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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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Box 1972 CMA, Cleveland,
Ohio, USA 44106.
Author's address:
Department of French,
University of Minnesota,
Minneapolis, MN 55455

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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.

(Hautement)
Si elle-même
cause la répétition
le premier fois
ou avec le stéréotype la clare
ouverte" Si on pouvait
l'appeler autrement ?
parce que sans ça, ça devient
un morceau mort, volent
d'un raisonnement
Il n'y a plus d'élaboration
nonverbal (dans le 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, si ce n'est, a
affaire avec la voix
à ce point à se démar-
quer de la clare ouverte
pour ce que c'est ?
- le lien nonverbal d'un rai-
sonnement ?
- une chose ? la parole ?
ou, quelle limite ? quel
culers

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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."⁶

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."¹ 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."² 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 tibiaire
contre la première fois
la ~~autre~~ ~~fois~~

Niveau de l'éblouissement
de l'éblouissement - Stéréotype
de l'éblouissement - Changement de langage

des stéréotypes la clare
ou vice " 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 (Changement de langage) →

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

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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."³ The slashmark at the center of its body, between equally apportioned horizontal members, emblemizes Sarra-

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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) illustrated in Massin, *La Lettre et l'Image* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 108.

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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,⁴ 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