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DESIRE AND HISTORY IN ROLAND BARTHES

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In the final pages of *Mythologies* Roland Barthes describes the contradictory position which the critic of culture—the mythologist—inhabits. The critical thrust of his project lies in displacing the effect of normalization or naturalization which myth produces so that the sign can be grasped anew within the historical processes that gave it form. Yet it is precisely because the critic relentlessly analyzes his own culture that he is unable to live in its plenitude. If the critic analyzes the mythology of 'good French wine', as Barthes does, he can no longer innocently enjoy it. The act of reinventing history precludes to him *both* the comfortable existence within the collective myths of his community *and* the luxury of a utopian vision of the future. "For him," Barthes writes:

> tomorrow's positivity is entirely hidden by today's negativity. All the values of his undertaking appear to him as acts of destruction: the latter accurately cover the former, nothing protrudes. This subjective grasp of history in which the potent seed of the future is *nothing but* the most profound apocalypse of the present has been expressed by Saint-Just in a strange saying: *"What constitutes the Republic is the total destruction of what is opposed to it."* This must not, I think, be understood in the trivial sense of: 'One has to clear the way before reconstructing.' The copula has an exhaustive meaning: there is for some men a subjective dark night of history where the future becomes an essence, the essential destruction of the past.[1]

The praxis of the mythologist, then, does not allow him to integrate himself with the plenitude (the meaning) of his cultural context. Quite the opposite: critical perception renders the mythologist unable to grasp the sign systems of his culture except through their discontinuous, *analyzed* forms.

We can go still further. Desire is felt not as a positive longing for a plenitude, but rather as a negative lack yearning towards a further negativity. Such a formulation—drawn here from Barthes' consideration of popular culture—has significant implications for the analysis of literary texts. Traditional literary criticism has grouped itself around two broad claims. On the one side, various critics—Frye, Ransom, Leavis and some of the Frankfurt School—insist that literature's radical cutting edge lies in its concretization of a utopian wholeness, a vision of unity not to be grasped in the disembodied forms of lived experience in advanced capitalist societies. On the other side, post-structuralist critics and their

precursors, Brecht or Benjamin, argue that literature's critical praxis lies precisely in the extent to which it fractures wholeness, thereby reorienting perception and calling into question perceived versions of "reality". Within these two positions the question of desire is central. The former stance would seem to posit a longing for wholeness in desire, a yearning which cannot be fulfilled within the contemporary socio-cultural context; the latter appears to insist on a radical reorientation of desire itself. This paper will argue that in *The Pleasure of the Text* and *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* Barthes is deeply concerned with the reconceptualization of both desire and its actualization. Barthes' focus, however, veers towards a consideration of desire which isolates itself from the crucial question of the context of its concretization. Taken together *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* and *The Pleasure of the Text* form a meditation on desire, but one which curiously disevers itself from history.

I

The relationship Barthes draws between text and critic is most clearly articulated in his famous commentary on "rereading" in *S/Z*. There he commends rereading as:

> an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us "throw away" the story once it had been consumed ("devoured"), so that we can then move on to another story, buy another book, and which is tolerated only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, and professors), rereading is here suggested at the outset, for it alone saves the text from repetition (those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere).[2]

Like the mythologist, the critic here strives to release the narrative from the characteristics it shares with other narratives, to make it aware of its "critical difference." The text, trapped within the repetitive conventions of its narrative structure cannot know itself without the critic's intervention. The critic, because he is not satisfied with one "reading", because he insists on "rereading" and desires to grasp difference as well as similarity, can liberate the text into its own identity.

Yet is it precisely here that we should examine the concept of "identity". Barthes does not intend to signify the text's uniqueness; rather, in Barbara Johnson's words, it is "the text's way of differing from itself. . . . Far from constituting the text's unique identity, it is that which subverts the very idea of

identity, infinitely deferring the possibility of adding up the sum of a text's part or meanings and reaching a totalized, integrated whole."[3] The rereader's desire, then, is to emancipate the text from the bounds of structure, from its own plenitude, into the infinite interplay of its own possibilities. Politically, then, the rereader, and we should note that the rereader is still the critic, although a perverse critic, sees his task as one which denies any utilitarian status to the text. Just as Barthes' analysis in *S/Z* emancipates Balzac's *novella* from the domination of the classic realist narrative, so rereading liberates the text from being appropriated, consumed or devoured. And, it is exactly here, *in its insistence not to be used*, that rereading recaptures the text's critical dimension.

In designating the utopian by the text's fragments, by its refusal of a codified identity, Barthes takes issue with the dominant tendency of describing the text's utopian vision. Whether utopianism is located in Frye's master narratives or in the Frankfurt School's aesthetic dimension, it is generally ascribed to the text's ability to concretize wholeness, unity, harmony in the face of the atomized lived experience of advanced capitalist societies. Barthes discerns the text's utopian dimension not in the vision of otherness, but in the existence of otherness, that is in the refusal to participate in the act of appropriation.

This direction in Barthes' thought is most fully formulated in *Pleasure of the Text* where he opposes the erotic interplay between text and reader to the demands of any system based on the authoritarianism of the reality principle. Reading in *Pleasure of the Text* is an engagement which denies appropriation. "What I enjoy in a narrative," he writes, "is not directly its content or even its structure but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface: I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again."[4] The interaction between reader and text takes the form of undirected playfulness which produces either pleasure, in the classic narratives, or bliss—Barthes' famous sexual metaphor of *jouissance*—in the modernist narratives.

Such a formulation radically reorients the relationship between reader and critic. The critic, who attempts to insert his interpretative stance into the text, demanding at points that it *mean* this or *mean* that, imposes an authoritarian censure on the unstructured interplay between reader and text. To follow through Barthes' Freudian metaphor: if all readings have their basis in neurosis, then the critic stands as a censuring father figure demanding that the reader abandon the pleasure principle and submit to criticism's version of the reality principle. Hence the peculiar subversiveness which the modernist texts hold for Barthes; they are the texts whose fractured narratives refuse any interpretation, slipping again and again out of the critic's grasp to insist on their radical eroticism.

According to Barthes, the text transforms itself from the frigidity of "prattle" when neurosis forms in it, that is, when desire of something perceived to be external is born out of its lack. The text of bliss, then, must maintain the moment of desire, the neurosis around which its madness forms: "So we arrive at this paradox: the texts, like those by Bataille—or by others—which are written against neurosis, from the center of madness, contain within themselves, *if they*

want to be read, that bit of neurosis necessary to the seduction of their readers: these terrible texts are *all the same* flirtatious texts."[5] Indeed, the scandal of the literary text lies in the seductiveness. Saint-Just, speaking as the republic's lawgiver, notices that Racine subverts the careful codification of legalisms; when you read *Phaedre*, he writes, you believe Phaedre to be innocent and the law guilty.[6] It is not merely that the text presents a narrative of rebellion against unjust laws, but that it seduces the reader into a position he would not *consciously* hold. Or, to take up again Barthes' psychoanalytic terminology, it seduces the reader into allowing neurosis free play.

Thus when Barthes categorizes the readings of pleasure, he sees in the text the imagined image of the reader's own neurosis:

> We can imagine a typology of the pleasures of reading—or of the readers of pleasure; it would not be sociological, for pleasure is not an attribute of either product or production; it could only be psychoanalytic, linking the reading neurosis to the hallucinated form of the text. The fetishist would be matched with the divided-up text, the singling out of quotations, formulae, turns of phrase, with the pleasure of the word. The obsessive would experience the voluptuous release of the letter, of secondary, disconnected languages, of metalanguages (this class would include all the logophiles, linguists, semioticians, philologists: all those for whom language *returns*). A paranoiac would consume or produce complicated texts, stories developed like arguments, constructions posited like games, like secret constraints. As for the hysteric (so contrary to the obsessive), he would be the one who takes the text *for ready money*, who joins in the bottomless, truthless comedy of language, who is no longer the subject of any critical scrutiny and *throws himself* across the text (which is quite different from projecting himself into it).[7]

If Barthes' list seems to privilege here the hysteric, we must remember not only the anti-authoritarianism of interplay between text and reader, but also the abrogation of censure in Barthes' critical community. Indeed, when he invokes community, he does so as a 'Society of the Friends of the Text', thereby laying bare the mastercode of *The Pleasure of the Text* in his invocation of Loyola and Sade. For there can be no doubt that *The Pleasure of the Text* is, in effect, the hallucinated theory of that earlier text, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*. Barthes writes there of the necessity to release the text from its status as an object for analysis, as something to be appropriated to a particular critical system:

> Nothing is more depressing than to imagine the Text as an intellectual object (for reflection, analysis, comparison, mirroring, etc). The text is an object of pleasure. The bliss of the text is often only stylistic: there are expressive felicities, and neither Sade nor Fourier lacks them. However, at times the pleasure of the Text is achieved more deeply (and then is when we can truly say there is a Text): whenever the "literary" Text (the Book) transmigrates into our life, whenever another writing (the Other's writing) succeeds in writing fragments of our own daily lives, in short, whenever a *co-existence* occurs.[8]

The fascination with these three authors is not the desire to live through the programs set out in the texts, but rather the exact impossibility of any such transfer from words to action. Sade, Fourier and Loyola create worlds which belong exclusively to the realm of words, which can exist only in language. Indeed, it is as "Logothetes, founder of languages"[9] that Barthes links these three, so apparently diverse, writers.

To go further still: the language they create denies the utilitarian or functional characteristics of discursive texts. It is not a language of communication, but, on the contrary, one which attemps to give form to Saint-Just's "subjective dark night", one which tries to speak a void or to say what cannot be said:

> Thus, if Sade, Fourier, and Loyola are founders of a language, and only that, it is precisely in order to say nothing, to observe a vacancy (if they wanted to say *something* linguistic language, the language of communication and philosophy, would suffice: they could be *summarized*, which is not the case with any one of them).[10]

So Barthes will argue elsewhere that Sade defies visual representation: "Just as there is no portrait of Sade (except an imaginary one), no image of Sade's world is possible. By an imperious decision of Sade the writer, this world has been entrusted solely and totally to the power of the word."[11]

The abrogation of any communicative function in writing places language in a contradictory postion. On the one hand, in order to create the world of the word, it must pile up the catalogues, the lists, the calculations and divisions, sets and subsets which Barthes lays bare as the comon point among the writings of Sade, Fourier and Loyola. Thus, it overcomes its own vacuity by a kind of surfeit of language. On the other hand, language must always circle around the unspeakable, acknowledging its own negativity, while it attempts to abolish it.[12]

The Sadian world, according to Barthes' interpretation, is above all a world of

language: "Speech," he writes, "is wholly bound together with the overt mark of the libertine, which is in Sade's vocabulary the *imagination*: it might be almost said that imagination is the Sadian word for *language*."[13] To be sure, (and this is to the dismay of some readers of Sade, those readers who wish to consume or devour the novels) libertines discourse as much as they act: hence the charge that Sade is boring, turgid, unreadable. Language denies desire's actualization within the text, that is, denies a vicarious eroticism, infinitely deferring actualization:

> Its [language's] task, at which it is brilliantly successful, is to contaminate reciprocally the erotic and the rhetoric, speech and crime, to introduce suddenly into the conventions of social language the subversions of the erotic scene, at the same time as the price of the scene is deducted from the treasury of language.[14]

If the libertine is controlled by anything, if he submits to anything, then it is to language. For there can be no doubt that this *homme souverain* bows his head before the powers of language. Again and again the four masters of Silling Castle challenge the rules and regulations only to be convinced that one must obey what is *written down* in the statutes. And, as Barthes points out, even libertine practice is subordinate to speech: "practice follows speech, and is absolutely determined by it: what is done has been said."[15] Indeed the statutes themselves insist that the libertines may only reinvent an act after it has been recounted in story. Barthes sees then in Sade's work a new world of language for Silling Castle is in his words, "the sanctuary not of debauchery, but of the story."[16]

Such an interpretation, I will argue, conflates what are two separate narratives in *The 120 Days of Sodom* into one narrative structure, or, put from the other side, it privileges Duclos' narrative and pushes that of the ominscient narrator to the periphery. Barthes' reading of *The 120 Days* rests on an emphasis of the power of words, that is, the control and talent of the storyteller whose words give form to desire, or allow desire to be actualized. Duclos' narrative creates the "catalogue" of the passions, allowing, by permitting itself to be fractured, to be interrupted, the concrete enactment of its words. It is precisely within the catalogues of the passions that the surfeit of words takes form. And, even Duclos has to be instructed to increase the plenitude of her discourse. The first night of the storytelling Curval interrupts her, not to demand enactment, but to ask for more words:

> "Duclos," the Président interrupted at this point, "we have, I believe, advised you that your narrations must be decorated with the most numerous and searching details; the precise way and extent to which we may judge how the passion you des-

> cribe relates to human manners and man's character is determined by your willingness to disguise no circumstance; and, what is more, the least circumstance is apt to have an immense influence upon the procuring of that kind of sensory irritation we expect from your stories."
>
> "Yes, my Lord," Duclos replied, "I have been advised to omit no detail and to enter into the most minute particulars whenever they serve to shed light upon the human personality, or upon the species of passion; have I neglected something in connection with this one?"
>
> "You have," said the Président; "I have not the faintest notion of your second monk's prick, nor any idea of its discharge. In addition, did he frig your cunt, pray tell, and did he have you dandle his device? You see what I mean by neglected details."[17]

Yet while Duclos is told to produce "the most numerous and searching details", the omniscient narrator of *The 120 Days* refuses to give details, pleads a lack of knowledge and consistently denies the narrative plenitude: Here is the presentation of the first dinner at Silling Castle:

> Spying one of his neighbors stiffen, Durcet, though they were still at table, promptly unbuttoned his breeches and presented his ass. The neighbor drove his weapon home; the operation once concluded, they fell to drinking again as if nothing had happened. The Duc soon imitated his old friend's little infamy and wagered that, enormous as Invictus' prick might be, he could calmly down three bottles of wine while lying embuggered upon it. What effortlessness, what ease, what detachment in libertinage! He won what he had staked, and as they were not drunk on an empty stomach, as those three bottles fell upon at least fifteen others, the Duc's head began gently to swim. The first object upon which his eye alighted was his wife, weeping over the abuse she had sustained from Hercule, and this sight so inspired the Duc he lost not an instant doing to her things too excessive for us to describe as yet. The reader will notice how hampered we are in these beginnings, and how stumbling are our efforts to give a coherent account of these matters; we trust he will forgive us for leaving the curtain drawn over a considerable number of little details. We promise it will be raised later on.[18]

The narrator's promise, as we might expect, is never fulfilled. Later on we are told "Aline displayed I've no idea what, for I have never been able to discover what went on in those infernal closets"; and "I've no idea what happened next"; still later; "I have little definite information upon what the libertine took it into his head to do in the midst of those seven persons but his absence was prolonged."[19] Thus, the omniscient narrator of *The 120 Days* is unable to provide the details, the surfeit of words which make up Duclos' narration. In effect, omniscient is hardly an appropriate designation for this narrator who is anything but "all-knowing". Rather, in distinction to Duclos', his narrative is an absence of words, a register of the impossibility of speaking, or the *interdit*, "what cannot be said."

But it is exactly here in the *entredit*, what is between statements, between the plenitude of Duclos' narration and the vacuity of the narrator's, that Sade actualizes desire within his words.[20] The narrator had, in language very close to *The Pleasure of the Text*, invited his reader to skip, look up, dip in again:

> Many of the extravagances you are about to see illustrated will doubtless displease you, yes, I am well aware of it, but there are amongst them a few which will warm you to the point of costing you some fuck, and that, reader, is all we ask of you; if we have not said everything, analyzed everything, tax us not with partiality, for you cannot expect us to have guessed what suits you best. Rather, it is up to you to take what you please and leave the rest alone, another reader will do the same, and little by little, everyone will find himself satisfied.[21]

The eroticism of the reading lies in the edges of the two narratives rubbing against one another, the alteration of surfeit/surpression. It is not in the plenitude of Duclos' narration (or Juliette's or Justine's) but in the *entredit* between the two that desire concretizes its fitful existence.

Yet here we encounter a further problem for to live between the lines is not to live at all, and the ultimate effect of *The 120 Days* is, like the deaths of most of its characters, not the plenitude of erotic playfulness, but an immense vacuity. The privileged position which Barthes gives to Duclos' narrative foregrounds the plenitude of the word and displaces its absence. To grasp the significance of the juxtaposition of plenitude and absence we would have to turn instead to those critics which situate *The 120 Days* within history.

II

While Barthes had discovered in the catalogues of passions, the lists, the piling

up of details, the division and subdivision of Duclos' narration, a celebration of the plenitude of words, of the power of discourse, Horkheimer and Adorno interpret this surfeit of language as a pivotal contradiction in the project of the Enlightenment. From their perspective Sade represents not the surfeit of desire endlessly seeking its actualization, but, on the contrary, the relentless subordination of desire to systematization and rationalization:

> The architectonic structure of the Kantian system, like the gymnastic pyramids of Sade's orgies and the schematized principles of the early bourgeois freemasonry—which has its cynical mirror-image in the strict regimentation of the libertine society of *Les 120 Journées*—reveals a organization of life as a whole which is deprived of any substantial goal. These arrangements amount not so much to pleasure as to its regimented pursuit—organization—just as in other demythologized epochs (Imperial Rome and the Renaissance, as well as the Baroque) the schema of an activity was more important than its content.[22]

Here Barthes' reading is reversed. Far from constituting a privileging of the world of discourse, the rules and regulations of Silling Castle represent quite the opposite: regimentation and organization exist for their own sake, requiring that desire relinquish its emancipatory projection and subordinate itself to a rigid schematization. The analysis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* resembles Foucault's suggestion that Sade's world represents the Enlightenment's imprisonment of subversively "mad" passions within a controlled environment.[23] Silling is here neither the refuge of debauchery, nor of the story, but a minature asylum.

Such an interpretation begins to situate Sade within history, but it does not allow us to grasp his work as a praxis project which at one and the same time inscribes the discourse of emancipation into a process of enthrallment. Jean-Paul Sartre suggests that Sade lived "the decline of a feudal system": his project, to re-establish the residual rights of the warrior in violence, is deflected onto the terrain of the emergent bourgeoisie. First, he founds his system on the subjectivity of the ego; *homme souverain* represents the force of the superior individual. Second, he adopts as the enabling premise of this system the concept that Nature represents, and therefore justifies, a world of violence. But, as Sartre points out, it is exactly here that Sade comes up against the dominant idea of the period: "in the eyes of everyone living in 1789, aristocrat or bourgeois, Nature is good."[24] Far from merely actualizing desire, Sade's system results from the necessity to formulate his own thought, using what Sartre calls "the concept-tools of his period":

> It is in these terms that he erects a monstrous work which it would be wrong to classify too quickly as one of the last vestiges of aristocratic thought, but which appears rather as the claim of the solitary man, grasped opportunely and transformed by the universalist ideology of the revolutionaries.[25]

Understood as lived experience within history, Sade's thought is anything but the free play of desire to create new worlds of words. To be sure, Barthes' analysis in *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* lays bare the importance of systematization in its fascination with the elaborate and bizarre system-building which Barthes discovers in each of the three figures. Yet Barthes sees the intricacy of each system as a kind of tribute or monument to the play of desire within discourse. Such an emphasis allows desire untrammelled actualization, disevered from the pressures of history. If Barthes had ended *Mythologies* with an approving reference to the laconic discourse of Saint-Just, he might well have remembered that writer's insistence on the pressuring weight of history: however freely desire may appear to spin out its narratives in *The Pleasure of the Text* or *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* it never emancipates itself from *la force des choses*. Barthes foregrounds the liberating project of *historie* as story, as narrative, as discourse, but forgets that it can only inscribe itself within that other *histoire*: history.

Notes

1. R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, St. Albans: Paladin, 1976, pp. 157-8.

2. R. Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, pp. 15-16.

3. See B. Johnson, "The Critical Difference," *Diacritics*, 8, no. 2, June 1978, pp. 2-9.

4. R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, pp. 11-12.

5. *Ibid.* p. 6.

6. See Saint-Just, *Théorie Politique*, ed. A. Liénard, Paris: Seuil, 1976, p. 170.

7. *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 63.

8. R. Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, trans. R. Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1976, p. 7.

9. *Ibid.* p. 3.

10. *Ibid.* p. 6.

11. R. Barthes, "Pasolini's *Salò*: Sade to the Letter," in *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, ed. P. Willemen, London: BFI, 1977, p. 65.

12. Cf. Jean Genet's description of his project in that text of eroticism, *The Thief's Journal*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York: Grove Press, 1974, p. 94: "This book, *The Thief's Journal*, Pursuit of the Impossible Nothingness." See also Barthes' comments on the banishment of the peasant, Augustin, not from erotic play but from discourse in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, pp. 159-60.

13. *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, p. 31.

14. *Ibid.* p. 33.

15. *Ibid.* p. 35.

16. *Ibid.* p. 37.

17. D.-A. de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, trans. A. Wainhouse and R. Seaver, New York: Grove Press, 1980, p. 271.

18. *Ibid.* p. 265.

19. See, respectively, pp. 514, 524 and 534.

20. For an analysis in a different context of *entredit/interdit* in Sade, see Jane Gallop, *Intersections*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981, pp. 52-55.

21. *The 120 Days of Sodom*, 253.

22. M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightment*, trans. John Cumming, New York: Seabury, 1977, p. 88. Barthes does comment on the "mechanization" of sexuality in Sade, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, pp. 152-53, but he does not develop the theme of rationalization.

23. See M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. R. Howard, New York: Vintage, 1973, pp. 282-85.

24. J.-P. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. H. Barnes, New York: Vintage, 1968, p. 114.

25. *Ibid.* p. 115.