

NOTES

¹Abram Tertz, *Golos iz Khora* (London: Stenvalley Press, 1973), pp. 338. All subsequent references are to this edition. All translations are mine.

²A. Siniavski, *For Freedom of Imagination* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1971), p. xvii.

B/Z and S/Z

There are some books which become essential reading by their own manifest importance, and others which become essential reading because of the critical acclaim with which they are received, and the second category can be independent of the first. In the five years since *S/Z* was first published, in French, I have sometimes wondered whether the fortunes of the book, now appearing in a first-rate translation by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), are due to its intrinsic merit, or to the press it has had. What puzzled me about the critics' reception was the unanimity with which Barthes's essay was hailed, in literary and philosophical reviews all over Europe, by reviewers whose primary interest was not literary criticism. Yet the truth is that Barthes's book is difficult reading, rewarding if you persevere, but discouraging, one would have thought, to anyone not familiar with the language of semiology, or not addicted to the critical examination of texts.

Why should a meditation on a little known *nouvelle* of Balzac command the attention of so many readers—readers who, one imagines, are not fervent followers of Balzac (Balzacians have on the whole been reticent about *S/Z*, and we might have witnessed a repetition of the confrontation of new and old criticism which revolved round Racine in the mid-sixties)? Because Barthes's essay is not simply an exegesis of Balzac's *Sarrasine*. It is a meditation on the nature of reading, sustained by a phrase by phrase (more accurately, *lexia* by *lexia*) commentary on how an alert reader decodes Balzac's text. The commentary is frequently interrupted by short passages (numbered I-XCIII) in which Barthes scrutinizes the aspect of the reading process which is involved in the phrase under review. Why *Sarrasine*? Barthes's own explanation is disappointing: "Why? All I know is that for some time I have wanted to make a complete analysis of a short text and that the Balzac story was brought to my attention by Jean Reboul" (p. 16). Reboul's article, in the psycho-analytical *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* is not the sort of thing literary critics read as a matter of course (it was not even spotted by the regular Balzac bibliographers), any more than *Sarrasine* is a story nonspecialists would read as a matter of course. I suspect that Barthes was attracted to *Sarrasine*, once he had discovered it and read it, because he recognized subconsciously that it would provide him with the possibility of writing a book on literature which would be an illustration of its own principles. (Chance?

"But what is chance?" writes Barthes, noting that "the title and the first sentence of the story have already provided us with the five major codes under which all the textual signifiers can be grouped," pp. 18-19). It is remarkable that the "divagations" (Richard Howard's happy term, p. x), which are determined by the content of Balzac's story, add up to a powerfully coherent statement. Although each section starts from the commentary immediately preceding, rather than from the previous section, they frequently develop further points already made, and there is never any sense of the author's having to think through, or refer to ideas which the reader is not prepared for. And it is certainly not by chance that the central divagation (the 47th of the 93) is the one which explains the enigmatic title *S/Z* ("The title raises a question," Barthes writes elsewhere (p. 17) of Balzac's title, *Sarrasine*).

Another reviewer has indicated the appropriateness of Balzac's story on castration as an accompaniment to an essay which teaches us that behind the words on the printed page there is nothing that has independent existence. Significant too are the formal parallels between Barthes's essay and Balzac's story. Barthes defines the subject of *Sarrasine* thus: "A man in love, taking advantage of the curiosity evidenced by his mistress about an enigmatic old man and a mysterious portrait, offers her a contract: the truth in exchange for a night of love, a narrative in exchange for a body. After having attempted to bargain her way out of it, the young woman agrees: the narrative begins; but it turns out to be the story of a terrible disease animated by an irresistible contagious strength; carried by the narrative itself, this disease ends by contaminating the lovely listener and, withdrawing her from love, keeps her from honoring the contract. Caught in his own trap, the lover is rebuffed: a story about castration is not told with impunity" (p. 212-3). In other words, Barthes does not divide "frame" from "story," and put them in order of priority, he sees the two as interacting and together making the total statement, which is ultimately about the telling of a particular story. "*Sarrasine* is not the story of a castrato, but of a contract; it is the story of a force (the narrative) and the action of this force on the very contract controlling it" (p. 90). Likewise we should not choose one half of Barthes's own book at the expense of the other, it is about the reading of a particular work of fiction, and it is only when we later sort out our own reaction to the book that we classify the material and perhaps arrange it according to our own hierarchy of significance.

Barthes resolutely refuses to impose any such implied judgments of value on *Sarrasine*. His concern is to articulate the different codes present in the text. The raw material is here, he says, for a critic of whatever persuasion (VIII). In saying this, there is the inference that by taking one approach rather than another, a critic is impoverishing the text. The only honest reading is one which is open to all the suggestions. I believe that Barthes is quite right in his insistence that our reading (and our rereading—divagations IX and LXXI are excellent on this) should be open to as many of the text's implications as we can sense. Barthes's concern is to demonstrate plurality, and so he keeps his elements in the order in which we come across them as we read Balzac's story. That this kind of reading should precede interpretation is to me beyond dispute. But, I would argue, just as the unified work of art represents an attempt to reduce to order the infinite conflicting possibilities available through experience, so we inevitably try to group and order the varied concepts we entertain as we read. The impoverishment comes when we concentrate on some elements to the exclusion of others, and ideally we should ignore nothing. "The object of semantics should be the synthesis of meanings, not the analysis of words" (XL). It is difficult to leave our recollection of every book we read in the state of rich confusion evoked by Barthes's essay.

Barthes himself, we may note, cannot cover everything, and he has been taken to task by Pierre Barb ris, writing as both a neo-Marxist and a *balzacien*, for giving more attention to sex than to history (*Ann e balzacienne*, 1971). Barthes, who is excellent on the Roman element in the tale, and on the symbolic ramifications of the castration motif throughout the whole story, is rather reticent about the Parisian "frame," failing to note the precise significance of the choice of the Faubourg Saint-Germain as the setting. If the listening marquise "remained pensive" at the end of the narration, because of the disturbing sexual overtones of the tale, provoked by her curiosity concerning the beauty of an Adonis hanging in a sideroom, the reader can be pensive for another reason—because the tale also answers another enigma, that of the origin of the wealth of the Lanty family, an enigma which precedes the theme of the mysterious old man, once a beautiful castrato boy.

Barb ris also taxes Barthes with inconsistency in his references to other works of Balzac. In divagation XC, Barthes speaks of novels involving the marquise, without saying that her connections with these works were forged many years after the publication of *Sarrasine*. Yet Barthes does not look for other parallels with Balzac's writings—structural or linguistic—and these were explored with considerable finesse by Pierre Citron, also in *L'Ann e balzacienne* (1972). This is a dispute about method, not performance. Barthes could argue that he chooses to discuss only the market produce, the printed text, *Sarrasine*, a part of the *Com die humaine*.

There is no doubt that Barthes has many illuminating things to say about the text itself. He has a good eye for parallels between characters, and for the way characters fall into suggestive groups. There are many penetrating comments on the way the theme of castration permeates the whole work; on the complex relationship of the various artistic representations of La Zambinella with the narration itself; on the way the narrative yields its meaning only gradually, and the degree to which this can be attributed to the deliberate intentions of narrator as a character—or to the nature of the discourse itself (in particular to the obstacle presented by the agreement of adjectives in the French language, which force the writer to choose between the masculine and the feminine at a time when his reader should still be in doubt as to the sex of the object of Sarrasine's affection).

Barthes's own essay is however less concerned with interpreting *Sarrasine* than with developing a diagnostic of reading. A literary text is marked by the interpenetration of five codes. Barthes makes a distinction, which has become famous, between "le scriptible" and "le lisible" ("writerly/readerly" is the translation). In the writerly text, an author forces the reader to cooperate, to create the experience. "The writerly is what can be written (rewritten) today" (p. 4), a definition which begs many questions, including the status of the brackets round *rewritten*. The readerly text, on the other hand, gives the reader a passive experience, as if predictability brings comfort. To Barthes, the classic (classical?) text is the readerly text par excellence. It is however not clear whether this is simply the inevitable fate of a text which was once challenging, or whether a welcome change in the nature of literature has taken place recently. Balzac's reliance on the "cultural code" is condemned, and this seems no more than a new way of formulating a reproach often felt, but on other occasions, elements of the writerly in Balzac's *nouvelle* are discerned and praised. The allusions to the "writerliness" of modern literature do lead us to believe, however, that there is a built-in superiority in recent writing. Barthes's final pirouette characterizes Balzac's text as "good readerly." The concluding phrase of *Sarrasine* ("And the Marquise remained pensive") is an "infinitely open phrase which cannot be classified," says Barthes.

"Like the Marquise, the classic text is pensive: replete with meaning (as we have seen), it still seems to be keeping in reserve some ultimate meaning, one it does not express but whose place it keeps free and signifying At its discreet urging, we want to ask the classic text: *What are you thinking about?* but the text, wilier than all those who try to escape by answering: *about nothing*, does not reply, giving meaning its last closure: suspension" (p. 217). Such an ending must make Barthes's reader pensive, too. (Another example, perhaps, of the way the Balzac *nouvelle* Barthes has chosen supplies in the right place all the elements Barthes's essay requires.)

The demonstration is inseparable from the basic message. The first nine divagations, which precede any mention of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, are hard going. Barthes makes no concessions; as Richard Howard says in an enthusiastic and helpful preface to the new translation, Barthes's text is itself "writerly"; "this criticism is literature. It makes upon us strenuous demands, exactions" (p. xi); (Howard's style betrays Barthes's influence there). Some of these developments are wrapped up in abstraction and jargon. I find that the book improves markedly when the abstraction is complemented by the precise commentary, enabling us to solve puzzles by referring to the context which has provoked the initially puzzling remark. Barthes has a gift of finding the telling image. His short section on the use of historical characters (XLIV), which says elegantly and concisely what Marceau and others have said before him, includes this: "Yet if they [historical characters] are merely mixed in with their fictional neighbors, mentioned as having simply been present at some social gathering, their modesty, like a lock between two levels of water, equalizes novel and history" (p. 102).

There are many perceptive remarks of general relevance. In connection with the frequent references to artistic models, Barthes develops (in fragments) a theory of realism, which copies reality already depicted according to a code (XVI, lexia 25, XXIII, XXV, XXXV, LII, LXXII etc). This adds up to a thorough demolition of nineteenth-century realism. Other ideas develop a theory of character. A character is created when "identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it" (XXVIII). Characters are "types of discourse" (LXXVI). The name denotes a figure (XLI), not a person (who has moral freedom). A character's freedom is restricted by the discourse's instinct for preservation, but this must be concealed from the reader (LVIII), hence the concern of the "readerly" text with plausibility. A discourse lies as little as possible—just as much as is required to ensure the interests of reading, that is, its own survival (LX). The discourse is therefore governed by the reader's interests, and the writer can be compared to a public scribe (LXIV). Character and discourse are each other's accomplices (LXXII). There are other scattered remarks on double meanings (a positive meaning addressed to the reader, LXII), on decoding euphemism (the criticism that he is "reading things into the text" is answered by pointing out that "the literality of a text is a system like any other" (LII)). There is an interesting section on the impossibility of conveying a total impression of beauty by descriptive writing (LI).

But to isolate remarks in Barthes's text is to do him the disservice which he is himself unwilling to do to other writers. Despite one's suspicion of the critical fashion for new criticism, and despite certain obstacles in Barthes's manner which one fancies are not essential to his message (he is not really any less readable than F. R. Leavis), *S/Z* is worth the attention of anyone concerned with the reading of fiction. It can hardly fail to increase the reader's awareness of what he is doing, and

hence his responsibility. A dose of Barthes is certainly good for anyone interested specifically in modern fiction. But it would probably be better if such a person could treat Barthes's assumptions about the intrinsic superiority of modern fiction with some skepticism. We do not have to hold naive views on realism to allow Balzac (and others) into our Pantheon.

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