Sensationalism

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Abstract

Roland Barthes's fascination with discourse is usually considered a glorification of intellectual exchanges, the parade of a virtuoso eager to display his unalloyed dedication to logocentrism. As a consequence, scholars tend to rely on his writings as if they were principally a catalogue for the functional concepts of modernity.

The purpose of this article is to show through a close reading of Barthes's latter-day texts that his exhilarating verbal brio is first and foremost a sensuous relationship between the speaking subject and the verbal substance. In his case, this particular relationship generates a discourse akin to physical heroism, thanks to which the subject is able to postpone the debilitating irruption of «intractable reality.» Barthes, as writing subject, transforms what is a mere tool of communication and argumentation into an overwhelming sensuous machine producing a symbolic make-believe, which, in turn, makes him «more and better alive.»
SENSATIONALISM*

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To eat an A, a B, a C, a D...made out of a sort of spongy and whitish substance, endowed with their own flavor as well as with the aroma of the beef-broth; to eat them one after the other—recognizing each individual sign—or by the heaping spoonful, as a large and indistinct body, isn't this to indulge oneself in a process akin to wizardry, to savour the fruit from the tree of knowledge, to absorb the very imagery of the unknown and become like a god?'

Michel Leiris. Biffures.

What is significance? It is meaning insofar as it is sensually produced.'
Roland Barthes. Le Plaisir du texte.

«There is nothing like instinct. Fortunately.»
Ogden Nash. «Versus»

When, in Fragments d'un discours amoureux, Barthes writes: «The Beast—spellbound by his own ill-looking appearance—loves the Beauty, the Beauty, of course, does not love the Beast, but at long last, conquered (it does not matter by what; let's say, by her

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conferences with the Beast) says the magic words: 'I love you, Beast...',' his parenthetical remark reveals more than is explicitly said. In fact, hidden behind the seemingly «anodyne» presentation of the parenthesis is a perlocutory stratagem which prompts the reader to think that the «unnatural» seduction is a direct result, a pure effect of the discourse. This scriptural artifice conceals how much the mythical framework owes to an unconscious which is not yet «structured as a language» but which functions instead as a fairy tale. The primeval myth of the Beauty and the Beast, intertextually retrieved in this fragment under the form of a drama cum personae, simply realizes the cancellation of a binary pattern in which polar opposites merge through the consummation/dissolution of their differences.

Nevertheless, in all the stories conforming to the myth, this communion is traditionally accompanied by a large dispersion of energy, and this brutal liberation of force is expressed in terms of quivering flesh, glittering eyes and general exhilaration of the senses (cf. in the well-known story of Pan and the nymph—a variation on the basic myth—the scene of seduction can only be described in terms of «bestial passions»). But the re-framing of the story in the Barthes's version is intertextually blurred, scrambled and made dependent on another story in which discourse plays an essential role in the taming of the Other; yet of an Other who does not belong to this world since seduction per se does not belong to our world. It is primarily phantasmatic and can only be mediated through the language of myth. As two of Freud's followers put it: «Seduction is essentially not a fact, since it is difficult to replace it in the subject history; it is but a structural given which can only be transposed in history under the form of a myth.» In the overdeterminative story which functions continuously in the collective unconscious, and therefore in the sociolect (the myths' graveyard within the boundaries of which they circulate freely and intermingle playfully), the taming (and seduction) of the Other is above all a delaying action which retards the passage of the subject into something-Else.

The story in question, as one might have guessed, is The Arabian Nights (Alf Layla Wa Layla). Scheherazade uses her discursive powers to dazzle the sultan Shahriar, but, instead of her becoming the object of fascination, only the story line does. Discourse, then, is not the means of carrying out a seduction. In fact, it is quite the opposite since discourse «undoes» the fatal link
between the two main characters. Furthermore, discourse does not link Schererezade to the sultan but to her younger sister Dinarzade. The sultan is thus only indirectly captivated (although this is the main purpose of the two sisters’ ploy). The seduction of Schererezade by Shahriar is regulated by an impersonal bloody ritual in which they participate passively and from which any overwhelming sentimentalism is excluded. According to the ritual’s rule of law, the sultan is obliged every night to marry a different girl whom he «dutifully» executes the following morning, repeatedly avenging himself for his first wife’s unfaithfulness. The conditions governing Schererezade’s arrival at the palace are the same as those established for the previous «one-night» wives, and the French translator, Galland, takes extreme care to make perfectly clear that the marriage is celebrated and consummated before the midnight entrance of the younger sister. Since Schererezade is unable to finish her story before morning—not a very effective linguistic sedative, since it is intended to put Dinarzade to sleep—, her execution is postponed until the next day. The same ceremonial, including the consummation, is repeated night after night. Thus, in *The Arabian Nights*, the physical relationship between Schererezade and Shahriar is outside the realm of discourse, governed by an implacable court (not courting) protocol. Given the purely mechanical nature of sexual activity, the utterance «I love you, -bloody-Beast...» is pointless since the sexual contract is based purely on obligation and duty. The only meaningful effect of discourse is to delay repeatedly the ineluctable fate: death. In this case, the function of discourse (as related to death) is analogous to that of music when one is faced by a cobra: it prevents the cobra from striking. The intertextual contamination of the Beauty and the Beast story by the main theme of *The Arabian Nights* is made all the more readily since in popular phantasmagoria a beast often plays the allegorical role of Death (cf. Leviathan, the great sea-monster of Jewish legend).

Following carefully the demonstration outlined above, an observant reader may consider that our initial hypothesis of an intertextual «scrambling» in Barthes’s re-writing of the Beauty and the Beast myth only creates confusion. But, if that is the case, how can any reader understand that in the fragment the discursive capacity is attached to the potential victim (Beauty) of the seduction and not to the seducer? It is therefore necessary to recall the model offered by *The Arabian Nights* since there Death, the poten-
stial seducer, is kept away by the discursive incrementation of its designated victim.

In fact, our hypothesis explains the deviance in Barthes's reformulation of the tale; it is our contention that the uncanniness resulting from this apparent contradiction in the text reveals the value and significance that Barthes gives to discourse per se. Although it could initially be asserted that the confusion between the lover and its Other is a recurring element of Barthes's rhetoric, here the straightforward antilogy indicates that we are confronted with something more fundamental. Barthes has to negate the ready-made image (provided by the great image-reservoir of the sociolect) of the elementary «bestial» Beast and instead has to place «him» into a locutory context so as to affirm the central value of discourse in his own imaginaire and the ambiguity attached to it. The Beast is cast here in the same mold as the beast in Baudelaire's poem «Léthé»: «She» represents both the Other and Death. The poem is a funeral hymn taking the form of a declaration of love and it alone, as discourse, separates the poet from his fatal destiny. As long as the poet speaks, he escapes his demise. When «all is said,» then, unavoidably, the différence (the deferring) is nullified; no evasive action is possible anymore and the subject is reduced to quia and must accept physical destruction.

This is exactly what our fragment of a fragment is about. The text seems to tell us something about love, but its significance has to do with the value of discourse as a way to escape death and celebrate life fully. Under the guise of depicting a trifling scene of teratologic badinage, it addresses itself to the monstrous unfairness of man's fate and suggests that discourse is the only means at our disposal to counter death. More precisely, and without the heavy existentialist vocabulary involved in such explanation, it signifies: «Every discourse is first and foremost an enacting of its own activity.»

In the middle of a seemingly amorous discourse, Barthes conceals the inscription of an existential terror of physical annihilation. Although it is buried under several textual fragments, the intertextual contradiction directs the reader to the core of the significance and the whole phraseology then unravels the primal fear so intimately interwoven with the deceptive wording.

The sentence's structure and the choice of words establish the ambiguity of a syllepsis and combine to undermine the surface meaning where language is presented as a mere tool for intellectual
persuasion. The body is emphasized and so are the senses; language is seen as a stage traversed by vital drives and powerful energy. In this perspective, discourse is presented less as the principal element of an intellectual endeavor than as an auxiliary, as the artifact whose principal function is to protect the physical integrity of the subject. When the discourse stops, it is not a (momentary) interruption without consequence, but a complete surrender of the subject, in that the Beast triumphs. This explains, in our excerpt, the enallagic reversal: the Beast might be the real subject of the story («The Beast...loves the Beauty») and yet the account of events is presented from the side of the patient through a significant passive structure («The Beauty...conquered»). In French, the word vaincue (conquered) (military in essence) is generally associated with the final battle, the one fought against sickness (vaincu par la maladie (conquered by sickness)) or death (vaincu par la mort (conquered by death)). In the lexical paradigm of surrender, French has a synonym of vaincu which connotes intellectual reddition: convaincu (convinced). Nevertheless it is the most physically invested term which is selected by Barthes. Similarly, these entretiens (conferences) are apparently inappropriate. One would expect conversations or more topically, since we are told that the Beauty does not love the Beast, vaincue par les propositions de la Bête (conquered by the Beast’s proposals), or vaincu par les arguments de la Bête (conquered by the Beast’s reasoning). Most likely, the Beast should be the one who tries to win over the Beauty. But the text is exceptionally clear: the Beauty is placed in a situation of speech; she is engaged in discussions with the Beast who attempts to seduce her. Since the Beauty does not love the Beast, why should she condescend to even listen to «him»? The narrative plot does not make sense unless we allow significance to intervene: entretien here, as inappropriate as the word may seem, refers directly to the hidden meaning. In French entretien is at the same time «conversation» and «maintenance.» This second meaning has to do with the inscription of physical preservation. Discourse maintains life: as soon as the verbal flow stops the Beauty is conquered. As soon as Scheherazade interrupts her story, she is put to death; as soon as the passerby remains speechless in front of the Sphinx, he dies.

The significance of Barthes’s excerpt is now obvious. Any reading which considers it a straightforward glorification of the logical and rational argumentative power of discourse is inattentive to the subtleties of the text. We are not confronted with a purely
descriptive piece which could find its place as an inspirational vignette in a *Physiology of the Perfect Seducer*. Barthes transforms the discursive exercise into a passion of (the) being, into the ultimate artifice of a subject protecting itself. As the well-read Freud suspected, the (text’s) pleasure principle intimately relates to the needs of life-instincts [*pulsions de vie*]. While Barthes’s text seems to tell us something about sexual instincts, its real purpose concerns the opposite pole. We are told about the instincts of self-preservation. Therefore, to *discourse* is less to reason than to insure oneself that the blood is (still) *coursing*: «To write the body. Neither the skin, nor the muscles, nor the bones, nor the nerves, but the rest: a coarse, fibrous, shaggy, unravelled Id; a clown’s cloak.» 12 Between the body and language, which comes first?»

It is, therefore, this primal dimension of discourse that places Barthes’s later writings in the realm of autobiography or, more precisely, in the realm of self-portrait. Michel Beaujour accurately underscores this tendency toward self-commentary and indicates that the discourse always overflows the boundaries of rhetoric even if it is fascinated by it: «Nevertheless, it is immortality, glory, and the relationship to the death of the body which are in question; under the pretense of self-commentary it is the erecting of a sepulchre which is attempted...a transfiguration of a body into a corpus.» 14

There is no better way to enhance the changes for survival than to expand beyond the inherent constraints of an everyday language confined to the present of its enunciation. Language becomes less a loss than a place to occupy, to enlarge, and to fill out so as to resist the irremediable seduction of death. Discourse must be continuous: one has to pile up last word upon last word, *ad infinitum*. In this kind of verbal system, rhetoric is not a vain academic exercise. Instead, it is the source of strength, the *vade mecum* of the language warrior: *inventio* provides his raw material (*from Actif/reactif* to *Le monstre de la totalité* [*The monster of totality*] or *Voix* [*Voice*]) and it matters not if there is no seeming order, what counts is the inexhaustible *copia*; *elocutio* provides the stratagems of expression (including the uninterrupted production of a figurative metalinguistic terminology neglected as soon as coined); *argumentatio* provides the mapping underlying the verbal strategy of this everlasting final *entretien* («le vertige du déplacement»), the adversary must not know where he is going to be next (Balzac, mode, neutre, Japan, salmagundi, Sade, Erté, etc), it will be impossible to
anticipate which arm of the service he is going to deploy (existentialism, semiology, structuralism, marxism, bricolage, etc.). The rhetorical model helps gain time and saves the subject; an attitude consistent with self-portrait: immortality is played and acted in the materiality of discourse. Our analysis concurs with Beaujour’s basic definition of the genre, where he precisely delineates the parameters of this particular exercitatio(n) in language: «Self-portrait attempts to reunite the two opposite worlds of life and death,...Self-portrait knows that its immortality as a book (just as in the case of temples and Egyptian sepulchres which, according to Hegel, are «like pages of a book») is the direct product of the materiality of écriture.» 15 The saturation of the discursive corpus is simply an analogon of the body, a metonymical transposition which actively recharges the verbal vehicle with the body’s drive to survive. Self-love invigorates discourse and produces what Beaujour calls a «fervent enunciation,» 16 which can be taken as a form of erotization of rhetoric. One must understand that rhetoric itself has no other raison d’être than to allow discourse to continue endlessly: «The circle of fragments never had any center, except the desire to say something and to continue to express itself.» 17

The fact that the discourse is loaded with vital concerns explains why Barthes expresses contempt for what he calls le babil [prattle], l’écume du langage [the foam of language]: 18 It is an ersatz for what language ought to be because the vital and energetic dimension is absent. It is mere energon without energeia; it is a glib construct which has no roots in self-preservation, an exercise in frivolity and gratuitousness. Prattle is worthless verbalism, unable to generate a text «in which is braided, woven, in the most personal way, the relation of every kind of jouissance: that of ‘life’ and that of the text, in which reading and the risks of real life are subject to the same anamnesis.» 19

It does not matter how complex, tortuous, and clinquant the formulation is. The lack of essential energy confines prattle to mere stylistic pyrotechnics which try to capture the most obvious and the most expedient mannerisms of a certain modernity of writing. It delivers a sham text, decked with shoddy goods, a mere product of (mass) consumption, soon to be disregarded: «Modernity makes an endless effort to unshackle the exchange: it tries to resist the market for works (by excluding itself from the circuit of mass communication), the sign (by exemption of meaning, by madness), sanctioned sexuality (by perversion, which disconnects jouissance from the
finality of reproduction). And yet, «modernity can do nothing: the exchange recuperates everything, acclimating what appears to challenge it: it seizes upon the text, puts it in the circuit of useless but legal expenditures: and soon the text is back in a collective economy.»

Indeed, there is a Barthesian style which can be imitated, reproduced, and commercialized. But to consider only this component of Barthes’s passion for writing is to take the varnish for the whole discourse, without considering the grain by which «the whole sensuality of the human presence exposes itself in the jouissance of words.» Barthes’s discourse displays a playful sensationalization of language which was initially regarded with suspicion by more measured critics or writers. The idiolectic foot-stamping, flag-waving, sign-carrying, was close to a public display of exhibitionism to be accepted willingly by the aficionados of a more subdued language. Barthes’s language attracts attention and its strangeness arouses intense interest. Nevertheless, careful scrutiny reveals that it does not exhibit the obscurity, the opacity and the Gongorism which characterize so much contemporary French discourse. One critic has even asserted that Barthes’s stylistic models were Claudel and Loti. Unquestionably, his sentences flow freely and follow a pattern of amplitude usually associated with the classical well-rounded period. Barthes does not favor cut-up phrases, and the rhythmical sequence that articulates the sentence avoids irregularity. Similarly, his studies generally accompany texts characterized by an extended structure and a well-controlled intelligible discourse. He is fascinated by readable discourses endowed with driving force and with skillful volubility, where a casual rhythm is established even if underhanded discontinuities seize upon the entire utterance. In Le Plaisir du texte Barthes recalls what is for him the leisure of by-gone readings: «And at the same time, this rear-guard language is the language of my pleasure—for hours on end I read Zola, Proust, Verne, the Count of Monte Cristo, the Memoirs of a Tourist, and sometimes even Julien Green.» The plenitude of the textual body may be cut or perforated, still it remains readable and the discontinuity is a mere pretext for the convergence that the two edges of the gap bring about.

Nevertheless, it must be stated that the gap Barthes imposes as a reader upon the surface of the text (l’interstice de la jouissance [the interstice of jouissance]) is not permanent. It is merely a
momentary gap which can be eliminated and displaced by another reading («Proust’s felicity: from one reading to the next, we never skip the same passages»).54 There is no loss as such, just a controlled fading, and the missing parts can be retrieved at will. These éraflures [abrasions] on the surface of the text create a succession of ridges in the continuity of the text made by the reader himself. Pleasure comes about at the untenable, impossible moment when the reader has to hurdle the interval so created. Barthes compares this instant to the one «that Sade’s libertine relishes when, in a well-prepared scheme, he manages to be hanged and then has the rope cut at the very moment of his jouissance.»25

The analogy is revealing and its components significant. The hanging is fake as the gap. It can be cancelled at will and is solely a make-believe staging. Jouissance comes about in the threshold of an interruption; it is the ultimate experience at the edge of death. These constitutive characteristics can be integrally transposed into the realm of Barthesian discourse. Barthes’s economy of reading and his production of fragments have the same basic principle: an interruption should appear in the discourse so as to permit the temptation of the void which, in return, triggers jouissance. The always possible irruption of death sanctions this otherwise futile staging: the technical interruption may become a vital one. Barthes as reader has to jump over to another passage, a fragment has to be followed by another fragment and only discourse in its continuity can effect the necessary junction across the void. In this case, discourse’s visibility has to be as high as possible in order to make it known that the gap has been jumped, that life continues. Discourse must also dissipate the primal fear encountered on the edge of every seam, a fear coextensive with this untenable instant right before the jump («Proximity identity?—of jouissance and fear»).55 Thus Barthes’s exuberant discourse cannot be discounted as mere histrionics. The text’s brio, so closely related to jouissance56 is first and foremost the signal of Angst, of primal fear. Brio proves that one exists and that the whole body, the whole corpus is determined to survive: le sens fait la vie [meaning makes life].

Actio—to complete our rhetorical repertoire—: the corporeal exteriorization of language through catchy phrases, flashy headlines, memorable one-liners results in the sensationalization of this mere tool-communication. And yet the discourse so produced is not simply the parade of a virtuoso eager to display his mastery of the technique: it is truly a retreat ahead. The need to escape (the
névrose, according to Barthes) has a unique trigger: the one emblemized in the epigraph of *Le Plaisir du texte*, «The one passion of my life has been fear.»28 Here passion should be understood both as «suffering» and «primal drive»; it is passion rooted in the fear that irreality inherent in the discursive make-believe is soon to be negated by the «awakening of intractable reality.»27

Barthes’s insidious heroism of discourse is akin to that of Michel Leiris. If the sensuous relationship between the subject and the verbal substance be severed by accident or by chance, the interruption must be followed by a feverish verbal activity. After his attempted suicide, Leiris has nothing more pressing to do than to ask for a notebook so as to make clear to everyone that the return to discourse is analogous to the return to life. To write is to express the body’s *dur désir de durer* [arduous desire to last] and the fear of not being able to do so generates an exclusive personal dedication to discourse. When there is nothing further to say, when there is no possibility of saying anything to anyone anymore, when the gap becomes an infinite void, the discursive illusion dissipates, and reality settles in.

According to Thomas A. Sebeok, Barthes’s work attracts attention because of its devotion to *logocentrism*: «In the West, Roland Barthes’s extended, fascinating essay [Eléments de sémiologie], perceptive as it was radical, set in motion a new inquiry and debate in a personal idiom, or, if you will, reopened Pandora’s box of semiotic tricks…. Traditional Saussureans have variously condemned Barthes’s inferences and conclusions…though I happen to think on trivial grounds; my own objections continue to derive from his absolute exclusion of sign processes among the speechless creatures from the semiotic universe, an anthropocentrism that, for me, detracts seriously from the brilliance of his book.»30 The analysis is certainly flawless if one places oneself in an anthropological framework and establishes a *ne varietur* (rigid) difference between verbal and nonverbal communication. Yet, it must be remembered that both verbal and nonverbal communications are artificial, relying on parts of the body whose very function has been diverted. Verbal language is as much a «body language» as any so called sign-languages. There is no such thing as a clear-cut distinction between the «cultural» and the «natural» sides of a man as a «talking-animal.» Language can certainly *convince*, yet its first and foremost quality is to *seduce*. Our *faculté de langage* drifts about the surface of our senses and it
is not a minor achievement for Barthes to have found a way to speak pleasure, displaying the simultaneously vital, sensuous, and critical values of discursive activity. What causes the sensation in this verbal parade is that when the supremacy of denotation is suspended, the sensual world of significance gushes in.

NOTES

1. The use of subject matter, style, language, or artistic expression that is intended to...startle, excite, or arouse intense interest.

2. In philosophy, the theory or doctrine that all knowledge is derived solely through the use of the senses." Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary. 1979, p. 1652.

1. «Manger un A, un B, un C, un D...faits d'une matière de consistance assez molle et de couleur blanchâtre, dotés de leur saveur propre en même temps qu'agrémentés de l'arôme du pot-au-feu, qu'on les mange un par un—reconnaissant chaque signe au passage—ou bien à pleine cuillérées, par gros paquets indistincts, n'est-ce pas se livrer à une opération relevant tant soit peu de la magie, goûter au fruit de l'arbre de la science, absorber l'imagerie même du secret et devenir comme un dieu?» (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 49.


3. «La Bête—retenue enchantée dans sa laideur—aime la Belle; la Belle, évidemment n'aime pas la Bête mais à la fin, vaincue (peu importe par quoi; disons: les entretiens qu'elle a avec la Bête), elle lui dit le mot magique: «Je vous aime, la Bête,...» Fragments d'un discours amoureux (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 109 (Fragment «Je-t-aime»).


7. For a Freudian interpretation of this sexual ritual, see Bernard Mérigot, «Freud et la critique littéraire,» Europe (March 1974), pp. 189-199.

8. For further examples of this pervading imagery see Richard Cavendish, Visions of Heaven and Hell (New York: Crown, 1977). Especially pages 119-121.

9. Cf. «The double image of the lover and of his other,» Fragments d'un discours
amoureux, p. 115; «The text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me,» Le Plaisir du texte, p. 45.
12. «Ecrire le corps. Ni la peau, ni les muscles, ni les os, ni les nerfs, mais le reste: un ça balourd, fibreux, pelucheux, effiloché, la houppelande d’un clown.» RB, pp. 182-183. Betty McGraw, in her perceptive article «Semiotics, Erotographics, and Barthes’s visual concerns,» Sub-Stance, No. 26 (1980), pp. 68-75) has well identified the value of this fundamental relationship in connection with Barthes’s «form» of jouissance inscribed in the spatial configuration of language. See also, Visible Language, 11, No. 4 (Autumn 1977), Steven Ungar, guest editor.
15. «L’auto-portrait tente de réunir les deux mondes séparés de la vie et de la mort (...) L’auto-portrait sait en effet que son immortalité de livre, comme celle des temples et des tombeaux égyptiens qui, selon Hegel, sont ‘comme des feuilles,’ il la doit à la matérialité d’une écriture,» Beaujour, p. 145.
16. «une énonciation chaleureuse,» Beaujour, p. 269.
17. «Le cercle des fragments n’a jamais eu de centre, sinon le désir de dire et de continuer à se dire,» Beaujour, p. 223.
20. «La modernité fait un effort incessant pour déborder l’échange: elle veut résister au marché des œuvres (en s’excluant de la communication de masse), au signe (par l’exemption du sens, par la folie), à la bonne sexualité (par la perversion, qui soustrait la jouissance à la finalité de la reproduction). Et pourtant, rien à faire: l’échange recupère tout, en acclimatant ce qui semble le nier: il saisit le texte, le met dans le circuit des dépenses inutiles mais légales: le voilà de nouveau placé dans une économie collective.» PT, p. 40.
24. «Bonheur de Proust: d’une lecture à l’autre, on ne saute jamais les mêmes passages.» **PT**, p. 22.
25. «que le libertin goûte au terme d’une machination hardie, faisant couper la corde qui le pend, au moment où il jouit.» **PT**, p. 15.
28. «La seule passion de ma vie a été la peur, **PT**, p. 7. As strange as it may seem, this epigraph, central to the understanding of Barthes’s *entreprise d’écriture*, has disappeared as such in the English translation, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Miller trans., (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), being replaced by a Latin one by the same philosopher which obscures the unmistakable reference to fear. Should we interpret this veiling as a confirmation that what Barthes says about fear is accurate: *la peur est le laissé-pour-compte de toutes les philosophies...la peur n’est pas moderne...Qui pourrait écrire la peur?* Fear is the misfit of every philosophy...Fear is not modern...Today no one is willing to avow fear; **PT** p. 77.