange. As Montaigne had deflated it in a discussion of the mayor's office at Bordeaux in the pestilent winds of civic malady caused by a growing economy of capital, "Nous ne sommes que du vent" (We are all but wind). Balzac essays the same ambiguities in respect to Sarrasine's frustrated, always aggravated desire for sexual exchange which a Marxist reading might pinpoint as a cogent sign of an expansive textual economy. Unlike the instance of his work prior to 1968, Barthes does not dwell long enough on the word to unveil this dimension.

In disrobing the X within the text, Balzac insists on the half-presence of textile to represent and paradoxically, to be an absent organ displaced from the groins to the glottis. Upon exit from the opera, Sarrasine returns to his studio to copy her in clay, *sans voile* (p. 244), despite

les voiles, les jupes, les corsets et les  
noeuds de rubans qui la lui dérobaient.  
(p. 245)

the veils, the skirts, the corsets and  
the knots of ribbons which stole her  
from him.

Gallop

what Barthes does with those figures as signifiers in the center

imée dont ses cheveux é  
e, d'y compter les veines  
in cette voix agile, fraîche  
auquel le moindre soufl  
e, développe et disperse  
qu'il laissa plus d'une

subjectivity—calls out for inter-  
pretation, hermeneutic solutions  
to its being-as-riddle. The  
subject (human being) cannot  
help but try to make sense out of  
his own idiosyncratic body shape  
(tall or short, fat or thin, male or  
female: to name but a few of the  
least subtle). Outside the theo-  
logical model there is no possi-  
bility of verifying an interpreta-  
tion: no author to have intended  
a sense in composing such a  
body. No guaranteed sense, but  
still there is a particular shape,  
intimating associations, molding  
and containing the “anarchic  
foam.” A shape which by being  
distinct and diacritically *not*  
*another shape* (tall, not short) is

Yet the veil must both cover and become the bust  
of a great *prima donna*. The text therefore releases  
a flurry of breasts. The narrator finds himself in the  
Oedipal condition of Parisian society where the  
corset is speculation of gold.

J'étais plongé dans une de ces rêveries  
profondes qui saisissent tout le  
monde, même un homme frivole, *au*  
*sein des fêtes* les plus tumultueuses.  
Minuit venait de sonner à l'horloge de  
l'Elysée-Bourbon. (p. 227)

Photo:  
Detail of text from Balzac, “Sarrasine,”  
reprinted in *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 244.

## Gallop

a signifier, the signifier as enigma, teasing allusion to a signification to-be-guessed, yet without a puzzle-master to pronounce the verdict of "correct divination."

Not just the physical envelope, but other puzzling and irreducible givens, arising from the "body" if that word means all that in the organism which exceeds and antedates consciousness or reason or interpretation. In such a way a taste for a certain food or a certain color, a distaste for another, are pieces of the bodily enigma. We can, *a posteriori*, form an esthetic, consistent system of values (rules for Good Taste) to rationalize our insistent, idiosyncratic tastes. But the system is a guess at the puzzle, a response to the inscrutable given. A taste for women, or men, little children, decrepit invalids; a predilection for legs, breasts, asses, hands, feet, panties; a repulsion for spiders, worms, blood: we can (and do) theorize endlessly about the peculiarities of individual taste/distaste. But the theorizing is precisely endless, an eternal reading of the "body" as authorless text, full of tempting, persuasive significance, but lacking a final guarantee or univocal truth.

Part of that "body" (as we understand it here: perceivable givens that the human being knows as "his" without knowing their significance to him) is the subject's name. This name, organ of the "body," is not merely a

I was plunged in one of these deep reveries which seize everyone, even a frivolous man, in the fold of the most tumultuous parties. Midnight had just rung at the bell tower of Elysée-Bourbon.

At the threshold of a cliché combining hot and cold and life and death, the voice is separated from the condensation of contraries by the ripples of a moire curtain. Snow-capped trees and dancing figures mix only on the surface of a glass veil.

Vus au sein de cette atmosphère fantastique, ils ressemblaient vaguement à des spectres mal enveloppés de leurs linceuls, image gigantesque de la fameuse *danse des morts*.

(p. 227, stress Balzac's)

Seen in the fold of this fantastic atmosphere, they looked vaguely like spectres poorly wrapped in their shrouds, a gigantic image of the notorious *dance of death*.

The text is a paginal curtain draped over the breast; as Latinist Balzac could not help playing on *sinus*, the pleat which is one with the contour of the female torso. With the homonymic *seing* and *sein* harking back to *signum*, the sign as X-like supplement of the signature (a paraph), the *sein* identifies a tattoo and sign of death in *tocsin* which the *danse macabre* took as task to ring in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> The old version of the Zambinella in the center and margins of the spectacle is enveloped between the two breasts of the text:

La trop naïve Marianina jetait un regard de terreur sur le vieillard qu'elle surveillait *au sein des groupes*.

(p. 232)

The overly naive Marianina threw a glance of terror on the old man she was spying in the fold of the groups.



Gallop

sound; it is a visible shape. When a child learns "what his name looks like," he knows a second face, with its own traits, seemingly accidental, yet by dint of being "his," they beg for interpretation.

On the face of Barthes's double reading of Sade we see the marks S, F, and L. These three figures stand out from the greater mass of letters both because they form the left margin of the title and because they are the only upper-case letters. When Barthes has reason to refer back to the book, he uses the abbreviation SFL. Others have followed his lead, and SFL is generally the mark identifying this book. Like its twin *S/Z* (contemporaneous issue from the same author), *SFL* can be read as a compact, graphic emblem of the entire work. Reading the distinguishing lines on the face of this book according to our principle of the delicate S, we find a few remarkable features.

It would seem, at first glance, that *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* is simply an arbitrarily ordered list of the three writers Barthes studies. However, a perusal of the table of contents reveals an oddity. In this work, the order of the essays is Sade I, Loyola, Fourier, Sade II. The order of appearance of Fourier and Loyola has been inverted in the passage from cover to interior/interior to cover. The book's emblem is not merely SFL, it is (because it

Conley

Anxiety aroused by the sight of a throbbing bodice is allayed by the cold reflection of a mirror and philosophical absorption in a cup of sherbert. The text is subject of its own comedy:

Mais, en ce moment, il y avait peut-être *au sein de* ces salons resplendissants des philosophes qui, tout en prenant une glace, un sorbet, ou en posant sur une console leur verre vide de punch, se disaient: "Ce vieux (...) m'a tout l'air d'un assassin."  
(pp. 232-33)

But, at this time, there were perhaps in the folds of these dazzling salons some philosophers who, while taking an ice cream, a sherbet, or in placing their empty glass of punch on a console, were saying to themselves, "This old man looks to me just like an assassin."

Comedy of literal and figurative identities continues. Marianina kisses the zombie in a scene whose characters of theatre and typeface are congruent, where the young lady replicates the originary scene of castration by virtue of her kiss.

La jeune enfant baisa respectueusement le cadavre ambulante, et sa chaste caresse ne fut pas exempte de cette câlinerie gracieuse dont le secret appartient à quelques femmes privilégiées.  
(p. 238)

With respect the young child kissed the walking cadaver, and her chaste caress was not exempt from this gracious wheedling whose secret belongs to a few privileged women.

The *chaste caresse* carries the license of the singer in the role of her near double as *Diane chasseresse*, but even more, following the cliché as depicted in renaissance art,<sup>7</sup> the old man is obliged to mark contact with a ring between the singer's breasts, a

## Gallop

disappoints expectation) not-SLF. The inversion taunts, a bodily enigma.

Still, the plot thickens. The first note following the preface informs us that “‘Loyola’ is just the name of a village. I know one should say ‘Ignatius’ or ‘Ignatius de Loyola,’ but I persist in speaking of this author as I have always named him to myself. The writer’s correct name is of small importance; he does not get his name from the rules of onomastics but from the community in which his work is inscribed” (p. 17). Although already disquieting by its defensive tone, this note becomes truly astonishing when the reader discovers that throughout the article entitled “Loyola,” the Jesuit is always referred to as either “Ignatius” or “Ignatius de Loyola.” Barthes’s dogged defense is totally gratuitous as he goes on to do precisely what the note justifies as his right *not* to do.

In *S/Z* (p. 113, see our discussion above) onomastics is given as the basis for reading the second S in *Sarrasine* as not-Z: in other words, as the very context for the paradigm *S/Z*. Yet in the note on *Loyola*’s name Barthes would deny the demands of onomastics. To be sure this denial nonetheless allows those demands to be heard, allows Barthes an opportunity to tell us he ought to say “Ignatius,” not “Loyola.” Just as onomastics produces *S/Z*; so it makes us see

## Conley

locus of exchange between body and letter. Once again curved and flat surfaces oppose one another, establish a chiasmus and let forth a burst of laughter:

Nous entendîmes alors, grâce à un profond silence, le soupir lourd qui sortit de sa poitrine; il tira la plus belle des bagues dont ses doigts de squelette étaient chargées et la plaça dans le sein de Marianina. La jeune se mit à rire. (p. 238)

We heard then, thanks to a profound silence, the heavy sigh which issued from the chest; he drew the prettiest rings of which his skeletal fingers were adorned and set it in the breast of Marianina. The young lady broke out laughing.

The ring is placed in an empty, imaginary intersection between two spheres. And laughter, like that which crowns the tale, is released from the cross-over mirrored in the double alliteration of *b* against *d*, always as if the letters were attempting to resolve globally the difference of orthogonal and circular lines.

The breast becomes a locus of castration predictably imagined as a loss of sight; it attracts the reader’s eye in a fashion allowing the characters to erase any meaning beyond the shape of the words. In idealizing the *Zambinella*’s body in his studio, *Sarrasine* finds himself in adoration of curves of images rather than the sensual platitude of letters.

Il admirait en ce moment la beauté idéale de laquelle il avait jusqu’alors cherché ça et là les perfections dans la nature, en demandant à un modèle, souvent ignoble, les rondeurs d’une jambe accomplie; à tel autre, les contours du sein.

Gallop

L/I When we see L, we see not- I. And the gratuitous note calls attention to the discrepancy between title and text.

SFL is explicitly not-

SFI, not to mention not-SIF, or even not-SIFS.

L stubbornly insists. Barthes specifies in the preface that, as opposed to the "consistency" implied by style, "writing, to borrow Lacanian terminology, knows only *insistances*" (p. 11). Inconsistent with Barthes's internal naming of the Jesuit, the persistent clinging of "Loyola" (L) is indeed a classic (Lacanian) *insistance*. Barthes owes to Lacan not only the dynamic of *insistance*, but also a remarkable figure structuring his reading of Loyola's *Exercices*. Commenting on the overlapping names of the four weeks of *Exercices* (1. *Deformata reformare*, 2. *Reformata conformare*, 3. *Conformata confirmare*, 4. *Confirmata transformare*), Barthes writes: "Ignatian repetition is not mechanical; it serves the function of a closing, or more exactly a *chicane*: the repeated fragments are like the walls—or the notched joints—of a *redan*" (p. 66). The reader—sent scurrying to the dictionary by these two gems, "chicane" and "redan"—is dazzled by Barthes's lexical virtuosity. As Barthes says in *Le Plaisir du texte*, "the word can be erotic under two opposite conditions, both excessive: if it is extravagantly repeated,

At this time he was admiring the ideal beauty of the one of which he had sought here and there the perfections in nature, in asking of an often ignoble model the rotundities of a well wrought leg; or to another, the contours of the breast.

Unaware that the breast is carved in his own name, Sarrasine embodies the signatures of his desire in a language far more tactile than he is wont to figure; in his years of puberty, breasts were everywhere below his grasp.

Au lieu de chanter les louanges du Seigneur à l'église (. . .), il sculptait quelque figure de *sainte*; (. . .) il fut chassé pour avoir, en attendant son tour au confessionnel, un vendredi *saint*, sculpté une grosse buche en forme de *Christ*. (p. 240)

Instead of singing praises of the Lord at church (. . .), he sculpted some figure of a lady saint; (. . .) he was driven away for having, in waiting his turn at the confessional, on a saintly Friday, sculpted a fat log in the shape of Christ.

Even in sculpting a lettered cross, Sarrasine overlooks the cruciform difference between ideal and real. His myopia is translated into the chiasmic mark of the tale-teller below a copy of Girodet's version of "Sleeping Endymion" attributed to Vien, and whose voice is incapable of using representation in word to convey his desires to the female interlocutor so equivocally as the nineteenth-century painters displayed on the walls above him. In the company of Madame de Rochefide, the master Vien is replaced by the lettered mark of the woman's bosom next to a warm fire:

Le lendemain, nous étions devant un bon feu, dans un petit salon élégant, assis tous deux; elle sur une causeuse;

moi sur des coussins, presque à ses pieds, et mon oeil sous le sien.  
(p. 239)

## Gallop

letter marks our point of disruptive entry into Barthes's well-

or on the contrary, if it is unexpected, succulent in its novelty."<sup>4</sup> "Chicane" and "redan" are not only novel; they are repeated together a mere eight pages later. In a discussion of the obsessively numerical structure of *Exercices*, Barthes cites Lacan: "Obsessional neurosis has been defined (Lacan) as a 'defensive decomposition comparable in its principles to that illustrated by the *redan* and the *chicane*'" (p. 74).

Accustomed to the commoner meanings of "chicane" as chicanery and quibbling, the reader seeks an explicit, technical term (cued in by Barthes's "more exactly a chicane"). The dictionary yields a narrow military meaning—"a zigzag trench"—corresponding to the function of closure and protection. "Redan," we find, is a name for several zigzag constructions, one of which is a firmly resilient, defensive wall, fortified by joining wall sections at salient angles. This *redan* is stronger than a straight, linear barrier. And reading according to our *principe de délicat-S*, we notice that the *redan* and the *chicane* are a series of L's, whereas the usual wall is an extended I.

*Fragments d'un discours amoureux*: here where Barthes orders his figures alphabetically, Ignatius de Loyola makes his sole appearance under the L. L for *loquèle* (two L's like Loyola):

The next day, we were in front of a good fire, both seated in a small, elegant salon; she on a settee; myself, on cushions nearly at her feet and my eye under hers.

Here the eye becomes one with the sex and breast, the narrator's orbit literally under that of his listeners, and appropriately so, for the almost enucleated sockets of the old castrato ("these globes incapable of reflecting a glimmer" [p. 236]) are elsewhere set in counterpoint to the bulbous forehead and corsage of the Marianina.

Dissemination of the globe of desire through the text, to which Barthes often alludes in commentary on its homosexual potency, depends on the coincidence of *toile* and *voile*, the voice and the painter's canvas, the cloth and folds of the screen. Mention circulates about the painting before giving onto the breasty presence of the Marianina. The narrator heaves a sigh when the listener's attention is divided between himself and the sight of the portrait of Adonis:

Oublié pour un portrait! En ce moment le bruit léger des pas d'une femme dont la robe frémissait retentit encore dans le silence. Nous vîmes entrer la jeune Marianina, plus brillante encore par son expression d'innocence que par sa grâce et par sa fraîche toilette, elle marchait alors lentement, et tenait avec un *soin maternel*, avec une filiale sollicitude, le spectre habillé. . . . (pp. 237-238)

Forgotten in favor of a portrait! At this moment the soft noise of a woman's steps whose dress was quivering still resounded in the silence. We saw the young Marianina

## Gallop

"This word, borrowed from Ignatius de Loyola, designates the flow of words through which the subject relentlessly debates in his head the effects of a wound or the consequences of certain conduct: an emphatic form of amorous discourse."<sup>5</sup>

*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*: the author writes that this work "proceeds by the path of two movements: the *straight line* and the *zigzag*" (p.94).

Barthes refuses to choose between the **I** and the **L**

(Loyola in the title, Ignatius in the text). But the zigzag is, of course, also already the Z: Z pertinacious in the word zigzag, Z carrying the defensive<sup>6</sup> pattern one turn further, and more acutely at that. So *SFL*, twin to *S/Z*, is also somewhat *SFZ*.

In the preface to *SFL*, Barthes claims that what grabs him from Loyola's life (from some sort of fragmentary materiality unrecuperated by the logical consistency of a history) are, exclusively, "his beautiful eyes always slightly filled with tears [*Jarmes*]." When, in the article on Loyola, Barthes does look at those tears, we learn that in Loyola's *Journal spirituel* there is a graphic code for tears. This *Journal* is precisely, according to Barthes, the place where Loyola inscribes his own bodily enigma. To be sure, Ignatius gives full credence to the theological model of knowledge.

enter, still more brilliant from her expression of innocence than from her grace and her fresh costume, she was walking slowly then, and was holding, with maternal care, with a filial solicitude, the spectre in clothes. . . .

Adjacent to the evidence of castration, the dress and fresh appearance displace the canvas through the visible convergence of two meanings in one word accumulating, then refracting, itself into those around it so acuitously that the maternal care veils the cliché of a *sein maternal*, an ever maternal breast, and the rustling *robe* into a more titillating *orbe*, another common metaphor of the bosom in standardized euphemistic tradition. When the curtain rises in the opera, displaying the first sight of the Zambinella, Sarrasine's visual faculties are arrested by the coincidence of designations on the paginal veil depicting them. When he ought to see, Sarrasine can only hear:

La toile se leva. Pour la première fois de sa vie, il entendit cette musique. . . .  
(p. 242)

The veil rose. For the first time in his life, he heard this music. . . .

Crosshatchings of sounds and congruities of letters lead back and forth through the same names and repeated evocation of this *voi(x)/e*—the canvas veil paragrammatically beckoning us to see what is ostensibly not there. In the midst of the redundancy, the apparently unspoken letter which Barthes never studies in his exegesis is the **X** between the S and Z,<sup>8</sup> the ideogram cementing the two according to the form of the 22nd letter of the Greek alphabet. Numerically identical to the age of Sarrasine when the story begins ("A l'âge de vingt-deux ans, Sarrasine fut forcément soustrait. . ." [p. 241]) and to the fantasm of the old castrato before the Parisian public ("Elle avait à la fois cent ans et vingt-deux ans" [p. 233]), Balzac's *chi* condenses loss of money, sex, religion, and identity. An unknown

## Gallop

Reading his body with a Barthesian fascination, Loyola wishes to interpret God's intention. Yet he cannot know God's meaning. The solution to his body-as-enigma is a question of faith; he cannot, as a mortal bereft of total immediate communion with the Godhead, be certain.

So his journal simply marks down the brute facts: the scribe copies God's text, ignorant of its sense. In a footnote, Barthes presents Loyola's tear-code: "A=tears before mass (*antes*); L=tears during mass (*lacrima*); D=tears after mass (*después*); L—=sparse tears, etc." (p. 79n).

The stubborn, clinging **L** in Barthes's reading of Ignatius de Loyola leads us to the Jesuit's *lacrima* (his only true point of fascination for Barthes), and to a system which in fact inscribes the bodily enigma as initial letters: bare shapes in Loyola's writing which serve not to theorize/interpret but merely to mark the unexplained, irreducible phenomenon of tears.

Barthes's "etc.," ending the footnote, implies that there are other tear-code symbols, but that he has chosen to name only these four: three letters plus one of these (the persistent **L**) in its negative form, **┌**, not (enough) **L**. Closing the gap between the two components of

**┌**, making it one mark, a

quantity signifies an unknown quantity. In joining the frame of the narrative, Balzac makes the **X** the lowest common denominator and constant term for every character, whose form emanates from the *voix*, *voi(s)x*, or *vois-x*. Into the design he places alternate spellings of *chi*—that Barthes traduces into a rather innocuous rhetorical question, *qui parle?* (p. 48)—by means of a tissue of indeterminate voices composing the program of the story. But Balzac insists far more artificially on the unknown value in a volley of consonantal plosives stopping and releasing the force of passion from the body onto the page. The encoded

**X** transmutes the violence of the cadence of castration, where its cacographic[k] embodies the veiled voice arresting itself in the buccal palace at the instant of castration. Years before Mallarmé, we see *le chant du cygne*: even though he



l'aisa plus d'une fois échapper de ces cris involontaires arrachés par les délices convulsives, (p. 244)

## Photo:

Scottish poster of 1865 in personal collection of Massin, illustrated in *La Lettre et l'Image*, p. 109. The ciasma of the letter X is excessive insofar as eyes, nostrils, mouth, and head are aligned with the clown's anus—and whose receptacle (for either end) is figured by the inverted hat below.

let go more than once one of these involuntary cries ripped away by convulsive delights,

## Gallop

single grapheme, **L**, we find a flipped **F**, standing on its head. This kinship between **L** and **F**—by means of this not (enough) **L**, inverted **F**—leads us back to the traits on the face of the book. There, SFL is in the place of SLF; F is in the place of L. An axiom about the substitutability of F for L in this text would make the three letters from Loyola's tear-code D, A, and F. And those three letters are not without import for Barthes: for example, they are the initials of his most recent book *Fragments d'un Discours Amoureux*. But more important for SFL is their appearance in the name D.A.F. de Sade (who is referred to by his initials rather than by the names those letters represent).

The gratuitous inversion in the title of Barthes's book on Sade (recalled by the **F** implicit in

**L**) leads us to see Sade inscribed in Ignatius de Loyola's text. This appearance of Sade in Barthes's quotation from the Jesuit's journal (specifically in Loyola's transcription of the bodily enigma) is appropriate. Sade serves there as the mark of physical passion, of the pre-logical flow of corporal fluid, and as a monument to God's silence, God's refusal to resolve the enigma, which can only be traced, not interpreted.

Barthes's *consistent* argument in

the text designates the breastly sign in a spatial void framed by the coincidence of *ca*, *ch* and *ci*. The old Zambinella appears to the spectators in a mirror as

Ce vieux, qui se cache et n'apparaît qu'aux équinoxes ou aux solstices. (p. 233)

This old man, who hides and appears only at equinoxes and solstices.

Not only is he likened to a witch appearing at magic periods as Barthes emphasizes, (p. 54), but also as a figure incarnate only on the twenty-second day of December and June, at the coincidence of seasonal transformation. The hidden signs are already exposed in the words the narrator accentuates in speaking of his "réflexions mélangées de noir et de blanc" (reflections mixed with black and white [p. 233]), and in his portrayal of the old body: "Vous eussiez dit de deux os mis en croix sur une tombe" (You might have said of two bones crossed over a tomb [p. 234]), of an unlikely combination of straight and contoured lines, of twice a bony O with a median axis of **X**. All of a sudden the traditional attributes of excess accorded to Balzac's descriptions of physiognomy find themselves to be meager indeed. The corpulent beauty of the Marianina is revealed to be an impossible outcome branching from the letter to a demonstrative of lunar monstrosity.

Ah! c'était bien le mort et la vie, ma pensée, une arabesque imaginaire, une *chimère* hideuse à moitié, divinement femelle par le corsage. (p. 236)

Ah! It was surely life and death, my thought, an imaginary arabesque, a chimera half-hideous, divinely female in its bodice [docile body].



## Gallop

*SFL* would disagree with our finding an enigmatic silence (sign of an impossible transcendence) marked in Barthes's text. According to the preface, Sade, Fourier, and Loyola are juxtaposed in order to dismiss their transcendent ideologies (which they do not share): sadism, revolution, religion. This reunion would rather emphasize their similar practices of writing ("same erotics of classification, same enumerative obsession" [p. 7]). Barthes reads the three as Logothetes, founders of languages, and thus producers of fortified, closed systems: "the reconstitution of a whole, for them, can only be an addition of intelligibles: nothing unspeakable, no irreducible quality of ecstasy, happiness, communication: nothing that is not spoken" (p. 9). In these obsessional, fortified systems (in reference not only to Loyola, but also to Sade, Barthes mentions a "defensive redan" [p. 183]), the articulation and the order work to keep out the pain, despair, and chaos caused by transcendent ineffables.

So at the conclusion of Sade I (the consistent reading of Sade—logical argument leading to a verdict—as opposed to the fragmentary Sade II), Barthes declares that "the function of discourse . . . is to conceive the inconceivable, that is, to leave nothing outside words and to allow the world no ineffables: this, it seems, is the keynote which repeats through the Sadian

Although Balzac is faithful to the image of the Greek chimera as a creature at once lion, goat, and serpent, the involutions of narrative demand that *chimère* be read as a X-mother and an unworldly who-mother cut from Greek and Roman alphabets to shape the interlace of their grotesque encasing the text in mannerist style. This is later translated into the "capricious beauty" (p. 248) of the Zambinella simply because of the etymon in *capra*, the she-goat who crosses the *chimère* with its "tyrannie capricieuse" (p. 255). This is what Barthes recoins in a clichè of *castration* struck from *castration*, by which hermeneutic and symbolic dimensions in literary cadres are illustrated by the blinding sameness of the letter, "the same by the same, making the *idea* of illustration derisory" (p. 169).

Analogous to the *repères* of *RB/rb*, the letters veil what they reveal in insistence on things half-hidden, "une porte cachée" (p. 258), "une malice cachée" (p. 248), all connoting the negative thrust of an *encastrement*, drawing outlines encasing and deepening the narrative frame. These border the discourse to hint at referential depth in order that each sentence be marginal to its horrendous excess. Balzac projects the narrative into an orgy, in part to designate the hollow plenitude of the word heard, all the more since meanings spin around homonymic echoes in the falsetto of the Zambinella. It says to Sarrasine, "Je ne suis pas assez forte pour supporter tous ces excès" (p. 251); that is to say its identity, *c'est X c'est*, the chiasm of an ecstasy forcing the character to admit, "Les orgies m'abîment la voix" (p. 251) in a bookish box. The reason is in part because the Dionysian sound of "le peraltra et le pedro-ximinès" and the frenzy inspired by stains of *Xérés sur la nappe* were each "un trait qui peignait l'excessive violence de son caractère" (p. 249). In painterly terms, Balzac's is a perspective in *trompe l'oeil*.

"Sarrasine" ends with reference to patrician figures of higher case, a capital cardinal, a mysterious "Roman" Prince *Chigi* and a flock of prelates whom Sarrasine describes as "les cardinaux, les évêques

## Gallop

world, from the Bastille, where Sade existed only through words, to Silling Castle, not a sanctuary of debauchery, but of the 'story' (p. 42). The "story" (the triumph of consistency over enigmatic, disruptive, scrappy *insistances*) reigns supreme in the Sadian world. Or does it?

The center of Silling Castle,  
scene of Sade's *120 Days of*

et les abbés qui sont ici" (p. 254). All the personified letters of the alphabet converge upon the two principal characters in order to bring them back to their beginning in the Orient, in Arabics and the A, B, C. The ultimate question girding Sarrasine's desire is framed in a double negation borrowed from a tradition of description where a copulative, because it must traditionally be an invisible term, valorizes that which surrounds it. Sarrasine asks bewilderingly why the singer is dressed "like" a man: "Elle/ qui elle?" (p. 254). Again the interrogative is no more than a quadruply doubled monogram and a paraph:

elle X elle

Each *elle* can be read backwards and forwards, with the difference designated only by opposition of the vertical stroke of the exclamation point contiguous to the sinuosities of the question mark,

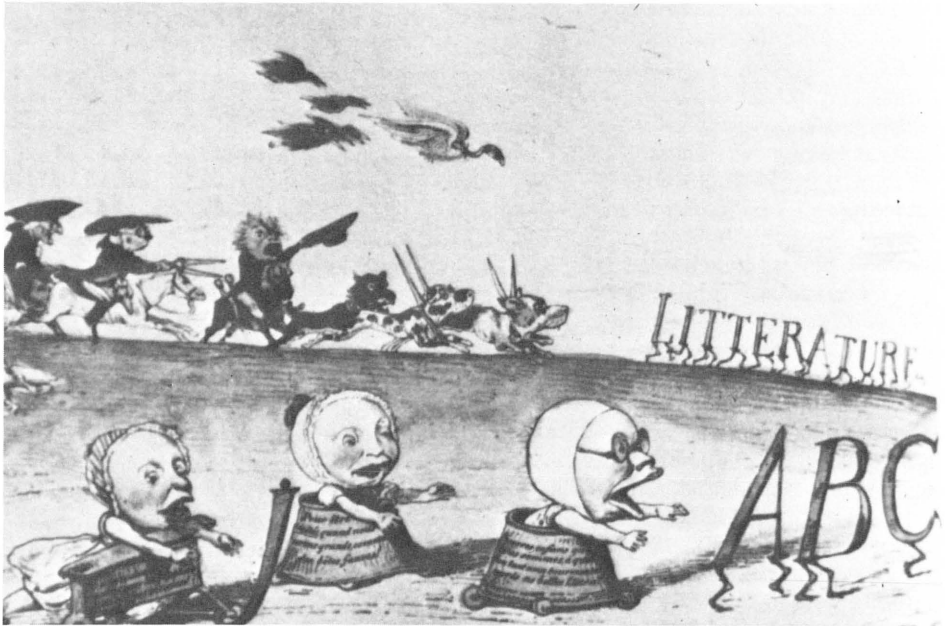


Photo:

Literature is overwhelmed—*abaisée*—under the foot of monstrous letters; From *La Chasse aux lettres, scène de l'ancienne histoire de France*. Lithograph, ca. 1836, illustrated in Massin, p. 108.

## Gallop

*Sodom*, is an amphitheatre (imagined in the sole picture in *SFL*, [p. 151]) where, daily, a prostitute/storyteller recounts five scenes of sexual/criminal pleasure in lurid detail. The four libertines (friends who set this "scene" up for their own greater pleasure) are surrounded by various categories of objects for their desire: pretty young girls and boys; extraordinarily well-endowed young men; decrepit, old women; the friends' own wives and daughters. When moved by a story, a libertine can re-enact it using any of the objects he chooses.

Barthes presents this amphitheatre as the emblem of Sadian writing: a universe enclosed within the safe boundaries of the "story." "Practice follows the word and is absolutely determined by it: what is done has been said" (p. 40). Yet examining this scene of utopic adequation of word to act ("absolutely determined by it"), we find the narrator confessing that "it is certain that these gentlemen, behind-the-scenes and before it was quite exactly permitted, indulged in things which had not yet been recounted to them, and in that they were in violation of the conventions they had established." Having established conventions specifically for the regulation of violations (first penetrations—vaginal and anal), they turned around and violated those conventions. The narrator makes confessions similar to this over

that is, a breast which loses its nipple after the slicing effect of the exclamation point. So when the tale ends so comically in its underscoring of vacuous words known only by derivation from an apocopated X, it is because their doubling in the ear gives them the appearance of something they always possessed in plastic form, that is, their signified body.

"*Aimer, être aimé.*" sont désormais des mots vides de sens pour moi, (p. 256, stress his)

"*To love, to be loved*" are hereafter bereft of meaning for me,

means the artist in confession failure he must admit when trying to transgress the frame in which he is enclosed.

Another rereading of the tale in all of its acrylic resonance would reveal that the desire of Sarrasine for the Zambinella can only meet in the abysmal X between the S and Z which is dispersed everywhere beyond his grasp on the surface of the page. That Barthes erases, even castrates the *chi* from his analysis by means of a bar—as if to excise the curved member which would otherwise establish a closed dialectic of difference resolving the hill and the valley, the long and short of things, life and death, etc.—is no doubt part of a tactile, indeed sexist, strategy which intends to keep the chimerical female locked out of the study.

Better yet, his spineless bar exposes for a reader today a formerly uncanny feature of writing which our extended scrutiny might resolve: in no story in the French language, to our knowledge, does there fall such a shower of parallel letters reflecting one another, visibly excluding the presence of a happy volute which might mediate their specularly. Omnipresent in the passage describing the agile voice of the Zambinella (cited above), the doubled letters jump from the page exorbitantly to meet the bedazzled reader whose eyes are blinded by the opacity of printed characters in most metaphysical fiction:

## Gallop

half a dozen times in the course of the book, and at the end of the existing manuscript (which is but a first draft), in his notes for revision, Sade chides himself: "Above all never have the four friends do anything that has not been narrated; you were not careful about that" (p. 526).

In order to emphasize his point about the absolute determination of action by story, Barthes adds a footnote: "Crime has exactly the same 'dimensions' as the word: when the storytellers reach the murderous passions, the harem will empty out" (p. 40n). The four libertines do wait until the fourth month (month of narrated murders) before they kill any of their victims. However, this deferral is a difficult sacrifice. On two separate occasions a couple of the libertines, carried away by passion (that is, inspired by something outside the daily storytelling) appeal for the right to annihilate a victim before that fourth month (see p. 448 and pp. 472-473). The order imposed by the story is not absolutely secure; these disruptions bespeak the force of what is suppressed. And although the libertines manage to kill no one until the fourth month, they actually kill only a small number of their victims during that fourth month; and none of the murders follows the blueprints offered in the storyteller-of-the-month's examples (cf. Barthes: "Practice follows the word and is absolutely determined by it"). In fact, the

Sur *te*lle feuille, la Zambinella se trouvait dans *ce*tte attitude, calme et froide en apparence, *affectionnée* par Raphaël, par le Georgian et par tous les grands peintres. Sur *te*lle autre, *e*lle tournait la tete avec finesse en achevant une roulade, *e*t semblait s'écouter *e*lle même. Sarrasine crayonna sa maîtresse dans toutes les poses. (p. 244, stress ours)

On such a sheet, the Zambinella was discovered in this attitude, in appearance calm and cold, having a fondness with Raphaël, Georgione and all the great painters. On such another, she turned her head with finesse in completing a roulade, and seemed to listen to herself. Sarrasine pencilled his mistress in every pose.

The glacial doubling of the text is resolved midway between the page and the reader's eyes.

If it is so evident that the self-reflective parallels and S-Z can only be recoiled in *chi*, we still must ask ourselves why Barthes prolongs his reading without insisting on this obvious element in the fiction. Is it because he too wants to leave a figure hidden in the Oriental carpet of his analysis? to repress the letter purloined from the tale? to displace the trivial so that it will remain monstrous, contrary to the formerly transparent, often boring prosody of Balzacian discourse? to stay away from the explosive chiasm of what Bataille called the *hétérogène*?<sup>9</sup> On the one hand an answer might be found in the preface to *Le Bleu du ciel* from which Barthes's reading of "Sarrasine" was in effect inspired, where Bataille destroys the letter by plunging the eye of the reader into the sky of a marvelously excessive text denying the representative authority of the novel, and in a space where each word is at once a *rebus* and *rebut* dispersing the stereotype of the writing self. Barthes may well have placed the reader in the abyss of the preface at the end of *S/Z* (p. 271) in quotation of Bataille's

## Gallop

majority of victims are killed after the 120th day, when the storytelling structure itself has disappeared. In exuberant excess of the framing "story" called *120 Days of Sodom*, the libertines stay a fifth month, until the snow melts.

Even when a libertine does faithfully re-enact a "passion" recounted by the storyteller, the fact that certain stories move him and others do not, as well as the choice of particular "objects" for his performance, reflect some taste or preference beyond the closed circuit of story (acting out recounted by the novel) repeating story (prostitutes' narration). The predilection indicates a bodily enigma; it points to an outside—beyond/before language.

Barthes chooses *not* to read Sade according to a "project of violence" (p. 174). Yet Sadian violence is not simply crimes of mutilation and violation. The really disconcerting violence in Sade disrupts the Sadian system itself. Sade's text is scarred by breaks in its obsessive structures, chinks in the fortifications that enclose this world and render it stable and orderly. The real, untamed violence in Sade is the persistence of a bodily enigma which never can be definitively interpreted. As Barthes says in the preface to *SFL*: "as style [consistency] becomes absorbed by writing [*insistances*], the system unravels into systematics" (p. 11). Sade's work is obses-

portuous notes; or he may have indicated the circularity of an endeavor that laboriously had to scrape away the crust of Balzac's diction as it had been consumed in French curricula before 1969. Barthes's repression of the crucial letter is necessary to keep alive the mythology of a generalized intertextuality. *S/Z* would have been a text cut from another, scarred and grafted upon Balzac and Bataille who are in turn cut from the cliché of hackneyed prose. In any case the distance Barthes marks between himself and the author of "Sarrasine" in the autobiography published six years later is all the more indicative.

Bataille en somme me touche peu; qu'ai-je à faire avec le rire, la dévotion, la poésie, la violence? Qu'ai-je à dire du sacré, de l'impossible? Cependant, il suffit que je fasse coïncider tout ce langage (étranger) avec un trouble qui a nom chez moi la *peur*, pour que Bataille me reconquière; tout ce qu'il écrit, alors, me décrit: ça colle. (RB/rb, p. 147)

In sum Bataille affects me little; what have I to do with laughter, devotion, violence? What have I to do with the sacred, with the impossible? Yet, it suffices that I make coincide all this (foreign) language with an affect that in me is named *fear*, in order then that Bataille conquer me again: all that he writes describes [unwrites, de-writes] me: that [also the id] sticks.

Thus the resinous intertextuality he heralded in the way Sarrasine, Bataille, Girodet, Vien and others traversed him might have been a sort of infratext where the emulsion of a visible letter is too much, too sticky for the strategies of interruptive analysis. His fear of Bataille replicates the fear of seeing words.

Or perhaps after the proto-revolution of May 1968,

## Gallop

sively systematic, but, as excessively systematic as it might be, it never settles into a closed system.

As an emblem for this subtle (*délicat*) Sadian violence ("in violation of the conventions they had established," see above), we propose Justine's breaking out of the convent at Sainte-Marie-des-Bois. That convent is the ultimate closure: everyone and everything is arranged in categories. The convent is isolated, impregnable, surrounded by seven walls. We are even told that the seven walls are gratuitous since it is already impossible for a victim to get out of the building. Yet the obsessive proliferation of defensive structures is only the inadequate response to the inevitable, although impossible escape of Justine. Sade creates an inescapable closed system *and* a character who breaks out.

Barthes sees in Sade only the violence encompassed by the system—ordered, arranged violent acts. He ignores the violations *to* the system, thus dismissing Sadian violence as co-opted and uninteresting.

In the reading of Fourier which is part of Barthes's book on Sade (libraries classify *SFL* in the Sade section), Barthes writes: "Fourierist pleasure is free from evil: it does not include vexation, in the Sadian manner, but on the contrary dissipates it; his discourse is one of 'general well-

Barthes could not extenuate the tale so strongly as a reader in 1977 in the wake of eight volumes of Bataille's writings. But the cause for the effect is casually immaterial. Suffice that the contradiction Barthes's blindness disengages so diagonally between seeing and hearing is enough to permit reconsideration of the trajectory of the neuter, neutral letter from his pastiche of the *Crito* in 1933 to fragments of amorous discourse spoken at the Collège de France from a chair bearing an incongruous title of Semiology. When Barthes was Marxist in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture, Mythologies*, or *Sur Racine*, his attention was drawn to the specific sight and weight of the signifier in corporal economy, but when he revolved to a Lacanian stance from the pivotal moment of *S/Z*, his letter turns to a castrative fantasm and loses some of its materiality. In repressing such a zero degree or floating sign from the Balzacian text in which the

X is so obviously placed, Barthes tells us obliquely that his own gloss is a veil over visible language too fearful in its symmetries to be named as such in critical gesture. In repressing, paradoxically, Barthes comes closest to the explosive release of the *chi* that destroys the entire narrative tradition which conveys it. But, based as it is on castration, the model of the analysis will never permit Barthes to smash the Bar. And so, instead, he will leave the slash and bar the S: X S.

1. *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, Collection "Ecrivains de Toujours," 1975), p. 164, hereafter noted as *RB/rb*.
2. "Littérature et discontinu, à propos de Michel Butor," *Mobile: étude pour une représentation des Etats-Unis* (in *Critique* in 1962, then reprinted in *Essais critiques*, (Paris: Seuil, Collection "Tel Quel," 1964), p. 185.
3. *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, Collection "Points," 1976, reprinting original edition from Seuil, Collection "Tel Quel," 1970), p. 113. For sake of ease and copy, we refer to the smaller re-edition. All quotation will be cited in the body of the text above. Emphasis, unless indicated otherwise, will be ours.



## Gallop

being': for example, in the war of love (game and theatre), out of *délicatesse*, so as not to upset, the flags and leaders are not captured" (p. 187). Fourierist pleasure is camped under the banner of *délicatesse* rather than that of violence. So when Barthes chooses to read Sade "according to a *principe de délicatesse*" rather than a "project of violence" (p. 174), he gives Sade a Fourierist reading. In fact, the very last sentence of the book (where the conclusion might be), which is actually the last item in the Life of Fourier, is "Fourier had read Sade" (p. 188).

Barthes's exposition of the Fourierist view of violence continues: "What if someone has a taste for vexation? Must he be allowed to do it? Pleasure in vexation is due to a congestion; so Harmony [Fourier's Utopia] will decongest the passions and sadism will be reabsorbed." Violence here is recuperated, and ultimately dismissed as a contingent malfunction. Fourier's Utopia, where no pleasure will be looked at askance, excludes sadism, denies it any status as a passion. If admitted, violence would threaten the entire stable system of Harmony. Echoing this Fourierist reduction of violence, Barthes (in his final biographeme on Sade), remarking on the fact that the Marquis in prison was denied both writing and exercise, declares that "with neither stroll nor pen, Sade *becomes congested*" (p. 186, Barthes's italics).

4. See "Strip-Tease" in *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, Collection "Pierres Vives," 1957), pp. 165-68; see also *RB/rb*, pp. 166-67. On the problematic of Barthes and the body, we refer the reader to Steven Ungar, "RB: The Third Degree," *Diacritics*, VII (Spring 1977), 67-77.
5. For example, the old spoonerism: "Un lieu de chardons est mort à Falaize" as "Un chieur de lardons est fort à malaise." In Estienne Tabourot des Accords, *Les Bigarrures* (Paris: Jehan Richer, 1583), f. 104.
6. See etymology in Bloch-Von Wartburg or Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974), p. 16. For the sign of the X as explosive chiasm of a thing and idea, see Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), p. 31; *Positions* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 90-96, etc. The x-shape of the scythe is evident as a half-letter in the three best remains of the *danse macabre* found at La Chaise-Dieu (Auvergne), Kernaria (Côtes-du-Nord) and Kernascléden (Morbihan) dating from ca. 1470.
7. In, for example, the topical *femme entre deux âges* of the Fontainebleau style, a diaphanously robed damsel is between two lovers, one young and the other old. Reconciliation of the triangle is impossible, as the ring she takes from the older courtesan in the center of the tableau has an empty center—filled metonymically by the nipple which the younger suitor holds between his thumb and index finger. And the only response to the exchange is directed by her complicitous look with the viewer who is hence discovered outside of the picture. See the famous version hanging in the Musée de Rennes.
8. The X as crossover between the breasts is a stereotype in Western literature. The blason-genre to which Barthes alludes (p. 120) is based in part on an agglomeration of poetic attributes that evoke, then disperse, the body. In question is a parody of Platonic origins accomplished by use of a double unit twice doubled. "Du beau tetin" and "Du layd tetin" specularize the alphabetical distance between

the two spheres and the two ages they represent:

Tetin dur, non pas Tetin, voyre,  
Mais petite boule d'ivoire

## Gallop

Fourier can be used to domesticate Sadian violence. That violence is vulnerable inasmuch as it opens onto some radical exteriority. The insistent

marks such Sadian violence in Ignatius de Loyola's writing.

This **L**, which leads us to discover the wounds in Loyola's and Sade's logothesis, is the

**L** of the *redan* and the *chicanne*, thus it is somewhat a Z.

**L** *qua* Z gave us SFZ as an intermediate step between SFL and S/Z. What then is the kinship between Fourier (F) and the paradigmatic bar (/) in S/Z?

In S/Z, Barthes writes that "the bar (/) which opposes the S of SarraSine and the Z of Zambinella functions out of panic: it is the bar of censure, . . . the cutting-edge of antithesis, . . . the index of the paradigm, hence of meaning" (p. 113). Barthes frequently uses the expression "*avoir barre sur*" (literally "to have a bar over") which means "to have the advantage over, to dominate, to subdue." As he says in Sade II, "the paradigm is very moral" (p. 155). The paradigm (bar) suppresses scrappiness under the harmonic consistency of meaning, just as Fourier "reabsorbs" Sadian violence into Harmony.

Fourier serves Barthes as "a bar over" what is most disquieting in Sade. S, after all, far from being a closed system, is two half-circles,

or

Grande Tetine, longue Tetasse,  
Tetin, doy je dire bezasse?

So asked Clément Marot in *Oeuvres poétiques*, (Paris: Garnier/Flammarion, 1973), pp. 402-03.

9. Bataille emblemizes this in other titles: "X Marks the Spot," in *Oeuvres complètes*, t. I (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 250-57; *L'Abbé C* in *Ibid.*, t. III (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 233-ff. ■

## Gallop

desperately gaping open, as well as in contradiction to each other. Contradiction in Sade retains its intensity as disturbing conflict, as a rift in the mind's logical domination of the world. Sade is distressed over his transgressions of his own self-imposed order in writing *120 Days of Sodom*. "You were not careful about that," he tells himself. In order to tell himself, he uses a second person pronoun. The split (two half-circles facing opposite directions) is between a "you" that violated the system and an "I" (implied first person of second person usage) who is anxious to secure that system.

Barthes has a theory of contradictions to calm him. He chooses to write fragments, opts for ruptures and inconsistencies, and supports this choice with an ideology of writing (*insistances*) as opposed to style (consistency). Convinced that contradiction is inevitable, that fractured writing is "truer," more "authentic" than attempts to cloak the bodily enigma in meaning, rather than being vexed by persistent contradiction, Barthes can feel gratified at this verification of his theory. B, like S, is comprised of two half-circles which *do not* come together to form a circle. But in B, they face the same way, fragmentary but not in conflict; *and they are barred*.

RoI and bar the S.<sup>7</sup>

Gallop

1. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).
2. Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Paris: Seuil, 1971). All translations mine.
3. Barthes's tag for *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).
4. Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 68.
5. Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 191.
6. The "chicane" and the "redan" are literally defenses, and serve to underline patterns of neurotic defense in *Sade* and *Loyola* for Barthes (and Lacan). Yet it is precisely the defense provided by a zigzag which allows us our "attack" on Barthes, our disruption of his system. Our offensive has been conducted through a study of the defenses. It seems, ironically, that the defenses of a system's closure are in fact its weaknesses.
7. We are greatly indebted to R. Runyon who by finding this sentence in Barthes's name, unwittingly wrote this paper. ■

# The cover of Ro

Indeed, we often get an impression

# amoureux prese

as though, to borrow the words of

# painting of Tobia

Polonius, our bait of falsehood had

# a scumble, throu

taken a carp of truth. —Freud,

# The configuratio

*Constructions in Analysis* (1937)

# ter R. A prolong

Barthes describes himself as a child waiting for the

# childhood in the

return of his mother: "I went in the evenings to the

# lel to that noncar

U<sup>bis</sup> bus stop, at Sèvres-Babylone; the busses pas-

# based, makes po

sed by several times, she wasn't in any" (*FDA*,

# scribed within a

21).<sup>1</sup> Baby alone, not yet weaned (*sevré*)—from

# roles of Tobias, a

such an endured absence, Barthes maintains,

# in canonical imit

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nd Barthes's recent *Frag*  
 is a puzzle for the reader  
 and the Angel, it constitutes  
 h which the reader scans  
 created by that frame se  
 d gaze discloses prefigu  
 Apocryphal story on wh  
 sible a reading of Goethe'  
 onical legend, and reveals  
 short story of Balzac. Alte  
 ngel, and fish, Barthes and  
 tion, a reunion of readers

language is born: "The child concocts a bobbin,

casts it out and reels it in, miming the departure

and return of the mother" (*FDA*, 22). Distorted

time is transformed into rhythm, and the death of

the other (for to the child absence is tantamount to

death) is delayed. Barthes' new book, *Fragments*

*d'un discours amoureux*, (1977), is likewise born

out of an "extreme solitude" (*FDA*, 5), for it is the

discourse "of someone who speaks within himself,

in love, facing the other (the loved one), who does

not speak" (*FDA*, 7). Like Plato's *Phaedrus*, it is a

*ments d'un discours*

text about both love and literature in which dis-

**er: a fragment of a**

course about one becomes discourse about the

**tes an opaque glaze,**

other. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) Barthes

**the text that follows.**

had already spoken of writing as "the science of

**ems to form the let-**

the ecstasies of language, its kamasutra" (*PT*, 14).<sup>2</sup>

**rations of Roland's**

In the *Fragments*, reading the text becomes a

**ich the painting is**

model for falling in love, and vice versa. Ostensibly

**s *Werther* as a paral-**

an encyclopedia of the gestures of a person in love

**; Barthes's name in-**

(*Anguish, Declaration, Exile, Jealousy, Muteness,*

**ernately playing the**

*Night, Obscene, Rapture, Scene, Tenderness,*

**d the reader engage**

*Union*, and 69 other "figures"), this book becomes,

**s and lovers.**



Steven Ungar /

From Writing to the Letter:  
Barthes and Alphabetese

“ABCDEF GH  
IJKLMNOP  
QRSTU VW  
XYZ”  
(ALPHABET)

The alphabet is a universal ordering system within our culture and an arbitrary one. Practically everyone knows the order of the letters of the alphabet. It is one of the first things a child is taught and yet there is no inherent logic to the actual ordering of the letters. Nevertheless, the alphabet is a useful system for manual retrieval of stored information and a useful memory device. Anything that has been named or can be placed in a category can be alphabetized. The alphabet assumes spoken language and is the basic code for written language, although in English phoneticism is chaotic.

the more one falls in love with it, a discourse on writing. And when Barthes writes that “there is always, in discourse on love, a person to whom one is addressing oneself, whether this person be a phantom or a creature still to come” (*FDA*, 88), the amorous reader begins to see that he is himself that future phantom, addressed in ignorance by an author who has provided for such an eventuality by setting up his text to “turn like a perpetual calendar” (*FDA*, 10), a device capable of providing for future events without specifically predicting them.

“Rolling here and there,”<sup>3</sup> said Socrates in his denunciation of writing in the *Phaedrus*, a text wanders aimlessly like an errant orphan, liable to fall into the wrong hands, unable to defend itself without parental assistance. It is in just such weakness that Roland Barthes finds the discourse that constitutes the *Fragments*: the roll of the bobbin of the child who takes himself for an orphan. Socrates can argue that writing is but the faint imitation of speech because he assigns its origin to a father whom it may unfortunately outlive, but Barthes’s discourse originates in the orphan, and not the father. There is no father to guarantee a correct reading of the text, or verify its canonicity. Orphanacy and errant rolling—no longer reasons not to take writing seriously—thus become precisely what make such a discourse possible.

Barthes was always an orphan; his father, a naval ensign, died in combat at sea when Roland was less than a year old. This paternal absence seems to open up the first break in the alphabetical order of the fragments that make up the autobiographical *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975): *Actif/réactif, L’adjectif, L’aise, Le démon de l’analogie, Au tableau noir, L’argent, Le vaisseau Argo*. . . . For it is in *Au tableau noir*, the title that does not really fit between *analogie* and *argent*, that the father’s name first appears, inscribed on the lycée blackboard along with all the relatives of students who “had fallen on the fields of honor.” Uncles and cousins abounded; only Barthes could announce a father: a source of embarrassment, “an

Figure:  
John Perreault, in Ursula Meyer, ed.,  
*Conceptual Art*. New York: Dutton, 1972.

Ungar

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# Roland Barthes's career as a critic can be measured by the various definitions and functions which he has given to writing.

excessive mark." When the chalk was erased, Barthes writes, there remained of this proclaimed grief nothing but "the figure of a hearth with no social anchorage: no father to kill . . ." (*RB*, 49). The absent father is equivalent to a missing *ancrage*—the word that really fits the alphabetical sequence, the word that should have figured in the title but is suppressed, as the father's name was erased from the other *tableau noir*.<sup>4</sup>

There is another *ancre*, one that fulfills the same role towards the missing father that the bobbin's course plays in the absence of the mother: *encre*. In the *RB* fragment *La seiche et son encre* he says of his text, "I write this day after day . . . : the squid produces its ink: I spin out [*ficeller*] my *imaginaire* (to defend and offer myself at the same time)" (*RB*, 166). He spins such threads of ink, as the child spins out his reel, to fill up an absence; the lover does the same, faced with the silence of the one he loves: "*Je t'aime, je t'aime!* Welling up from the body . . . does not this paroxysm of a declaration of love conceal some lack? One would not need to say it, if it were not to obscure, as the squid does with its ink, the disappointment of desire under the excess of its affirmation" (*RB*, 116).

These three models of discourse produced in the solitude of an endured absence (the mother: the child's bobbin on a string; the tie of a paternal anchor: filaments of underwater ink; the beloved: repeated declarations of love, like a squid's smoke-screen) are joined by a fourth: the reader, whose absence the author overcomes by writing a discourse that is true to its etymology: "*Dis-cursus* is, originally, the action of running *courir* here and there . . ." (*FDA*, 7). The fragments of *Fragments of an Amorous Discourse* invite the reader to join is, originally, the action of running [*courir*] here and there . . ." (*FDA*, 7). *Fragments of an Amorous Discourse* offers an invitation to the reader to join and pass from hand to hand, behind their backs, a ring; they sing a round, and when the music stops the one in the center must guess who has the

# While his earliest works emphasized its social and institutional dimensions, he has more recently sought to develop a revised

*furt*. Each fragment of Barthes's book is "offered to the reader so that he can seize it, add to it, subtract from it and pass it on to others." Sometimes in this game, Barthes continues, "by a last parenthesis, one holds on to the ring a second more [*une seconde encore*—a richly suggestive pause: a second encore, *bis*? Or, like the resurgent father (this Louis Barthes who, though erased from the *tableau noir*, resurfaces in the name of the lycée: *Louis-le-Grand*), a second anchor?] before passing it on. (The book, ideally, would be a cooperative: 'To the Readers—to the Lovers—Reunited')" (*FDA*, 9).

What is written here is of course situated in that delaying pause, *in loco parenthesis*. In the same figure (*Absence*) where he speaks of the U<sup>bis</sup> bus and of the child's game that defers the death of the mother ("To manipulate absence is to stretch out the moment, to retard as long as possible the instant when the other must topple brusquely from absence into death" [*FDA*, 22]), he also tells the Buddhist parable of the master who holds the disciple's head under water, for a very long time. Little by little the bubbles become rarer; at the last possible moment, the master brings him to the surface: "When you have longed for truth as you have longed for air, then you will know what it is." The absence of the other, Barthes continues, "holds my head under water; little by little I suffocate, my air rarefies; it is through this asphyxiation that I reconstitute my 'truth'" (*FDA*, 23-24). Like the Buddhist master, Barthes bathes the reader in an airless expanse; his book threatens to overwhelm, to smother the reader ("Writing is . . . a kind of steam roller . . . It suffocates the other" [*FDA*, 93]) by the fragmentation of its discourse. Its four score topics have no definable beginning or end, no apparent direction. "To discourage the temptation of sense, it was necessary to choose an absolutely meaningless order" (*FDA*, 11): that of the alphabet.

To realize the "truth" that is at issue here, one must undergo this threatening experience: to be held

Ungar

# version of Saussurian semiology into a social critique which he terms semioclastics. In his 1970 preface to the alphabet of the

below the surface of the text until that penultimate moment when one nearly perishes. "Truth would be that which, once removed, would leave nothing else uncovered but death," Barthes writes in the figure *Vérité*, using as an illustration the story of Emeth, the man of clay whose name meant "truth." He was used as a domestic servant, never allowed to leave the house. His name was written on his forehead. Each day he grew stronger; out of fear, the first letter of his inscribed name was erased, so that all that remained was *Meth*: "He is dead"—and he crumbled into dust (*FDA*, 272). Like Emeth, the reader of the *Fragments*—fascinated by the text, in love with it, believing it somehow to be addressed to him—is a prisoner. And his movements within this house that he is not allowed to leave begin to resemble Barthes's description of the *discours amoureux*: "a dust-cloud of figures agitated in an unforeseeable way like the coursing of a fly in a closed room" (*FDA*, 233).

If only a letter separates truth from death, then what is that letter? What happens when it is discovered? What would happen if it were erased?

II

From the beginning, the front cover of the *Fragments* both attracts and puzzles, beckoning the reader with a visual fragment, as though offering a glimpse of what lies within. Below the title, and above the threshold of the publisher's name (*Seuil*), a detail of a painting in color: two intertwined arms, the hands delicately, barely, touching; a thumb centered precisely on the border between sleeve and wrist: Are these two lovers? Are they not both male?

A primal scene? Writing in the figure *Image* of the wounding experience of seeing the beloved engaged in tender conversation with someone else, Barthes almost seems to be describing what is visible here: "The image is outlined in relief, pure and clean as a letter . . . I am excluded as if from a primal scene that exists only in so far as it is out-

# fashion designer Erté, Barthes finds a semiotic system which allows him to combine these int erests in an extended commen

lined by the contour of the key hole" (*FDA*, 157). Yet beyond giving the feeling of having stumbled across a scene of desire that was already going on before one arrived, this image can itself become an object of longing—not only evoking the reader's desire to know what is really going on, to complete the puzzle of which this is only a piece, but also charming him, capturing him as one is enthralled by the first sight of the beloved.

The first stage in love's course, Barthes writes, is "instantaneously, capture (I am ravished by an image)" (*FDA*, 233). Consider, for example, Goethe's young Werther, to whom Barthes returns for 49 examples of the gestures of the *amoureux* and who sees his beloved Charlotte for the first time "framed by the door of her house." Barthes comments on this scene: "We love first a *tableau* . . . . The immediate is worth the whole . . . . The tableau consecrates the object I am going to love" (*FDA*, 227). Both fragmentation and framing play a role in the mystery of love at first sight; it is possibly because one can see only part of that person that one is free to fall in love—yet somehow the very part that is framed by that glimpse responds in a marvelous way to one's own desire. A great deal of chance and "many surprising coincidences (and perhaps much research)" are necessary, Barthes writes, before he can find the one image in a thousand that suits his desire. "It is a great enigma to which I will never know the key." What do I desire in this person—"a silhouette, a form, an air"? (*FDA*, 27).

An *R*? (pronounced in French as *air*): its *P* formed by the figure on our left, its remaining limb by the arm of the other, best seen by turning the book at a slight angle: Is that what so attracts us to the image, the key to the enigma of our love at first sight, silhouetted in the key hole ("an entire scene through the key hole of language" [*FDA*, 35]) through which we view this primal scene, "outlined in relief, pure and clean as a letter"?

What does it stand for? *Roland*?

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# tary on the alphabetical letter and on alphabetism as an autonomous semiotic entity.



Perhaps—but we would like to propose another solution:

Truth, we have seen Barthes say, is that which, once removed, would leave only death. Despite the arbitrary exigency of his alphabetical ordering of topics, *Vérité*, true to its name, occupies the penultimate position. The only one to follow it is *Vouloir-saisir* (“The Will to Seize”), where what is really discussed is *non-vouloir-saisir*, the decision to cease the expression of one’s desire, equivalent in this context to the death of the text, to the end of amorous discourse. Truth does in fact stand last before death.

But it is what stands just before *Vérité*, that which would take its penultimate place were truth to disappear, that interests us here. In the game of

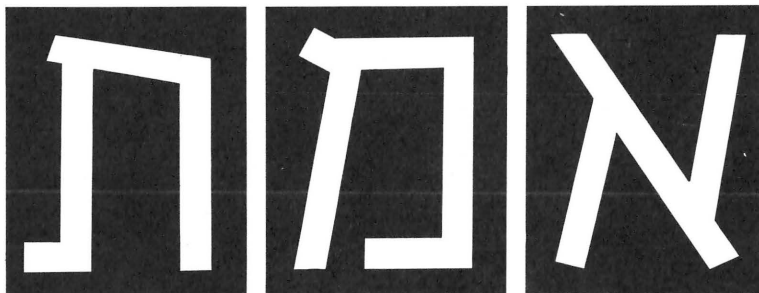
the *uret* to which Barthes likens the way his book might be read, one may hold on to the ring—to one of the eighty figures of the *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*—a second longer, if one desires, before passing it on: *Union*, the antepenultimate figure, will be our *uret* here.

Each of the figures is preceded by an “argument” that defines the area of the topic: “UNION. Dream of total union with the beloved.” If an amorous reading of the text leads us to see “the reader” where Barthes says “the beloved,” if indeed one remembers that he describes the book as a co-



operative venture in which readers and lovers are reunited, then this figure, speaking of *union*, suggests *reunion*. The difference between these two words, which can stand here for the difference between reading the book as a discourse on love and reading it as a discourse on writing, is practically

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The terminal function of Z as the letter announcing death in the *Erté* needs to be qualified in the light of what happens in the current *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* to the alphabet's first letter. Alluding to the Hasidic legend of the Golem, Barthes suggests that the ultimate truth—that of life's completion in death—may be contained in a simple letter: "Truth would be that which, being removed, would leave only death to be uncovered (as is said: life would no longer be worth living). And so it is with the name of the Golem: *Emet*, it is called. *Truth*, amputated by a letter, becomes *Met* (*Death*)."<sup>14</sup>

reducible to one letter, the same letter the cover frames.

Our holding on to the figure *Union* "a second more" will extend this parenthesis just enough to include the cover's letter, enabling us to read each in light of the other. The first of the four sections into which *Union* is divided speaks precisely of just such a superposition: of *frottis* (scumble), the

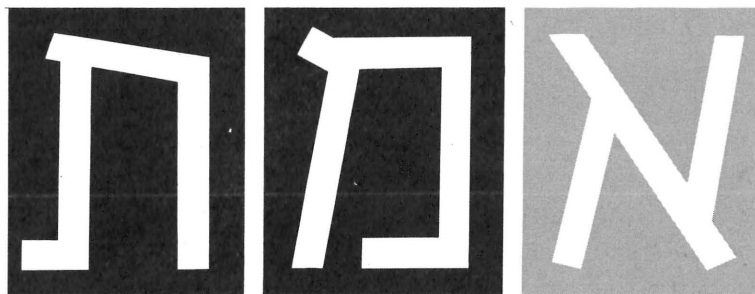
**Allegro ben marcato. N° 84 LE FURE**

thin, opaque layer of color that a painter sometimes applies to his canvas to change, ever so slightly, the appearance of the colors underneath, while still allowing the grain to show through.

... fruitive union, the *fruition* of love (a pedantic word? With its initial

*frottis* and its rustling stream of acute vowels, the ecstasy of which it speaks is augmented by an oral delight; saying it, I take pleasure from this union in my mouth). (FDA, 267)

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The symbolic profusion of death associated by Barthes with alphabetism may well provide the strongest evidence of the fallibility of systematic ordering, so that an intentional use of alphabetism becomes a destructive purging of the claims to scientificity which Barthes finds intolerable. For at least one other writer, alphabetism may be fatal and its proponents open to a kind of (systematic) suicide.

What might be the discourse of a frustrated artist? It is almost as if Roland Barthes has had to repress a potential for graphic or plastic invention in order to write. When, in the recent *Roland Barthes* (1975), he admits that he cannot help but *see* language where others might simply hear it, we really ought to take his statement—and Barthes himself, for that matter—literally or, as the French say, *à la lettre*. In a sense both literal and metaphoric, Roland Barthes is *pris aux lettres*; that is, “taken” by letters as one is said to be caught up or smitten by infatuation. In this, he is far from alone. Readers of Geoffrey

The best name for the dream of total union with the beloved, Barthes has been saying in what leads up to this passage, is “the *fruition* of love.” He can taste the union it denotes already, before its fulfillment in reality, just by saying it. The initial sensation, in turn, of this prior pleasure is *fr*—itself named best as *frottis*, which bears the same relation to *fr* as *fruition* to *union*. For it not only names the sound, it embodies it as well in its own enunciation.

## T DU BOIS JOLI.



The cover of *FDA* bears the same *frottis* in the first two letters of the title, *FRagments*. . . . And it displays a more literal *frottis* as well: that splash of color that catches our eye the first time we see the book, and that cannot but color, however faintly, our reading of what follows.

## Figure:

A piano transcription of the *ronde enfantine*, taken from *Album National Français*. Braunschweig: H. Litolff, n.d.

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Hartman's *The Fate of Reading* (1975) and viewers of television's *Sesame Street* alike agree that a new romance of the Letter is now in full bloom and many a pre-schooler recites or writes letters with an intense pleasure and play unknown to most adults.

If you have been reading Roland Barthes, you may have noticed a refined version of that play at a number of levels in the prolonged attention paid to the term "writing" (*écriture*) throughout his own writings (*écrits*). In keeping with my opening characterization of Barthes as a frustrated artist become writer, it would be suitable to see the play between the French terms *écriture* and *écrits* as something more than embellishment or a pedant's stratagem. Critical attention and verbal play would appear to be polar opposites pointing to respective attitudes of gravity and levity. On its own, a certain gravity is necessary to critical thinking, particularly when a single medium serves as both means and ostensible object of study. For most critics, this complexity precludes any kind of levity; the play factor is displaced and ultimately repressed. Not for Barthes, however.

For those acquainted with the recent writings, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) illustrates Barthes's passage away from a practice of reading predicated on assumed objectivity (gravity factor) toward something more

There is a text behind the painting of which this is a detail. The back cover of *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* permits us to begin the reconstruction of that larger context, telling us the source of the cover's fragment: a painting by Verrocchio (or by one of his students—authorial attribution is a continuing problem here), *Tobias and the Angel*. It depicts a scene from the Apocryphal Book of Tobit. A man of good works, in particular the surreptitious burial of persons put to death by the state, Tobit was about to sit down to dinner one evening when he learned that a corpse had been thrown into the street. He left immediately to attend to it, but after burying it could not return home until sunrise because of his defilement. He therefore slept outside, in the courtyard. But there were sparrows sitting on the wall near where he was sleeping, and their dung fell into his open eyes, forming an opaque white film that blinded him.

He prayed to God for deliverance. At that very moment, in a distant city, a woman named Sarah was praying for release from an affliction of her own. She had been given in marriage seven times, but each bridegroom was slain by an evil demon on the wedding night, and she was despairing of ever finding a lasting husband.

The same day Tobit remembered that he had left a sum of money in trust with a friend in another city. Because of his blindness he could not make the journey, but he decided to send his son, Tobias, to claim the money. The trip would be long and difficult, and the boy did not know the way. Tobit therefore chose to hire a trustworthy traveling companion for his son. The man who presented himself for the job was none other than the angel Raphael, sent by God to answer Tobit's prayer, but neither father nor son knew his true identity.

Tobit's fatherly benediction ironically invokes the angelic guide: "Go with this man; God who dwells in heaven will prosper your way, and may his angel attend you" (Tobit 5: 16).<sup>5</sup> Tobit is in that extraordinarily lucky position, although he does not yet

Photo:  
*Tobias and the Angel*, School of Verrocchio.  
The National Gallery, London.



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intimate which replaces scientism with value. What distinguishes Barthes's practice of critical thinking and writing from those of his contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic is a unique evolution in the perception of language and writing whose impact on our own attitudes makes it exemplary of critical theory and practice since World War II. Of a kind with the principles which supported the Pop Conceptual Art movements over the last twenty years, Barthes has questioned and ultimately rejected the traditional distinctions between artistic and critical activities. In fact, his writings since *The Pleasure of the Text* are closer to the creative or artistic side than to the (serious) evaluation and hermeneutics at the forefront of earlier texts more fully devoted to the serious business of criticism. That transition, and the value which it has placed on the play factor as antidote to illusions of objectivity, is a kind of regression which I want to explore in terms of Barthes's role in the romance of the Letter. In order to see that transition, in order to see that Barthes's writings about writing are something more than the critical *entreglosement* which Montaigne found intolerable close to 400 years ago, it is necessary to trace the origins of that transition and clarify the assumptions and values which Barthes has brought to bear upon language. Barthes's return to the Letter begins with a return to writing.

know it, of being able to cause something to come about just by naming it. Barthes, similarly, can enjoy the dreamed-of total union by pronouncing the right name for it, *fruition*; one might well wonder if something akin to this is going on in the evocation of the Tobias story itself by the fragment on the cover: Tobit had no idea that his prayer that an angel accompany his son was at that very moment being answered: Do the *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* betray an awareness that they are accompanied by the apocryphal Book of Tobit?

Barthes surrounds his amorous discourse with a certain aura of innocence. Like Socrates's errant, rolling orphan-text, it does not really know where it is going:

... a constraint characteristic of amorous discourse: I cannot myself (enamored subject) construct to the very end my love story: I am the reciting poet only for the beginning; the end of this story, just like my own death, belongs to others; it is for them to write the novel, the exterior, mythical narrative. (FDA, 117)

Any reading of the *Fragments* must therefore run the risk of being noncanonical, of standing outside the text—as the books of the Apocrypha rest precariously on the edge of the Bible. Yet the author sanctions precisely this activity, asking the reader to continue the story he has begun: "Only the Other could write my novel" (FDA, 109). One is asked to accompany the text, to guide its desire, to play a role curiously akin to that which Barthes attributed to Fourier's *Angélicat*, which "conducts desire: as if each man, left to himself, were incapable of knowing whom to desire . . . blind, powerless to invent his desire" (SFL, 119).<sup>6</sup> *Fragments*, indeed, is dedicated to an angel:

... I dedicate the dedication itself, in which is absorbed everything I have to say: