

# Love as Morality: The Non-Will-to-Possess or the Utopia of Affectivity in Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*

Alexandru Matei

Department of Applied Modern Languages, Lumina – The University of South-East Europe, 64b, Colentina Avenue, Bucharest, Romania  
alexandru.matei@lumina.org

*A Lover's Discourse. Fragments is one of the most read text on love by the end of the twentieth century. Considered within the larger span of Roland Barthes's works, his Fragments are a sort of preview for the main affective utopia Barthes ever dreamt of: the Neutral, as closeness and distance at the same time. The main trigger of Barthes febrile research of the Neutral is his conception of an affect apt to be separated from power. Love without exerting any pressure on the other. One of its origins may be considered his own difference: being homosexual in a society deprived of institutions meant to shelter homosexual affection.*

Keywords: love / Barthes, *Roland: A Lover's Discourse. Fragments* / affect theory / language and power

Pour que la pensée du NVS puisse rompre avec le système de l'Imaginaire, il faut que je parvienne (par la détermination de quelle fatigue obscure?) à me laisser tomber quelque part hors du langage, dans l'inerte, et, d'une certaine manière, tout simplement : m'asseoir («Assis paisiblement sans rien faire, le printemps vient et l'herbe croît d'elle-même»). Et de nouveau l'Orient: ne pas vouloir saisir le non-vouloir-saisir. (Barthes, *OC*, V<sup>1</sup> 286–287)

One of the best known European texts on/about/with love written in the late twentieth century is *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (*A lover's discourse. Fragments*). Its author was, at that time, famous: no wonder the book

---

<sup>1</sup> We refer to the last edition (2002) of Roland Barthes's complete works as "OC" (from *Oeuvres complètes*) plus the number of the volume (I–V).

was an immediate best-seller and Barthes was invited by Bernard Pivot to appear in his television show. In 1977, in France, a new generation of “Nouveaux philosophes” emerged at the same time with a change in the intellectual agenda: a new revolution was no longer possible, as Sartre still thought it possible some years before (Judaken 87). Sartre was writing in a “Preface” to the Czech author Antonin Liehm’s *Trois générations*, aiming to denounce Soviet socialism, that “we should rethink without bias the European left wing, its objectives and its tasks in order to avoid the future Revolution to give birth to such a socialism” (quoted in Tepeneag 112).

In 1977, Barthes said to Bernard-Henri Lévy that “societies where revolution had won, I would call them *deceptive societies*” (Barthes, OC, V 375). Theory was giving way to other approaches of human realities, namely to a sort of neo-humanism, not entirely different of Ranjan Sarkar’s neohumanism that would “elevate humanism to universalism, the cult of love for all created beings of this universe” (Sarkar 18). It is worth noting that 1977 is also the year when Serge Doubrovsky invented the so to say “autofiction”: the subject of enunciation was back on stage, in his book *Fils* (Doubrovski 1977). Beginning with the mid-seventies, despite his fidelity to his structural intellectual formation, Barthes was increasingly stepping from a “science” of literature and from a militant theory to a more refined and more personal discourse, which we may call, by default, essay (Barthes, *Le Neutre* 202). Barthes felt the need to pinpoint the pathetic dimension of language (including theory) and the impossibility to overrule the link between truth (as language) and subjectivity. The semiologist was still alive, but the stakes had changed:

Signs are important for me only if they seduce or annoy me. They are never relevant for me in themselves, I have to have the desire to decipher them. I am not a philosopher (“herméneute”) (Barthes, OC, V 369)

Far from being a love panegyric, *A Lover’s Discourse* shows how such a discourse can be written. It is an essay or a treatise (Samoyault 627), neither scientific nor marketed for general public – as for instance the books of Alain de Botton (his first book is called *Essay in Love*, published in 1993). In his biography, Samoyault finds three instances of the originality of Barthes’s book, combined together: a *structural* disposal of two main elements (the subject who loves and the loved one, dynamic disposal which could be seen as a dance between those two partners), the use of *semiology* as a method of interpreting the figures of love, involving the lover and the loved one, and the influence of *imaginary* seen as the “projection of phantasms into writing.” (Samoyault 626) In his illuminating “Preface” to the seminar *Le Discours amoureux*, Claude Coste insists on the rehabili-

tation of imaginary in *A Lover's Discourse* as opposed to its denunciation in Lacan's psychoanalysis (Coste 40). Imaginary may well be a source of confusion, as it happened in *Mythologies*, but in the end it is the imaginary which forges our world. The *Fragments* are about and with imaginary, and Coste acknowledges that one does not have to distinguish, here, between the lover's words and the teacher's ones, between a general profile of the Lover and an autobiographical I, as they are co-substantial. Imaginary is here a source of writing, not a reason for deconstruction; reflexivity is part of the lover's discourse, and it equally addresses it. With a memorable sentence, Coste merges both voices, the professor's and the artist's, in only one: "The lover is an artist, at least potential, as he enjoys at the same time the power of the affect and the recoil force of every consciousness coincident with language." (Coste 44)

Love, as Europeans know it, binds us, hampers us and finally shows us, through the bias of suffering, how dissymmetrical a desire is in front of the possibility to possess its objects. Love as such ends in impotence. It surpasses us. That's why *The Lover's discourse* consists of fragments, as if the enunciator couldn't gather and *stand together*, as an autonomous self-sufficient subject. Each of these fragments talks about a "figure" of love, having the same structure: a name, an "enseigne" (emblem) and a "definition" (a short analysis) which changed, on way from the seminar to the book, into an "argument" (Coste 21).

The most provocative figure, the most obsessional of all late Barthes's works is that of *non vouloir saisir* (*non-desire-to-possess*), which merges with the notion of *neutral*. This is the shift Barthes operates between a European affect (love as will-to-possess, intimacy as the cry of the body itself, as he puts it) and the Neutral as what we could call a "utopian affect": an affect impossible for Europeans to feel (to live). This *Barthesian* love is in fact the utopia of *love without possession*: a feeling to be cultivated, as a spiritual exercise, a way towards an affective emancipation of the humans, much more difficult to de-scribe and to pre-scribe than the political emancipation of the consciousness of a unified subject.

Barthes opens his book with this sentence: "the lover's discourse is today of *an extreme solitude*." (Barthes, *A Lover's* 2) The sentence could be thought to be true only if one assigned it to something we could call, together with Barthes, metalanguage. We could take this sentence as the expression of author's regret noticing the absence of the *theme of love* in public discourses. But it would mean to lose the importance of the discourse from the syntagm "discours amoureux." This is why he undertakes a "dramatic method"; "the choice of a dramatic method, renouncing examples and relying on the only action of a first language." (Barthes *A*

*Lover's* 3) Notice the use of the last syntagm: the "first language" means the primitive language of love, as if in a "lover's discourse." All throughout his works, Barthes has been interested in renewing the core of a French human sciences discourse, and now he is doing it by subversion. Barthes paints a "structural portrait" of a lover. One could consider that he attempts to produce a simulation (the simulation of the lover's discourse) and he is a theorist as such if we admit Jean Marie Schaeffer's recent definition of theory. Jean-Marie Schaeffer warns us that theory is not a certain field of studies, cobbled from a certain version of close reading and some works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes; but:

In the serious sense of the word, a theory is a conceptual framework that "holds together" a field observation or experimentation by projecting them on a formal structure ... of general terms linked by relations of interdependence, so that, in the ideal case, any variation of any of the terms (as a result of the screening of a new empirical value) will result in a variation on the level of the relations between the whole set of its terms. (Schaeffer 77)

Despite the painstakingness of this definition, one may find here a project Barthes has never given up: what Barthes calls a "topique" (topical) of love, a sequence of empty "figures" or shapes everyone could fill in with her or his experiences. In other words: he tries to write love without the will-to-possess it as a *theoretical topic* ("philosophy of love"), as a *dramatic nexus* ("love story") or as a *transcendent value* ("love above all"). This is one technique of subverting the theme of love, for one has to "change symbolic system of our civilization; it is not enough to change its content ..." (Barthes, *OC*, III 526). Love is here neither the reference of a prescribed knowledge, nor the reason of a story. Not even the theme of an essay, even if critics had to use this label.

### **Love in language: a-definitional**

Barthes mocks allegedly any definition. Barthes reverts the imaginary of the word itself: when he writes "structural portrait" of a lover, he aims at "structuralism" as a theory, so to say to a metalanguage. He uses "structure" as "pigeonholed" ("cases" in French) in the figure called "Tutti sistemati": "I want, I desire, quite simply, a structure (this word, lately, produced a gritting of teeth: it was regarded as the acme of abstraction)" (Barthes, *A Lovers's* 45), as if he had succeeded in taming a former savagely theoretical notion.

The *Fragments* are of course part of a utopia, as every time when an enunciator denies what one cannot avoid. The "Introduction" to them is

but a preterition, as it cannot avoid asserting a certain idea of love. When Barthes denies the “analysis,” he still cannot avoid it; when he calls the “figures” of love “gymnastic figures,” and not rhetorical ones, he keeps writing. When he puts away the example, he gives literary references. In this respect, the *Lover’s Discourse* resorts to Barthes’s late devotion for “utopias of the self” (Andy Stafford, 144), which is neither entirely theoretical, nor only the rationale for an artistic program (as for instance that of writing a novel). In the end, what stops Barthes from becoming a theoretician of love is precisely what he calls “morality.” Morality, as it appears in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, is “even the contrary of moral” insofar moral stems from the will-to-possess of the prescriptive language, while morality would be “the way in which the body thinks in a state of language.” (Barthes, *OC*, IV 129). Love is not an idea – or a signified – but rather a form to be filled in by body moods or tempers (“humeurs”).

Barthes is also a nominalist when writing love: he conveys that what has an existence is not love, but the words, sentences, gestures people make are indexes of what may be called love. This is perhaps why Barthes decides to remove, among other twenty “figures” out of one hundred he discussed or figured out during the seminars he held at Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, precisely the figure called “Love” (Coste 28). He maintains in exchange “I love you,” and the detail is telling: his *Fragments* are not about Love as a whole picture. They do not intend to give an idea of what love is. They are about what love does to us, about what people do when they are in love, as they happen to coincide with language. He wants to avoid well-worn clichés, and puts “love” on the scene of discourse. He takes the whole phrase, *I-love-you*, as a language ready-made object: “*To love* does not exist in the infinitive (except by a metalinguistic artifice): the subject and the object come to the word even as it is uttered ...” (Barthes, *Le Neutre* 187).

A passage from Barthes’s late writings shines light on the distinction to be made between “love” and “I-love-you” as figures of “a lover’s discourse.” The meaning of the disappearance of the figure of “love” from the book could be grasped while reading in his book about a pair of trousers, in a catalogue presenting the works of Cy Twombly at an exhibition organized in Milan. His works would be pieces of “writing” at the extent of which a “written” object grasps it as a phenomenological donation (this phenomenological term is important, because Barthes comes back to a version of phenomenology in these late works), as an existence-for-the-viewer. In order to make his point clear, he compares it to a pair of pants.

What is the essence of pants (if there is such a thing)? Surely not that primed and straight-lined object one can find on hangers in malls, but rather that cloth chunk

fallen onto the floor, inattentively, by the hand of a teenager, when he takes off his clothes, exhausted, sluggish, indifferent. (Barthes, *OC*, V 704).

There is a materiality of things giving them a life, and what Barthes tries to do in his book is to design love as a *montage* of scenes in coalescence. The essence of them is a binding agent, not an “essence.” Love is something like a background, dissolved itself in words and gestures. “I love you” is a figure of love, while “love” is not. When do we say simply “love?” Never.

## Love non-narrative and a-hierarchical

The second betrayal would be the narrative. Love as put into language results more often in a love story. A love story as such has more to do with drama rules and with a set of love ideas, rather than with feelings in their strange dynamic. The choice is indeed harsh: in order to avoid “taking hold,” either of love as feeling or of love as a narrative, he cannot let himself become a character in a story, as if writing were the transparent medium of a self-evident truth (I as an incarnation of love). A narrative is but a version of a metalanguage:

[L]ove story subjugated to the grands narrative Other, to the general opinion which disparages any excessive force and wants the subject itself to reduce the great imaginary current, the orderless, endless stream which passes through him to a painful, morbid crisis of which he must be cured, which he must “get over” ... the love story is the tribute the lover must pay to the world in order to be reconciled with it. (Barthes, *A Lover's 7*)

The third pitfall for someone who wishes to write about love – or to write on lover's discourse – would be to assign love to a transcendent value. That is why the figures of love are not classified according to a supposed alignment to the “absoluteness” of love, but in a flat alphabetical order. Even we committed a mistake when we selected the “Non-vouloir-saisir” (No-Will-to-Power/NWP), as we unconsciously considered the last figure of this alphabetical order the most important as a symbol. Barthes wanted to “discourage the temptation of meaning.” In order to succeed, it was necessary to choose an absolute insignificant order. Hence we have subjugated the series of figures (inevitable as any series is, since the book is by its status obliged to *progress*) to a pair of arbitrary factors: that of nomination and that of alphabet (Barthes, *A Lover's 8*). Barthes conceives a “topique” of love, which does not impose a hierarchy. As a theory or as a story, love is outdated because it imposes an order. In both cases, there is a morality

underneath; it could not be avoided, because both a theory and a story conclude the same. Conceiving a “topique” of love has for Barthes at least one advantage: the same rules out the hierarchy. Without hierarchy, the distinction between the two discursive levels (meta- and its reference) is ruled out as well.

### **Non-will-to-possess as a utopia of affectivity. The Neutral**

The identification-with-the-subject is an illusion. Indeed, love acts in the title of the book as seduction. No wonder that this is Barthes’s best sold book during his lifetime (Coste 19). Love is in fact one of the most marketed words, and it is impossible that Barthes, as a semiologist, ignored this power exerted by the word. The book was written before his mother’s death; Barthes had no reasons to hide from social scene, as he would in the aftermath of October 1977. No doubt he wanted to widen his audience. At the same time, once the book became a media event, he tried hard to show that writing about love was far more important than “love.” Moreover, he wanted to show that “love” did not exist outside a discourse, putting it forward. Barthes knew that if he wrote a love history the morality he would aim at would be brought forth by to the story. Yet, Barthes rejected the idea of “fictional worlds,” as Thomas Pavel put it (Pavel 1989). If Barthes’s idea was to rebuild love throughout writing it, he also would replenish it. There are mythologies of love and Barthes is a mythologist. Hence, his project in *A Lover’s Discourse* is not different from his former project of *Mythologies*. Barthes is also a second-degree writer in search for a writing degree zero, and *A Lover’s Discourse* is, once again, consistent with his quest. What is new with this book has to be looked for elsewhere. This time, Barthes attempts not to deconstruct love, to sweep it as a bourgeois mythology. He realizes that love, as well as a lot of other “things” giving us pleasure or pain, things he enlisted in his *Mythologies*, are unavoidable. They are, in fact, part of our nature, because nature exists, even if not in that manner naturalism for instance tries to present it. Love does exist, it would be useless to deny love, to despise love, and to put instead a likely objective reason. There is no zero love degree, but this is only the starting point for a new quest: how can one feel (love) and restrain from taking hold of the loved one? This is the moment when simulating love acquires a new meaning: neither a theory (we could imagine a convincing preparatory course, “propédeutique”) nor a story.

Then, what? We should venture to say that for Barthes simulation is not only, and not primarily a way to render something intelligible (Schaeffer



62), but also a way to test it as a possibility. (Writing can be thus conceived as an experimental device.) In our case, what would be put on a trail, through writing, is a vivid love, which would not be at the same time a will to possess or a will to power. In Barthes's work, this affective paradox is given different names, but their eponym is the Neutral. Yet, we are not very happy with this term, as it is too wide, too ambiguous. Happily, it generates some more material or codified figures, as for instance the "wou-wei" (not-making). It appears in Barthes's course called *The Neutral*, where it is associated with the will-to-live. Barthes enlists three Occidental figures of Wou-Wei (of the Neutral), corresponding to three forms of language, or to "its 'moment,' its individuation, its kairos." (Barthes, *Le Neutre* 223) They are Leonardo da Vinci seen by Freud, Prince Andrew from *War and Peace*, and John Cage. Let us take a closer look at Cage. He is asked during an interview, reports Barthes, why is he always so passive, why does he restrain himself from wanting. Cage answers that he lets himself want things, but only that his will does not affect anybody. He can choose between chicken and beef in a restaurant, he says, as long as his choice doesn't bother anyone (Barthes, *Le Neutre* 224). This is of course an example to be easily misunderstood – in a moral sense, for instance, as one may not do to someone else what one doesn't like to be done to her or himself. Yet, it means also that *conatus* or *libido* may be conceived in the margins of the will to power.

What is in fact the aim of this treatise, avoiding metalanguage, narrative and hierarchy? The last figure of the book *Vouloir-saisir*, gives the key of Barthesian poetics. Barthes tried not to take hold onto love, writing it. He withdraws from wanting love. Even if he had had to leave language in order to simply elude power, this would have meant the loss of desire. But the non-vouloir-saisir does not mean purity, absoluteness, but let it go. Therapy.

Il faut que le vouloir-saisir cesse – mais il faut aussi que le non-vouloir-saisir ne se voie pas : pas d'oblation. ... Le NVS n'est pas du côté de la bonté, le NVS est vif, sec ... Que le Non-vouloir-saisir reste donc irrigué de désir par ce mouvement risqué: je t'aime est dans ma tête, mais je l'emprisonne derrière mes lèvres. Je ne profère pas. Je dis silencieusement à qui n'est plus ou n'est pas encore l'autre: je me retiens de vous aimer. (Barthes, *OC*, V 285–287)

## Conclusion

However, the figure of non-will-to-possess would not be so important in Barthes's treatise of love if it had not been for his (homo-)sexuality. Barthes's sexuality has been precluded or at least minimised by critics,



especially the French ones, not least because the writer himself did not want to make it explicit. Barthes resisted the temptation to keep a diary, he confessed it precisely while publishing a few pages of diary-attempts, entitled “Déliérations” in *Tel Quel*, in early 1979 (Barthes, *OC*, V 668-681). For the first time, the importance of Barthes’s sexuality was underlined by Tiphaine Samoyalt. In the aftermath of the most complete to date research in Barthes’s archives, she could assess how astonished were most of Barthes’s close friends when they read the text. Philippe Sollers confesses: “When I received the book, it was a surprise, because he unveiled a lot of things.” (Sollers 36). The fragments of the lover’s discourse do not show a pleasant image of love. Instead of a synonym of happiness, love is here an incessant source of anxiety, of mortification. The lover put on display is most of the time left alone, his wills aren’t fulfilled. The lover is the prisoner of unachievability suggested at a formal level precisely by the fragments. Barthes’s lifetime friend, Philippe Rebeyrol, wrote him in 1977: “I read slowly, after fifteen pages I suffer from overfeed. Homosexuality besieges me. Dangerous topic for heterosexuals, especially if they have an ambiguous vocation ... While reading your book, I felt like being introduced to a half-closed society, this is an initiation. Even if love is unique and eternal.” (Quoted in Samoyult 628).

Despite the uncommon openness of the *Lover’s Discourse*, despite its autobiographical content, what makes the actuality of that text is a vision of the lover as a *momentary subject* experiencing states of exception, and the ability to project on language those moments as onto a stage. Tired of rationalisations, Barthes wanted to catch not what love would be as ultimate pathos (it is death, as the Marquis has taught us), but the pool of love epiphanies. He is secretly following up the Sadian project: while de Sade wrote a structural sex treatise *avant la lettre*, in a time when everybody was discussing about love, Barthes was writing a love treatise at a moment when sex became an obsession for occidental societies. The non-will-to-possess would not only be what allows the lover to survive pathos, but the critical term to distinguish between love and sex.

#### WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. *Oeuvres complètes I–V*. Paris: Seuil, 2002.
- Barthes, Roland. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. (Translated by Richard Howarth). London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Barthes, Roland. *Le Neutre. Cours au Collège de France (1977–1978)*. (Texte établi, annoté et présenté par Thomas Clerc). Paris: Seuil IMEC, 2002.
- Coste, Claude. “Preface.” Roland Barthes, *Le Discours amoureux. Séminaire à l’Ecole Pratique des hautes études*. Paris: Seuil, 2007.

- Doubrovski, Serge. *Fils*. Paris: Galilee, 1977.
- Judaken, Jonathan. *Race after Sartre*. New York: SUNY Press, 2008.
- Pavel, Thomas. *Fictional Worlds*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Tepeneag, Dumitru. *Un roman la Paris*. Bucuresti: Cartea Romanesca, 1996.
- Samoyault, Tiphaine. *Roland Barthes*. Paris: Seuil, 2015.
- Sarkar, Raijan. *Neo-Humanism. Principles and cardinal Values, Sentimentality to Spirituality, Human Society*. Kolkata: Ananda Marga Publications, 1982.
- Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. *Lettre à Roland Barthes*. Paris: Therry Marchaisse, 2015.
- Sollers, Philippe. *L'Amitié de Roland Barthes*. Paris: Seuil, 2015.
- Stafford, Andy. *Roland Barthes*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015.

## Ljubezen kot krepost: *non vouloir saisir* ali utopija naklonjenosti v delu *Fragments* *ljubezenskega diskurza* Rolanda Barthesa

Ključne besede: ljubezen / Barthes, Roland: *Fragments ljubezenskega diskurza* / teorija čustev / jezik in moč

Eno najbolj znanih besedil o ljubezni, napisano v drugi polovici 20. stoletja v Evropi, je Barthesovo delo *Fragments ljubezenskega diskurza* (*Fragments d'un discours amoureux*). Še zdaleč ne gre za panegirik. Delo priča o možnosti, kako lahko *zapišemo* takšen diskurz. *Fragments ljubezenskega diskurza* je sestavljen iz fragmentov, kakor da se govorec ne bi mogel zbrati in se sestaviti kot avtonomen, samozadosten subjekt. Fragmenti govore o posameznih »figurah« ljubezni in so enako strukturirani: ime, *enseigne* (emblem) in »definicija« (kratka analiza), ki se je na poti iz seminarja v knjigo spremenila v »argument«. Najbolj provokativna figura, s katero se je Barthes obsesivno ukvarjal v svojih poznih delih, je *non vouloir saisir* (odsotnost želje po posedovanju), ki se staplja s pojmom *nevtralnosti*. Barthes oriše razkorak med evropskim afektom (ljubezen kot želja po posedovanju, intimnost kot krik telesa, ki se izrazi) in nevtralnostjo kot nečim, kar bi lahko poimenovali 'utopični afekt': afekt, ki je za Evropejce nemogoč. Ta *barthesovska* ljubezen je utopija *ljubezni brez posedovanja*: čustvo, ki ga je treba gojiti, gojiti kot duhovno vajo, kot pot k človekovi čustveni emancipaciji. Ljubezen v *Fragments* ne definira, ni hierarhična in ne narativna. *Fragments* govore o tem, kako ljubezen vpliva na nas, kaj ljudje počnemo, ko ljubimo, ko to po naključju sovpaše z jezikom. Figure se vrstijo po abecednem redu. S tem Barthes poudarja, da ni privilegirane figure. Vsaka figura ljubezni je

absolutna in vse so relativne, v jeziku. Ubesedena ljubezen je najpogosteje ljubezenska zgodba. Ljubezenska zgodba kot taka ima več opraviti s pravili dramatike in idejami o ljubezni kot pa s čustvi in njihovo samosvojo dinamiko.

Barthes v svojih delih različno poimenuje ta čustveni paradoks, toda eponim vseh poimenovanj je Nevtralnost. Kaj je pravzaprav cilj razprave, ki se izogiba meta-jeziku, narativnosti in hierarhiji? Zadnja figura v knjigi, *Vouloir-saisir*, je ključ do Barthesove poetike. Barthes si je prizadeval, da se pri pisanju ne bi oklepal ljubezni. Umaknil se je od želje po ljubezni. Četudi bi moral zapustiti jezik z namenom, da se izogne moči, bi to pomenilo izgubo želje. Toda *non-vouloir-saisir* ni čistost, absolutno, temveč spuščanje. Terapija.