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*Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life Writing*

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## Dialectics of Love in the 'Early' and 'Late' Writings of Roland Barthes

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# Dialectics of Love in the ‘Early’ and ‘Late’ Writings of Roland Barthes

Andy Stafford

## Abstract

It is well-known that Roland Barthes spent the Second World War in a sanatorium for tuberculosis; less appreciated is the voluminous and frank correspondence that he sent to his closest associates and lovers, often in moments of despair and distress. Some of these letters have been published in *Album* (2018); and, more recently, in Frédéric Goldbronn’s documentary *Les fantômes du sana* (2020). From these long and heartfelt communications with his friends emerge not only a complex account of illness and hope for recovery but also deep reflections on love, friendship and heartache. In January 1946, writing to his much-missed partner Robert David, Barthes described the “logical dialectic of Love” and its extraordinary power over everything. “In reason,” he confided, “logic has the power of royalty; in love, it is one of tyranny.” Having therefore to accept the panic caused by every “sign” generated in his amorous mind as an “absolute pressure of an internal dialectic,” this then “became confused with love itself.” How does this dialectic of love develop in Barthes’s published writings? Is it part of the “double grasp” that is at work in *Michelet* in 1954 and *Mythologies* in 1957, and in *A Lover’s Discourse* and the seminars on love twenty years later?

We are missing a political theory of language, a methodology which would allow us to see the ways in which language is appropriated and to study the ‘ownership’ of the means of enunciation, something like the *Capital* of linguistic science.

Roland Barthes, “Digressions” 998.

[L]et us now imagine reintroducing into the politico-sexual field thus discovered, recognized, traversed, and liberated... *a touch of sentimentality*: would that not be the *ultimate* transgression? The transgression of transgression itself? For, after all, that would be

*love: which would return: but in another place.*  
Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* 65-66.

To love is to struggle, beyond solitude, with everything  
that can animate existence.  
Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love* 104.

In a recent article on love in the internet age in the *Paris Review*, Alfie Bown makes a slightly surprising suggestion about Roland Barthes's famous 1977 treatise on the language of love, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Not only is it Barthes's most psychoanalytical text, argues Bown, but also his "closest to Marx." Citing the work of Srećko Horvat, the Croatian philosopher whose *The Radicality of Love* questions (*pace* Alain Badiou in his essay *In Praise of Love*) the division of love from politics, Bown goes against much of the 'late Barthes' orthodoxy and its tendency to downplay if not ignore the radical edge to Barthes's best-selling book.

It is true that, when *A Lover's Discourse* was published, some of the Left in France seemed to take a distance on the essay's non-theoretical approach, Louis-Jean Calvet being one of its main detractors; though this shunning by the left was by no means systematic (Stafford, *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth* 208). The book had large sales, but, according to Eric Marty, silence from intellectuals made it an "orphaned" essay in Barthes's *oeuvre* and suggested a new intellectual solitude in his life (Marty, *Roland Barthes* 198-205). As Marty points out (202-03), it was not that the topic itself was out of tune with theory of the 1970s – Jacques Lacan also held a seminar on love in 1975 just as Barthes was giving his at the newly renamed École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. With, firstly, its refusal of grand narratives in favour of fragmented micro-stories, secondly a critique of abstraction, thirdly, a return of the past over the present, and fourthly, generic impurity with irony and satire, *A Lover's Discourse* is cast by Marty, rather problematically, as a precursor to post-modernism. Marty's main point, however, is that the language of someone in love was the least theoretical subject possible in 1977; the soft sweetness and the ridiculousness of the name "lover," the references to a "heavy heart," all made it irrelevant to a radical modernity (Marty, *Roland Barthes* 205).

Indeed, it is easy to think of love as far from politics as possible and Barthes himself argues in *A Lover's Discourse* that, alongside Christian doctrine and psychoanalysis, "Marxist discourse...has nothing to say" about love or the

erotic, because in today's world they have "no system" (211). Yet, when Marx writes about love in the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" of 1844 (the end of the section called "Money," 375-79) he ends the section on the "misfortune" of unrequited love (379) and then goes straight into his famous piece "Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and General Philosophy" (379-400) where he recognises Feuerbach's breakthrough with respect to the Hegelian dialectic. In other words—in Marx's mind at least—Money-Love-Dialectic are all connected tightly. This deeply political and materialist link by Marx between dialectics and love resurfaces, I want to argue, in *A Lover's Discourse*. For Barthes, writing in 1977, it is "today's intellectuals" who "reluctantly" privilege "Love" over "Need" (*A Lover's Discourse* 211); it is "no longer the sexual which is indecent, it is the sentimental" (177); this is "Love's obscenity" (175). Furthermore, as we shall see, and supporting Bown's view, the essay regularly alludes to Marxism, from the Leninist title "What is to be done?" (62) to the "revolution" of being in love (151).

The aim of this article then is to find on the one hand what might in Barthes's essay dissent from any normative or accepted view of love, and, on the other, to explore much earlier attempts to write about love in the period of Barthes's life that Philippe Roger has called the "Marx Years." A friend of Barthes's in the 1970s, Roger has seen little of his work on Barthes translated into English. In his impressive 1986 essay *Roland Barthes, roman*, he looks closely (232-33) at the political, indeed materialist, import of sections of *A Lover's Discourse*, noting how Barthes rejects the "not necessarily 'depoliticised'" in favour of the "not being 'excited'" (232). Roger shows how Barthes refuses, in *A Lover's Discourse*, the "generalised hysteria" attached to political discourse, favouring instead the "passivity" and "lethargy" ('paresse') of the person in love. Indeed, for Roger, politics is the "hors-texte" (233) in Barthes's 1977 essay on love, it is there by its conspicuous absence. Outside of the hysteria of politics, the language of love is nevertheless akin to, in parallel with, the radical change of the truly political. He points here to Barthes's rhetorical, and rather startling, question in *A Lover's Discourse*: what can the person in love say, except that they want a "revolution, in short," that is "not so far, perhaps, from the political kind," that, in both cases, what Barthes "hallucinates is the absolute New" (*A Lover's Discourse* 151). In short, Barthes is equating the earth-shaking of being in, and speaking (about), love, with the political imagination of how the world could be organised in a radically-different, revolutionary way. Similarly, Pierre Saint-Amand argues that

not only is the eroticism in *A Lover's Discourse* a tactile, sensual one, but that it points to the "materialism" that Barthes had always claimed ("Erotisme et euphorie" 638-39). Indeed, the "absolute materialism" which Roger sees here as "very close to mysticism" (233), resembles the famous quote from Jean Jaurès in his *Socialist History of the French Revolution* where the radical politician states that his "interpretation of history will ... be marked by the materialism of Marx and the mysticism of Michelet" (167).

### **Double Hegel**

To the "Marx years" in Roger's account of the early Barthes, we could easily add the 'Hegel years'; for the 'early' Barthes, starting from the 25-year-old tuberculosis sufferer locked away in a sanatorium during World War II, develops distinctly Hegelian, and then Marxian, perspectives on his heart-felt relationships both in and outside of his constricted sanatorium life. In correspondence written between 1944 and 1946 in particular we can trace a growing dialectical sensibility, if not a materialist outlook, that will resurface three decades later in his academic and essayistic work.

Though Marx does not look at the sensuality of sexuality, sensuality is a key element of his early materialism and his deep engagement with Hegel's phenomenology; and Barthes's insistence in *A Lover's Discourse* that he is "not dialectical" (63), does not then preclude his recognising that "odd dialectic" whereby "amorous errantry is a fatality" which even has its "comical side"; and that, due to this "'perpetual mutability'," the result in love and relationships is the unending search for a lover, a constant and restless move from "one nuance to the next" (101-103).

Indeed, Hegel is present in the "Discours amoureux" seminar that Barthes gave in Paris between 1974 and 1976. Just as he divided "RB" into I and II in his 1973-1974 seminar *Le Lexique de l'auteur* (324-5), so the "Discours amoureux" seminar divides Hegel into two: Hegel I is "love," and Hegel II, "History":

The early Hegel could see the reality of human desire and of human action in the microcosm of love. Then Hegel II, the reality of human action in the macrocosm of History. The [human] is this animal species whose essence develops in the dialectic of historical time, the animal that possesses a history. Therefore, the [human] cannot be identified with love. Love is a brief subjective moment in the lives of lovers: it leaves intact the macrocosm of History (which is tantamount to identifying [humans] with death). (*Le Discours amoureux*, 532, my translation)

Citing in a footnote Norman O. Brown's work on psychoanalysis applied to History, Barthes is aware in the 1970s of the importance of love in its nexus with History and death; and yet, in *A Lover's Discourse*, love is outside of History:

Whatever is anachronic is obscene. As a (modern) divinity, History is repressive, History forbids us to be out of time. . . The lover's sentiment is old-fashioned, but this antiquation cannot even be recuperated as a spectacle: love falls outside of interesting time; no historical, polemical meaning can be given to it; it is in this that it is obscene. (177-178)

It is this perspective on the seriousness of love that we will now trace in his early career, just as Barthes moves, during the final days of the War, from Gide and Michelet, to Marx and Sartre. We will see in particular that this dialectic plays an important role in his early conceptions of love.

### **Love = Both “Tyranny” and “A Gold Medal in a Foundation”**

In two letters to Robert David –his lover from 1944 to 1946– Barthes refers to the “dialectical logic of love” and its extraordinary power over everything. In a letter dated 23 January 1946, from the Leysin clinic in Switzerland where he had met and fallen in love with David, he is describing to David the evening he had spent with two friends, Mosser and Solliers:

During the conversation, which was painful as long as Solliers was there because of his growing mythomania (vanity), then more relaxed when I was alone with Mosser, I thought of you intensely many times. I talked to Mosser about passion (in an absolutely general way, adopting that proverbial tone I love). I surprised myself with the power of the hypothesis on love that I constructed. (*Album* 60)

I reconsidered, reexperienced, and reaffirmed that vocation of passion which is my own and which I understand better and better— without knowing where it is leading me—this is part of it. Some elements that I have often mentioned to you appeared forcefully to me: the dialectical logic of Love, which is one of the most astonishing things I know. (60-61)

Although we now have only a fragment of the letter to Robert David from the week before (18 January 1946), he explained the meaning of the “dialectical logic of love”:

Love, you see, is a kind of inverse reason, and therein lies its terrible, and terribly beautiful, nature. Love has all the characteristics of reason. It is

the most logical action possible, accepting no compromise and basing its progression on a logical line of thought. In reason, logic has the power of royalty; in love, it has the power of tyranny. I cannot do otherwise than accept the panic (before a word, or silence), not through intellectual fidelity to a principle, but through the absolute pressure of an inner dialectic that for me merges with love itself. (314 n.106)

The tyranny of love's dialectic is then described in the 23 January 1946 letter to David, thus:

One is taken with a surge of emotion at seeing this power of *thought* that makes no act indifferent, that makes a telegram or letter an eternal *sign*, transforming *everything*, absolutely *everything* into the absolute. It's exhausting, but it is undeniably great, this sacredness upon which, in Love, one bases each movement, like a gold medal in a foundation (Michelet). I thought again—but I've already explained this to you—precisely of that discovery of the sacred (I cannot find a better word) that prompts passion. (61, author's original emphases)

We will return to the reference to Michelet in a moment. Citing Maurice Barrès's *Amori et dolori sacrum*, Barthes now makes the crucial link between love and revolutionary politics that, as we saw above, Philippe Roger identifies in *A Lover's Discourse* written three decades after these letters to David:

I sense the degree to which, for example, the vocation of passion and that of revolution are identical. It is an engagement of the same nature. Through that similarity, one can easily understand the chemical formula of the absolute, the eternal. It would be a kind of indissoluble compound—indissoluble for having become a truly living body—of suffering and of loving-suffering, of the horror and the love of love. (61)

The chapter in *A Lover's Discourse*, "To Love Love" (31), is clearly prefigured here. However, it would be perhaps too biographical, and even simplistic, to invoke the account by Susan Sontag (*Illness as Metaphor*, 16) of the tuberculosis sufferer as one of wild swinging between utter exhaustion and listlessness, and then almost superhuman energy in the hunger for life; but her suggestion does point to an oscillation—a dialectic of some sort—in Barthesian thought and writing.

### **Michelet and Marx**

Barthes appears as all too aware of the deep, over-deep even, theorising of love to which he is reduced. In a letter to another friend from his time in the sanatorium, Georges Canetti, composed in November 1945, he writes:

Those who are ill only have speech for expressing themselves. If we were healthy and free, we could experience friendship in silence, as in certain American novels. I truly believe that as long as I'm sick, I will inevitably be saddled with this academicism that weighs on me so heavily that sometimes I go for weeks without writing to avoid assuming the burden of the only habit I have at the moment. (*Album* 47)

This highly intellectualised conception of love is soon to become, in the final months of 1945, a much more philosophically-complex one, in which Jaurès's joining of Marx's materialism with Michelet's mysticism can be seen implicitly in Barthes's syncretic view of love in his personal life. The comparison of Michelet's expression "like a gold medal in a foundation" to the "sacredness" of love is a striking one. However soon, as we shall see, Barthes will go on to compare being in love to that of being a revolutionary.

Barthes's fascination with Michelet is a complex and often contradictory one. Indeed, in matters of love, Michelet, the romantic historian, is surprisingly uninspiring for Barthes. In his 1954 book on Michelet, Barthes regrets forcefully the division of sentiment from theorisation: «Michelet greatly contributed to the propagation of a superstition still widespread today: the stupid and harmful distinction between "idea" and "feeling"; our anti-intellectuals are still feathering their nests with it» (*Michelet* 183note).

It is not only in his early letters, but also in the later work on love in the 1970s, that Barthes continually battles this "superstition" by bringing sentiment and theory together. It is also Michelet's political ideas, his petty-bourgeois ideology that troubles him – "Classic credo of the liberal petit-bourgeois around 1840" (11) – and this is doubtless a view that is inflected by his initiation into Marxism in Autumn 1945.

It was in the Leysin sanatorium in Switzerland that Barthes had met Jacques Fournié in Autumn 1945, with whom long discussions about Marxism, philosophy and politics took place, against the back-drop of the liberation of Europe, the crisis of capitalism and the arrival of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. Indeed, we can see some measure of the shift towards dialectical and materialist thought that this meeting and then intense discussion with Fournié had on his view of love. On 15 November 1944, whilst still in Saint-Hilaire, Barthes had written to David, with a very different – but equally important – analogy for love, here between physical love and writing:



Writing for me would be, I think, like the same sort of pleasure as physical love (I call physical love: sleeping with someone you desire but do not love: in three stages: excitement; release (fulfilment) and disgust.) (unpublished correspondence, Fonds Barthes. Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

The change of both analogy and tone in Barthes's writing on love in his correspondence with David is striking. The letter of 8 December 1944, sent from Saint-Hilaire (that is, before Barthes's transfer to Leysin), must be contrasted to the correspondence from Leysin a year later. The use of Hegel here in 1944 precedes a more Marxian account to follow:

Since all the requirements for a predetermined confession seem empty to me, incomprehensible beside the deep life of my soul, I would even say beside the truth of a certain absence (at least of words) where finally I sense no deception—if I weren't afraid of being misunderstood by your honest heart, your avid intelligence for formulated truths, because your extremely straightforward and delicate soul has something Hegelian about it that tells it the ineffable is nothing but the imaginary, and even if you acknowledged the mystery, you would only do so within the framework of your own confession. (*Album* 52-53)

Despite the reference to Hegel and despite the contradictions in love Barthes underlines here in 1944, the following lacks the starkly dialectical "logic of love" in the January 1946 correspondence we saw earlier:

Love illuminates for us our imperfection. It is nothing other than the uncanny movement of our consciousness comparing two unequal terms—on the one hand, all the perfection and plenitude of the beloved; on the other hand, all the misery, thirst, and destitution of ourselves—and the fierce desire to unite these two such disparate terms and to fill the void of one with the plenitude of the other. (53)

Even the firm discounting of fiduciary value is less materialist than liberal humanist:

[t]he value of a being is an extremely fiduciary notion. Without playing on words, it is a market value: your worth is that I love you; that's what must be understood. Only love truly creates; a being who is not loved is worth nothing, has no existence, is an element in the scenery and that scenery is a desert. I believe that a being's moral progress means understanding that and consenting—if only timidly at first—and entering the flaming circle of love in order finally, truly, to be born. And then, how distant grow all the intellectual and moral values of character, etc., how they shrink and shrivel up! How many intelligent beings are nevertheless dead, useless, cold, hard, etc. There is a miracle, there is a life, there is a flame that struggles to emerge between us, a sign that, once raised, would

endow us both with our true value, our eternal value, would shower us both with serious things. Having consented to the ultimate weakness of love, we will find ourselves truly strong. (53)

Nevertheless, we find here, already in 1944, a pessimistic sense of self when not in love:

You were ecstatic over the miracle that there was no more of the intellectual pontiff in me, and yet, at seeing your joy, your joyous surprise, wasn't that when my value was the greatest? And you too, wasn't it in that nocturnal fire that you were worth the most? Did you have a single moment of doubt about your own value? As though we left all of that far behind! But, come day, I could see in the way you would not look at me that you had gone back to those things that, not being part of love, can only be part of pride. Infernal self-pride, and that's why I suffer, even as I am sure of being right, even having already been enriched a thousandfold, just as Pascal suffered and yet... But neither for you nor for me can I continue this comparison. (53-54)

There is nevertheless a calmness and resignation in his liberal Hegelian view of love. Indeed, nine months later, in a letter to Robert David dated 28 September 1945, written soon after his arrival in Leysin, Barthes seems to be in control of his feelings of love:

To bolster my courage, I have adopted a kind of method (you will recognize me there, of course). I begin with this principle: one's intelligence must be in proportion to one's sensitivity; when one is not sure of the first, the second must be decreased. If my intelligence doesn't allow me to overcome a difficult situation, I'm going to try to lessen my sensitivity a bit, reduce the flame. This is all to let the mind retain control; to do that I must avoid certain temptations so they do not destroy me: the image of the Mother and the image of the Lover. I'm trying hard not to be forever thinking of you both. I know that you are always extraordinarily present, but I'm trying not to let myself be monopolized by your images. It's simply because otherwise I lose control. (55-56)

However, it is in the letter to David dated 17 December 1945 (and of which, again, only a fragment seems to remain) where we can see, following Barthes's reading of Sartre (and doubtless the beginning of discussions with Fournié), a more revolutionary spirit emerging, accompanied by the "violent thoughts about my life and my character. . . , anarchistic" (58) that are beginning to undermine his work on Michelet and to raise questions about the bourgeois character of France's 1789 Revolution amidst the rubble of post-war Europe:

[T]he modern world seems to call for a more “totalitarian” concept of man. It is very clear that 89, whose death echoes across the continent, will have its last stronghold in the legal mind, in the legal structures, cherished offspring of the Revolution and high priests of the analytical, bourgeois mindset. Thus, within the citadel of the Law, there must be revolutionary minds, applying revolutionary methods to the very subjects of the Law. You will be one of them, I am sure of it. One can be a revolutionary and very gentle. I really hope that, more and more, the new Revolution will be a question of work rather than of blood. (313-314, n. 101)

Barthes is clearly developing a more politicised view of love in December 1945. We can now return to the letter in which Barthes describes the dialectic of love and which he likens to the 1903 study by Barrès, the “indissoluble compound—indissoluble for having become a truly living body—of suffering and of loving—suffering, of the horror and the love of love”:

That chemical formula of the absolute, that theoretical body of the eternal, has isomers, so to speak: love itself—as I experience it—the gift of self for an idea, a nation, etc. But in all these acts there are: 1. A *beyond*, efficacy, a kind of practical disinterest, a moral force—and thus, if you will, a despair. To be revolutionary or in love basically entails being in despair—or without hope, which is better. 2. A *sacrificial*, almost ritual element that acts both contradictory and authentic and, thus essential to the true man, that plunges him into what he fears, the fear and love of torture, which pushed generations of men toward the guillotine during the Revolution. . . . That is how it is with passion—if it is truly followed to its end—because even as a man who is content with having political *ideas* without being wholly on fire knows nothing of the sacred in revolution, so a man who tries to elude the suffering of love, either by not loving completely, or by abandoning love (the most frequent case), or by sublimating it (perhaps the most contemptible case), will know nothing of the sacred in love, and for him there will be only losses, whereas, for the other, only gains of an essential order. (61-62, author's original emphases)

This is a quite extraordinary marrying of the sacred of love with the sacred of revolution and revolutionary ideas. This analogy seems to be going much further than Tennyson's famous dictum – “'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all”: Barthes seems to be saying that being in love, like being a *revolutionary*, requires the utmost personal sacrifice.

It is not surprising then that, in his conclusion to this extraordinary treatise on love, he calls this letter “one of the most intimate letters” (62) he has ever written to David. It is striking also that, in his recent treatise on the radical nature of love, Srećko Horvat cites Che Guevara's eldest daughter to a similar

effect: "To be a proper revolutionary, you have to be a romantic" (*The Radicality of Love* 110).

It is also the moment for Barthes to underline the gender-sexuality differences he sees in love:

I was also thinking—in my efforts toward intelligence and wisdom—that one can say all this only when it is a friend whom one loves. I imagine that, with regard to a woman, a whole other metaphysics applies, not at all inferior, that was not my thought. Because the degree of otherness one finds in a woman is entirely different, and that leads to experiencing the issue in an entirely different way. But that, my poor David, is a dangerous direction for the moment. (*Album* 62)

This rather essentialising view of woman has its echo in *A Lover's Discourse* when he describes the woman as the person in a heterosexual relationship who "gives shape to absence" (14). But, before we look at *A Lover's Discourse*, it is worth illustrating the dialectic of love as Barthes begins to conceive it in the mid-1970s, especially in his seminar, as well as antecedents in *Mythologies* and *Michelet*.

One of the keenest dialectics in love for Barthes is that of the "first time"/repetition. Quoting Heine's neat line: "It is an old story / Yet it always seems new" (*Le Discours amoureux* 54), Barthes is nevertheless aware of the spiral, the eternal return, the dialectic of difference, in the "first time" of love. This could be contrasted with his belief in the need to "create an unheard of language in which the form of the sign repeats itself (its voice, the signifier) but never the signified" (94). "The right to *I-love-you*" is Barthes's example, the ability to leave behind "*classification*, in order to reach in life itself the *shimmer* [*moire*] of the text, this is the key to the "dialectical work (to the success of amorous relations) ..., outside of the Imaginary, because it recognizes the value of a *praxis*, of a transformation" (94). In his otherwise sharp analysis of the seminar versions of the "I-love-you" section of *A Lover's Discourse* (147-55), Claude Coste (in "Brouillons du *Je t'aime*") does not mention the fact that Barthes combines, in a perfect counterpoint, the deeply singular personal declaration of love for the loved other, with the most political comments of the whole essay. Not only is "I-love-you" the longest section of the essay, it is also where Barthes sets out in paragraph 7 (151) – in a numbered presentational format typical of Hegel and then of the early Marx – the connection between Revolution and the 'absolute New' of love.

The notion of transformation is an important element in his 1957 essay "Myth Today," in which the "woodcutter" is posited by Barthes as a response to –

or a continuation of – Marx and Engels's metaphor of the cherry-tree in *The German Ideology*, whereby Barthes saw a direct praxis as the only area where myth could not take hold (*Mythologies* 172). Similarly here, the lover can *act*. However, that act of saying the immortal words "I-love-you" risks other dangers and traps. This is the "will-to-possess" that these words inevitably entail.

In *A Lover's Discourse*, it is the final section "*Sobria ebrietas*" (232-35) that supplies if not the solution, at least a happy coda. First, Barthes sets out the danger: «Realizing that the difficulties of the amorous relationship originate in [the] ceaseless desire to appropriate the loved being in one way or another, the subject decides to abandon henceforth all "will-to-possess" in [their] regard» (232, trans. mod.). This means even avoiding the "will-to-possess," insisting instead upon the "non-will-to-possess" (or "NWP"). It means to hold the "I-love-you" on one's lips, in one's mind, in order to avoid the compromises of both speech and affect, tantamount to some kind of solution to the complex dialectics of the play of love between subject and loved one. This seems to be a zero point in Barthes's argument, an all-or-nothing:

And if the N.W.P. were a tactical notion (at last)? If I still (though secretly) wanted to conquer the other by feigning to renounce him? If I withdrew in order to possess him more certainly? The reversi (that game in which the winner takes the fewest tricks) rests on a feint familiar to the sages ("My strength is in my weakness"). This notion is a ruse, because it takes up a position within the very heart of passion, whose obsessions and anxieties it leaves intact. (233)

This has an extraordinary resonance to his words in a letter sent from the Leysin sanatorium to Georges Canetti on 21 November 1945, in which he discussed at length the "Socratic debate on love" (*Album* 45):

Can one play the game halfway? For me that makes no sense. It is and it is not an act. One must risk everything and at the same time one risks nothing. It is an extraordinary sleight of hand and I'm sure the Greeks offered us an example similar to it in their way of believing—and not believing—in the gods. We know very well that through love we enter a universe where the concepts are no longer the same, where truth itself becomes amphibologic, etc., and what troubles us is finding in history, civilizations, literature, religion, etc., reflections of this reversed world that therefore no longer seems to us completely illusory; and that comforts us and confirms our thinking, our surmising that Love is only a myth in a system of fraternal myths pursued for so long by the historical world, and which return very often to tempt it through the impetuosity of their dream, through their truth, if you like. (*Album* 46)

The “internal dialectic” now suddenly resembles what Barthes called in a theorising of myth in 1954 the need for the demystifier’s “amorous dialectic” [dialectique d’amour] (“Phénomène ou mythe?” 953.) This “amorous dialectic” is not however exactly the “logical dialectic of love” that we saw above; but rather the description of the mythologist confronted with an object’s double reality, of its “phenomenon” on the one hand (Rimbaud the poet), and on the other the myth of Rimbaud (how the poet has been “consumed”). This “amorous dialectic,” based on a Lukacsian notion of reification and disalienation before the motility of myth, is nonetheless linkable to “the logical dialectic of love,” of human relationships, via the two areas that he had discovered in the Saint-Hilaire du Touvet sanatorium; namely Michelet, and the social pressures of living communally.

### **‘Double grasp’ versus Strabismus**

In the Saint-Hilaire sanatorium between 1942 and summer 1945, Barthes reads Jules Michelet’s huge *oeuvre* doubtless to pass the time, but also because he becomes fascinated with how the historian appears, in various ways and guises, in his works of historiography. There is an important echo of this fascination, in his writings on Michelet ten years later. In “Michelet The Walker” and “Michelet The Swimmer,” Barthes describes as a “double grasp” (*Michelet* 21-22, trans. mod.) the way in which the historian, by writing the past, manages to be the person who walks with the actors of History – the “people” –, blind (as it were) as to the outcome of their actions; it is a technique that uses a double form of writing which, suggests Barthes, involves “either the discomfort of progress or else the euphoria of a panorama” (22). Above all, it seems to him in 1954 that Michelet has squared the historian’s circle: being able, simultaneously, to be here *and* there, as both historiographer *and* partisan actor *in* History, at one and the same time, suggests a dexterity of writerly skill. This is Michelet’s *double grasp* [double saisie] or “double apprehension” (22). However, this double grasp has its obverse, its negative dimension, in Barthes’s experience of social life in the sanatorium.

In his “Sketch of a Sanatorium Society,” written in 1947 but published only posthumously, Barthes is rather candid, and rather rude, about life and some of the people in the sanatorium (as we saw above, briefly, in the case of Solliers in Leysin). What is striking in the opening paragraph of this proto-*Mythologies* piece is the “intolerable strabismus.” Here, in the sanatorium, the ability to see two

things at once – strabismus – that he had admired in Michelet’s “double grasp” of History, in the historian’s ability to be simultaneously *both* inside *and* outside, is now a curse (“intolerable”). By contrast with Michelet’s “double grasp” of History, the capacity to see oneself both *before* the onset of illness and simultaneously *in* one’s illness cannot be sustained:

In a sanatorium society everything conspires to return one to a situation defined and embellished with the attributes of an authentic society. The costs of this accumulation of artifice hardly matter, but first among them is considering as sufficient a society that is, alas, only parasitic. It is above all a matter of dissociating the consciousness of the ill person from the memory of not having been one; the junction of these two states would result in an intolerable strabismus. (*Album* 64)

In the sanatorium, one does not dare, Barthes is suggesting, to have a consciousness that looks in two directions; and we see a similar warning in Frédéric Goldbronn’s documentary (*Les fantômes du sanatorium*) that cites the correspondence with Philippe Rebeyrol in which Barthes councils strongly against thinking of one’s life elsewhere other than in the “sana.” The “intolerable strabismus” is a “double grasp” à la Michelet but of wholly negative use, if not mentally dangerous; and this strabismus has a fascinating return thirty years later in the 1974-1976 seminar on the “discourse of love” and the notes of which became, in very expurgated form, *A Lover’s Discourse*.

Here, his attitude is more ambivalent – neither positive in the way he seemed to be with Michelet’s “double grasp,” nor negative as in the “intolerable strabismus” associated with being in the sanatorium – but clearly linked to a “double” view on love. It involves a pure description of the elision between the seminar tutor, on the one hand, who describes objectively the language of love, but who at the same time is caught up, on the other hand, in the language of love:

They who speak here is a subject who *has spoken to themselves* the discourse of love, but who at the same time *speaks it to you*. It is within this duplicity, this strabismus, that there is the *almost zero* of difference between discourse (D) and amorous discourse (AD), or else the toing-and-froing between the stated [énoncé] and the utterance [énonciation]. (*Le Discours amoureux* 352, author’s original emphasis)

For Barthes, the seminar tutor, “placed in one of the institutional settings of knowledge,” the investigation of the discourse of love is a moment of “insecurity,” of “discomfort,” because the “stated” is shown to be in its “infinite return” to the

utterance. For personal reasons no doubt, Barthes uses an example which is close to him but not entirely his situation:

A psychoanalyst in love, or a teacher in love who is writing a thesis on Proust's Albertine or on heroines in Racine's theatre, etc., will have to go through this splitting of language. There will be a play of movement [jeu], a screeching caused by the friction between the two temporalities: between that of the internal text (the amorous text) and that of the external discourse being written: description, analysis, theorisation [...]. (352-353)

These two temporalities go directly back to Michelet's "double grasp," and to what Barthes called in a 1953 piece on Michelet and woman (not collected in his *Oeuvres Complètes*) a "dialectic of two temporalities" [dialectique à deux temps] ("Féminaire de Michelet" 1092-93). It is not just Marxian and Hegelian approaches that persist from his time in the sanatorium, from his radical years of the 1950s; it is also Michelet's "truncated" dialectic, the "amputated" dialectic of *Mythologies* (187), whereby for Barthes the mythologist a synthesised, three-part, dialectic was deemed impossible in a mass consumer society of myth that subtly and subliminally inculcated petty-bourgeois ideology into every area of cultural and political *praxis*.

## Conclusion

The conjunction of the personal consumption in love with that in Revolution does not stop Barthes alluding to their rivalry. In the 1977 *Playboy* interview with Philippe Roger, he seeks to differentiate love and revolution:

The lover is himself the site of a fierce investment of energy, and he therefore feels himself excluded from other investments of a differing nature. The only human being with whom he could feel complicity would be another lover. After all, it's true that lovers understand each other! But a political militant is, in his fashion, in love with a cause, an idea. And this rivalry is unendurable. On either side. I don't think a political militant could easily put up with someone madly in love. (*The Grain of the Voice* 302)

But this, in a way, is Barthes's point. Making the link between being consumed with love and totally devoted to the cause of Revolution in the same person on the one hand needs to be differentiated from passion and revolution *between* persons on the other. It is for this reason that, in the final instance, love and Revolution



have moments where they must be divided. Though neither can be done by half, love has implications for immediate social relations including language.

Marty's extreme example from *A Lover's Discourse* in which Barthes invokes the "heavy heart" (Barthes 52-3; Marty 214) allows him to show what Barthes is doing. Marty cites the preface to *Critical Essays* where Barthes inverts the usual expected role of literature, that of expressing the inexpressible (though not, states Barthes, through an intentional paradox). To "unexpress the expressible" (Barthes, *Critical Essays* xvii) is, in Marty's words, "by a conversion of alienated speech into a quotation, to empty it, to erode and neutralise it, allowing language a way out of the already-said. . .to reach possible forms of the zero degree of writing" (214). Not only does it suggest a strategy of opacity, it points to a new dialectic. Critical of the Marxist vulgate of the time as he is of the Lacanian one, Marty sees it as Barthes having set up a series of "reserves, gaps, detours" that avoids the naïve dogmatism of modernity's hardcore theoreticians.

But we also have shown here that not only Marx and Hegel but also Revolution plays a critical role in a Barthesian understanding of love, and that *A Lover's Discourse* is, potentially, not only Barthes's most psychoanalytical but also his most Marxist essay in that it stretches, contrapuntally, the dialectical and the amorous. So, has Barthes not shifted between 1946 and 1976? It is difficult –if not sacred– to be a revolutionary, as it is to be in love: but when there is love, Barthes is one. That is certainly a curious, but unmistakable, dialectic!

It is clear however that Barthes's dual conception of love – as both dialectical and outside of the hysteria of political language – makes his theories on love into forms of dissidence that challenge both political and 'affective' views of amorous relations. The life-writing that his correspondence from the Sanatorium years represents can be seen to prefigure, if not irrigate, the complex dialectical manoeuvres of his later treatises on the language of love that, in startling and critical ways, link being in love with radical political change. Indeed, Barthes's amorous love requires, radically and almost shockingly, the equivalent of total political commitment to revolution.

The final point is a question: does Barthes's intimate correspondence from 1945-1946 represent what *A Lover's Discourse* rejects, namely "an analysis" of love, a "psychological portrait" (3)? The replies to his letters to both Robert David and Georges Canetti do not exist (or not, at least, in the public domain), which undermines any "dialogue" in the ideas discussed. Either way, in both the

sanatorium letters and the 1977 essay *A Lover's Discourse*, it is the "loved object ... who does not speak."

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