

September Seminar 2019
NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP

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Barthes Between Literature and Lacan

A New Reading of *La Plaisir du Texte*

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In addition to its overwhelming multi-disciplinary premise, post-structuralist literary theory is fundamentally different from the traditional ways of literary criticism. There are five constitutive elements in general that distinguish theoretically-grounded literary studies from the traditional literary interpretation: (1) an archaeological pursuit of the truth or to be more precise human reality that is hidden in a variety of arrangements in different literary genres and their essential literary and creative values; (2) unequivocal antagonism with metaphysics and humanism; (3) the rise of the reader in literature that overrides the role of the writer as the creator of the text—the birth of the reader and the demise of the author; (4) the dissolution of fixed meaning, instead of fixing meaning, the author is bound to mixing meanings; (5) literariness, in this perspective, literary theory, as Michel Foucault once stated, is “a “practice of creativity” in itself a genre of so-called creative writing,” (Thomas, 2013, 16). The French theorist and critic, Roland Barthes subtly inaugurated a new method of theoretical critique by interweaving profound intellectual enquiry and creative writing with the publication of his master work, *The Pleasure of the Text* in 1973, for the first time in the history of modern literary criticism in the West that was started with, “the theoretical “revolution” in France in 1976—which has had a decisive impact upon the shape of literary studies today,” (Johnson, 2007, 340). *The Pleasure of the Text* is a collection of forty-six brief and rich aphoristic proclamations (*Pensées*). In order to understand the title of each piece, a reader has to return to the contents-page. The first thing that strikes a reader in reading a few sentences of the book is lack of clarity and structural and thematic coherence/cohesion, which turns the book into a literary text in its own right. This innovative style of theoretical and self-reflexive writing was flourished in 1960s and 1970s of the twentieth-century by French intellectuals associated with the literary journal *Tel Quel*. For this peculiarity and his eye for subversion of ‘common meaning’, Kristeva labeled Barthes as the ‘technician of social demystification’, “The author of *The Pleasure of the Text* was a technician of social demystification, an unpardonable fact! And he used eccentric language, perhaps,” (Kristeva, 1998, 89)

At the outset, on the basis of interaction between the text and the reader, Barthes divides literary texts in two groups, text of pleasure (readerly) and text of the *jouissance* (writerly). The basic interaction that brings to the reader pleasure or *jouissance* determines the mode and type of a text. Moreover, the readerly text belongs to the classical and traditional texts that are written in accordance with the accepted predetermined cultural and social encoding. Such social and cultural encoding is the source of the pleasure of the reader. By contrast, a writerly text is the

one in which a reader is wholly engaged to a degree that he/she might enjoy the text excessively even by the cost of undermining his existential stability as a subject. Barthes develops his theory of readerly and writerly texts in his later work *S/Z*. Barthes tries at the very beginning of the book to describe and categorize the 'pleasure' and 'bliss' (*jouissance*). In English translation of the book, pleasure is simply categorized as a feeling of pleasure whereas *jouissance* is delineated as a sum of (pleasure + bliss).

The *jouissance* is an important but a perplexing concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis. We don't have a single dictionary definition for this concept in Lacan oeuvre. Jacques-Alain Miller categorized at least half a dozen paradigms of this French term. Lacan preferred to keep the French term untranslated in other European languages for the lack of a satisfactory equivalent. The *jouissance* in Barthes' book seems to be problematic for it doesn't have an indisputable definition either, this problem is even greater in its English translation. In his posthumous *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*, Gustave Flaubert for example, defines *Jouissance*, as that "which carries the meaning of 'pleasure' in a general sense and of 'orgasm' in sexual one," (Flaubert, 1961, 67). This description seems to be inadequate when we consider the use of the concept in psychoanalytic discourse.

As hinted above, the *jouissance* is identified by Lacan in various types such as phallic *jouissance*, *jouis-sense* (the *jouissance* of meaning and signification, the *jouissance* of the Other (feminine *jouissance*), *jouissance* of the body and beyond the unconscious, the *jouissance* associated with the death drive, and so on. In any case, *jouissance* is a taste and an experience with its various degrees of intensity, it is like a Chinese medicinal herb called *schisandra chinensis berries* with five flavors: salty, sour, sweet, pungent, and bitter. Still, the core of this experience brings to the subject momentary veil for its fundamental lack and void from which desire takes its root. In other words, it carries the subject to touch the real, the impossible real. The *jouissance* marks the real and its presence in the text and comes about as a cut in the chain of signifiers that halts the infinite drifting of desire. Nonetheless, in his description of *jouissance*, Lacan takes his lead from Freud's theory of *the pleasure principle* and *beyond the pleasure principle*. The former is a principle whereby the whole mental and psychical apparatus is trying to reduce un-pleasure and maximizing pleasure. When this equilibrium is excluded, *the pleasure principle* is transgressed and as a result, the unconscious and *beyond the pleasure principle* take hold of the subject. In his *Seminar XXIII: La Sinthome (1975-1976)*, Lacan relates *the sinthome* to the transformation of the *jouissance*.

The *sinthome* is now linked to transformation of *jouissance* and the emergence of new nominations and significations. When one form of *jouissance* is stopped another *jouissance* is generated or attained. Castration is an indication of *jouissance*. Lacan's later work posits several types *jouissance*...Phallic *jouissance* as the second *jouissance* stops the first *jouissance* of the Other and the third Other *jouissance* stops phallic *jouissance* by not being all under the phallic function of the signifier but still under the NoF [the signifier of the name-of-the-father]. (Moncayo, 2017, 49)

What this suggests is that the concept of the *jouissance* (in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze & Guattari accuses psychoanalysis for the idealization of *jouissance*) still carries a degree of enigma. For Barthes the *jouissance* occurs beyond the pleasure principle where like Freudian parapraxes all cultural and social codes in discourse lend themselves to spontaneous raptures and discontinuities.

For him [Barthes] pleasure is not gratification, because what is gratifying is usually a confirmation of existing identity. On the contrary, Barthes posits another state which he calls '*jouissance*', an untranslatable French word usually rendered as 'bliss', but perhaps

having more of a sense of sexual ecstasy. *Jouissance*/bliss is a state of transport, an ecstatic loss of previous being. (Rylance, 1994, 82)

Barthes argues that a text which is written in pleasure—the pleasure of the writer—isn't enough to create pleasure in a reader, the pleasure rises from a locus in the text which he calls the 'site of bliss' (*jouissance*) as he writes, "A site of bliss is then created. It is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an unpredictability of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game," (Barthes, 1975, 4). What Barthes means here is the fact that each text is a field of morbid marks where desire comes into play. Desire comes into full swing when neurosis occupies that addresses or the sites of desire. Barthes singles out Bataille's works as a vivid example of a text which is "written against neurosis, from the center of madness," (*PoT*: 5). Such 'flirtatious texts' defines the writer as, "*mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am,*" (*PoT*: 6). What desires a reader in the text is writing or textuality, the science of blisses, "Writing is: the science of the various blisses of language, its Kama Sutra (this science has but one treatise: writing itself," (Ibid). Barthes further elaborates by this that in modern text writing and reading come together, because modern text is identified with a free-floating play of the signifiers, "writing/reading subject could be released from the straightjacket of a single identity into an ecstatically diffused self," (Eagleton, 1990, 141). For Barthes, writing was an open-ended heterogeneous process of signification, subverting meaning and the representation in language.

Meanwhile, Barthes exemplifies the modern text as the 'text of bliss', a text which is pockmarked by abrasions, gaps or unfillable holes in Lacanian sense. The *jouissance* comes not from the reading of the text as a whole or the integrity (narrative and structure) of the text. The will to bliss (*jouissance*) as Barthes emphasizes is the vigor and '*brio* of the text'.

What "happens," what "goes away," the seam of the two edges, the interstice of bliss, occurs in the volume of the languages, in the uttering, not in the sequence of utterances: not to devour, to gobble, but to graze, to browse scrupulously, to rediscover—in order to read today's writers—the leisure of bygone readings: to be *aristocratic* readers. (*PoT*: 13)

Another way of putting this argument is to say that the text of pleasure is a text which doesn't break with cultural codes and thus give the reader elation and 'euphoria', but the text of *jouissance* is the text where "the text imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language." (*PoT*: 14). As such the classical literature is by nature a matrix for the production of pleasure. The text of *jouissance* is on the other hand is the writerly text that often breaks the fabric and the integrity of language like Joycean text that Lacan explores in his *Seminar: XXIII*. Lacan catalogues the indexes of *jouissance(s)* in Joyce's text with the appearance and disappearance of the real in the text—the materiality of the text and discontinuities in the discourse that refuse to lend itself to symbolization. The real degenerates the flow of discourse and meaning in language by articulating lack, anxieties, neurosis and the all-embracing *jouissance*. In other words, the elements that disintegrate the constitution of the discourse and its structure, because the real is incompatible with language.

In all cases, *jouissance* is anomalous, foreign to the homeostasis of the organism and to the organization of semblants. It is disturbing, for it perturbs the pleasures that are called natural and the good order of things, which is that of discourse. (Soler, 2014, 127)

The understanding and unmasking of the index of the real offer the *jouissance* to a reader. Thus, the index of the real in the text is the index of the *jouissance*.

Thus, the text takes charge of the real just as a spider's web takes charge of the space that organizes and in which it unfurls its trap. The writing of a single letter is an action that resolves the relationship to the object in its own way by effacing its seal with its nameless breach in which the real resides. (Leclaire, 1999, 322-323)

Barthes argues that in a historical and evolutionary context, the text of the *jouissance* is the development of the text of pleasure which makes the former the more, supplementary, and the extremity of the latter. The discontinuities, cuts, contradiction in language demarcate these two fields. However, textual breakdown, aporias, ecstatic writing, semantic and syntactic opacities have a very long history, we can find elements of the text of *jouissance* in pre-Socratic writing, mystical discourse in all cultures, Shakespeare, and so on.

The text of bliss [I prefer the text of *jouissance* in English translation] is merely the logical, organic, historical development of the text of pleasure; the avant-garde is never anything but the progressive, emancipated form of the past culture: today emerges from yesterday, Robbe-Grillet is already in Flaubert, Sollers in Rabelais, all of Nicolas de Stael in two square centimeters of Cézanne. (*PoT*: 20)

In his exhausting discussion of the texts of pleasure and *jouissance*, Barthes refers to psychoanalysis and especially Lacan who considered the *jouissance* incompatible with words but a text capable of expressing pleasure. It is an account of Lacan's notion of the *jouissance* as unspeakable which Barthes insists that it is barred from the speaker. We can trace it between the lines, extra-linguistic expressions, aporias, and signification or its lack in the text. For Barthes, Leclaire's definition was of utmost importance apropos this issue as he quotes, "...Whoever speaks, by speaking denies bliss, or correlatively, whoever experiences bliss causes the letter—and all possible speech—to collapse in the absolute degree of the annihilation he is celebrating." (Leclaire cited in Barthes, 1975, 21). Thus, writer of pleasure can express it through his words and traditional literary criticism may be dealing easily with this type of texts produced by writers such as Flaubert, Proust, Stendhal and others. Writer of the *jouissance* on the other hand, cannot tell about it but express it by indirect fashion. In this respect a text for Barthes is like a 'fetish' that selects and desires a reader. But the author as an 'institution' is dead which makes *to write*, especially a text of *jouissance* is an intransitive verb.

The *jouissance* of the text has asocial character and through the moments of its arrival, the subject is losing its subjectivity and even whole being temporarily as the *jouissance* of the Other or mystical *jouissance* bears evidence. The repetition in the text also allows for *jouissance* and Barthes gives the example of the discourse of the mystics. He also mentions the paradigms from ethnographic rituals like the excessive use of sacred incantation, "litanies, rites, and Buddhist *numbutsu*, [ecstatic chants in Buddhism meaning I take refuge in Buddha] etc.: to repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into zero of the signified," (*PoT*: 41). The closest feeling to the experience of *jouissance* is fear but only the extreme perversion is able to define the *jouissance*—an extreme continually shifted, an empty, mobile, unpredictable extreme," (52). In the meantime, pleasure of the text isn't bound to please us for the second time, for it is "a friable pleasure, split by mood, habit, circumstance, a precarious pleasure," (Ibid) as psychoanalysis demonstrate.

Philosophy or as Barthes terms it in his book, 'political policeman' and 'psychoanalytical policeman' as always takes on the pleasure of the text, for former pleasure is a useless passion and the latter sees at the roots of pleasure prevailing guilt. Desire stands as a rival to pleasure. "Desire has an epistemic dignity, pleasure does not," (*PoT*: 57). The society reject bliss and the only thing that counts for it is the law and what people doesn't know is the fact that it is

“Desire—only pleasures,” (58), as Lacan insists in *Seminar V: Formation of the Unconscious*, the subject is by no means able to satisfy desire but draw pleasure from desiring itself. The text offers resources for the reader as a desiring subject who wants to sustain desire for the survival of its existence. In his book, Barthes develops this idea while showing the ways how a reader as subject steps beyond the boundary of desire—the preverbal field—that finds its place in the text of the *jouissance*.

The Pleasure of the Text is in part the story of how he came to replace the syntactic model by a ‘stereophony’ of unattributed voices overheard in a café, making him in a living text, and to ignore Oedipal conflicts to the benefit of pre-oedipal semiotic impulses. He had been a dubious sender of messages; he now was an undoubted reader. Instead of the ‘indifference’ of science, he now had the pregnancy of desire, an infinitely rich silence from which anything could be born. (Ravers, 2005, 153)

Barthes’ theoretical constructs fit well in Lacan’s ideas about the subject, desire, lack, identification, perversion, etc. The following passage, for example, reiterate the logic of the mirror stage and the identity of the preverbal subject. Such a theoretical interaction is growing rigorous when Barthes rounds off his booklet:

Then perhaps the subject returns, not as illusion, but as fiction. A certain pleasure is derived from a way of imagining oneself as individual, of inventing a final, rarest fiction: the fictive identity. This fiction is no longer the illusion of a unity; on the contrary, it is the theatre of society in which we stage our plural: our pleasure is individual—but not personal. (*PoT*: 62)

When we scrutinize the text that gives pleasure to the reader, the reader finds in it its peculiar individuality not ‘subjectivity’, the reader encounters his body with suffering and pleasure (*jouissance*) where the interaction between the ‘cultural pleasure’ and the ‘non-cultural *jouissance*’. In a more complex language, Barthes categorizes the responses of the neurotic, fetishist, obsessive, paranoiac, and hysteric apropos the text of pleasure.

At the last pages of the book, Barthes explicates the text as a tissue and a final objective product, “a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth). This is the truth that I in reference to Lacan highlighted as something always hidden in the text that calls for its discovery. The subject is the one that like a spider, “dissolving in the constructive secretion of its web,” (*PoT*: 64). The pleasure of the text is a value that is bestowed upon “the sumptuous rank of the signifier.” (65)

The notion of *jouissance* in *La Plaisir du texte*, or in *S/Z*, those of the ‘symbolic code’ structuring sexuality and the ‘circularity’ of metalanguages, are all extremely Lacanian...In all of these cases, Lacanian concepts are re-contextualized within a rather different overall theoretical framework, (Ravers, 2005, 2011)

The idea that Barthes raises in the last two pages of the book is the notion of ‘*writing aloud*’ as a carrier of the textual *jouissance*: Barthes aim is to illustrate the text of *jouissance* inscribed in his own writing.

In antiquity, rhetoric included a section which is forgotten, censored by classical commentators: the *actio*, a group of formulae designed to allow for the corporeal exteriorization of the discourse: it dealt with a theater of expression, the actor-orator “expressing” his indignation, his compassion, etc. *Writing aloud* is not expressive: it leaves

expression to the pheno-text, to the regular code of communication; it belongs to the geno-text, to significance; it is carried not by dramatic inflections, subtle stresses, sympathetic accents, but by the *grain* of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language, and can therefore also be, along with diction, the substance of an art: the art of guiding one's body (whence its importance in Far Eastern theaters...A certain art of singing can give an idea of this vocal writing...so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss). (*PoT*: 66-67)

Let us conclude by examining what Barthes is going to tell us in his last words of the book. Barthes tries to conclude his theory of *jouissance* or to be more precise portray a three-dimensional perspective of *jouissance* in a text by *writing aloud*. He speaks of *jouissance* (contrasting pleasure as hinted earlier, *jouissance* cannot speak and if it tries to speak it would be in this way that Barthes writes in the above passage) throughout the book in reference to texts by Sade, Bataille, Artaud, and Sollers.

Barthes significant point is the bliss is possible because the self returns to something like its original equilibrium. He posits a "living contradiction": a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys. (Rylance, 1994, 82)

This last passage is like a fragment of Artaud's drama where writing flows with a cacophony of ecstatic melodious sounds related to the substance of language—the free play of the signifiers in a poetic composition including rapturous bodily reverberations, echoes, digressions, blanks, trans-linguistic depictions, the margins of the text, where the subject disappears and dissolves in an excessive pleasure—the *jouissance* in the text. For Derrida, an outburst of the extreme pleasure in Artaudian drama was considered as the sudden and free overpowering of life. As examined here, Lacan and his theories makes the layout of Barthes's discourse in *The Pleasure of the Text* (essentially was written in response to Kristeva's pre-verbal semiology) as his other works namely, *S/Z*, *A Lover's Discourse*, *Camera Lucida*, and so on. Unlike an elusive self-unifying pleasure of the text, *jouissance* in text for Barthes provide his last example of *writing aloud* is dispersing the self in an ecstatic eruption of extreme pleasure and non-pleasure. As Susan Sontag writes in an introduction to a selection of Barthes' works, Barthes observed literature the opposite way of Sartre who insisted on an ideological commitment in literature. Barthes in his late works is the most radical Lacanian who saw literature as the playground of desire that persists and slide along the chain of signifiers in literary discourse. He saw desire as the driving force behind literature, reading, and writing. His own writing was a playful portrayal and a collection of transparent expression of desire, showing themselves in a joyous trauma of a loss (the loss of being) in text where we can easily separate voluptuous and refractory aspects. A similar signifying process is at work in writing and the critical theory insofar as literary and aesthetic values are concerned. However, the core of Barthes' theory remains like the psychoanalytic exegesis of the subject, the *I* as Lacan argues a desiring *manqué-à-être* (lack-of-being).

Barthes more and more entertained an idea of writing which resemble the mystical idea of *kenosis*, emptying out. He acknowledged that not only systems—his ideas were in a state of melt—but the "I" as well has to be dismantled. (True knowledge, says Barthes, depends on the "unmasking of the 'I'"). (Sontag, 1993, xxxvi)

Looking at the trajectory of Barthes' thought in *The Pleasure of the Text*, the whole book is structured by a spiral transposition of pleasure and *jouissance* in relation to literature and writing. This pattern of configuration of the conscious pleasure and the unconscious ecstasy is

excessively repeated almost in every paragraph. This pattern, especially the ecstatic writing—the text of *jouissance*—rises to a crescendo in the last two pages of the book.

Notes

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