

Gender Neutral: Rereading Barthes's *S/Z* and the Figure of the Androgyne

Yue Zhuo

University of Pennsylvania
E-mail: yuezhuo@sas.upenn.edu

Abstract

The Neutral is a late concept which Barthes developed during his 1978 lecture course at the Collège de France. Defined as a stance of 'retreat' or 'oscillation' that dodges or 'baffles paradigm' (binary oppositions), it has never been referred to as directly associated with questions of gender and sexuality. Yet its sexual undertones can be strongly felt in many of Barthes's works. Given Barthes's reticence on his own gay sexuality and the interest the discovery of his posthumous autobiographical fragments/diaries sparked in the Feminist and Queer communities, it seems useful to revisit some of his own writings in order to better understand his implied views on sexual difference, homosexuality and identity politics. *S/Z*, Barthes's seminal analysis of Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*, emerges as a key text foretelling the figure of the Neutral, translating at the same time the relation between Barthes's own sexuality and work. Some fifty years after the 'Structuralist Controversy' at Johns Hopkins University, how can we read this exemplary (post)structuralist analysis in a way that reinscribes the central question of sexuality and gender *in-difference*? We propose a hospitable rereading of *S/Z* that will open dialogues between Queer Studies and various branches of literary studies.

Keywords: *Barthes, Neutral, androgyne, S/Z, gender/sexuality, Queer, feminism*

In March 1976, Roland Barthes was elected to the Chair of *Sémiologie Littéraire* at the Collège de France. He taught there from January 1977 until a fatal accident abruptly shortened his life in February 1980.¹ 'The Neutral' (*Le Neutre*) is the title of his second-year public lecture series at the Collège. Published by Éditions du Seuil in 2002, this volume of lecture notes appeared in its English translation with Columbia University Press in 2005.² In its original course proposal, Barthes defines the concept as 'every inflection that, dodging or baffling the paradigmatic, oppositional structure of meaning, aims at the suspension of the conflictual basis of discourse.' (*N*, 211; 261) An amorphous notion without predicates, manifested more through its intensities than its logic equilibriums, the Neutral can be best understood as a structural destabilization, or a 'passage' (*traversée*) as it comes across language, discourse, body, gesture and action. Borrowed from structural linguistics and referring originally to a *tertium*, a third term

¹ On 25 February 1980, crossing Rue des Écoles, just outside the Collège de France, Barthes was run over by a laundry truck. He was taken to the hospital of Pitié-Salpêtrière, where he died of pulmonary complications a month later, on 26 March.

² Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); *Le Neutre* (Paris: Seuil/Imec, 2002). Hereafter cited as *N*, with page references first to the English translation, then to the original version in French.

of zero that cancels out the morphological or phonological opposition,³ the term 'Neutral' acquires a crucial ethical dimension in Barthes's College de France lectures. It is a refusal to choose between, or to enter into, the sets of binary oppositions that society fabricates routinely and obliges its subjects to accept. A 'neutral' subject would thus opt for silence, retreat, oscillation and *wou-wei* (non-action), as opposed to a 'committed' one who would always defend a position or transmit a message.

It would be wrong, however, to align the Neutral with indifference, or prudence. On the contrary, it is a principle that requires an indefatigable effort to combat the *doxa*, which Barthes defines as 'Public Opinion, the mind of the majority, petit bourgeois Consensus'.⁴ Defined more positively, the Neutral can be viewed as a movement of displacement, a constant softening of *doxa* into *paradoxa*, or an ongoing blurring of grids into *moire*. In Barthes's own practice, it is closely tied to what he calls the 'atopia', or the 'drifting habitation' of writing (*RB*, 49; *OC*, IV, 629).

The Neutral in Barthes has always had sexual undertones, but he never made this sexual dimension explicit, nor did he link it directly to his gay sexuality. It is my intention in this essay to explore this oblique relation, and to see why the Neutral might not be in concert with many LGBTQ discourses, resisting any type of communitarian appropriation. If Barthes's silence on his own homosexuality translates part of the attitude that he describes as 'neutral', how did this silence comfort some yet dissatisfy others during the emergence of Queer discourse in the two decades succeeding his death? Might not his 'historicist impulses', that is, desires to make partial connections with (queer) human bodies from the past through reading and writing, as Carolyn Dinshaw suggests, themselves already be queer?⁵ Or, is his emphasis on the neutral essentially a turning away from sexual difference, a '*discourse of in-difference* or of *pure difference*', as Naomi Schor terms it, which, willingly or unwillingly, becomes the 'last ruse of phallogentrism'?⁶ In order to understand the Neutral's uneasy or at least unstable relation vis-à-vis Queer studies as well as certain branches of Feminism, we must first see how Barthes's refusal to positioning is forced hastily into positions, and how silence, initially a weapon to outplay the paradigms (conflicts) of speech, is soon interpreted as a sign of wisdom, stoicism, enigma, passivity, etc. (*N*, 26; 54). The Neutral's deep connection to the sexually indeterminable, to the 'feminine', to the heterogeneous and forever divisible body, as well as its 'in-difference' to biological

³ Barthes borrows the term *neutral* from the Danish linguist Viggo Brøndal, who, in *Essais de linguistique générale*, defines the 'neutral', or the 'degree zero', as the 'non-application of a given relation' (term 'zero' for morphology and term 'degree zero' for phonology). In verbs, the 'indicative' mood (as opposed to the subjunctive or imperative mood) represents the 'amodal' form; the 'third person' (as opposed to the first or the second person) is another example of the term 'zero'. See Brøndal, *Essais de linguistique générale* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1947), 16; and Barthes, *N*, 7; 32.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (henceforth *RB*), trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 47; *Œuvres complètes*, vols. I-V (henceforth *OC*), ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), IV, 627.

⁵ In *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), Carolyn Dinshaw defines the 'queer historical impulse' as 'an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other hand, those left out of current sexual categories now.' (1). In her discussion on Barthes, Dinshaw emphasizes the remarkable resurgence of the past in *S/Z* and Barthes's attachment to Michelet's notion of 'History as Love's Protest' (40-54; 41 for the quotation in the text).

⁶ Naomi Schor, 'Dreaming Dissymmetry: Barthes, Foucault, and Sexual Difference', in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine & Paul Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987), 98-110 (99, 109).

division and even to the question of gender, however, can be strongly felt through a rereading of *S/Z*, Barthes's best-known (post)structuralist analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine* (1830). Almost fifty years after the publication of this highly original experimental 'dissection' performed on Balzac's short story, *S/Z* emerges as a key text foretelling the relation between Barthes's sexuality and his work. In the following pages, after a discussion on Barthes's 'silence', I propose a detailed rereading of *S/Z*; I will then discuss the figure of the androgyne, explored in the last session of Barthes's course on the Neutral, to see how it might come in to amend possible gaps between Queer Studies and Barthes's stance.

Barthes's 'In-difference' to Queer Discourse

Critics have noticed a perplexing fact: in general, critical and biographical literature on Roland Barthes, very little has been said on the relation between his homosexuality and his work. 'It is entirely possible to read hundreds of pages of critical studies about love, desire, pleasure, perversity, and even the ways in which writing depends on the body of the author in Barthes's work without encountering a discussion – or even a mention – of Barthes's sexual orientation.'⁷ The posthumous publication of 'Incidents' and 'Soirées de Paris' by François Wahl in 1987, which exposed Barthes's nocturnal wanderings and cruising in Morocco and in Paris, dramatically changed the image of the public intellectual.⁸ Not only did it spark debates on Barthes's own intention of 'coming out',⁹ but also Barthes's sexual life became overnight a new object of interest in Gay and Lesbian Studies. Among the cluster of studies on the subject that followed throughout the 1990s, D. A. Miller's *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, published at the same time as the English translation of *Incidents*, immediately established Barthes as a 'fixture of American Gay subculture'.¹⁰ For Miller, '[t]o refuse to bring Barthes out consents to a homophobic reception of his work.'¹¹ What interests him in this little precious book is to 'alleviate *an erotic pessimism*' by building an 'imaginary relation' with Barthes, a Barthes whom he otherwise could not have 'touched' had the public figure not become, all of a sudden, part of 'us', the gay community. 'This essay', writes Miller, 'proposes an album of moments [...] – in what journalism might call my "homosexual encounter" with Roland Barthes; responses to a handful of names, phrases, images, themes' inscribed in Barthes's texts which provide 'occasions for assessing "between us" particular problems that must [...] inform a gay writing position'.¹² Leo Bersani, who is otherwise vigilant on the use of 'we', immediately backs Miller's

⁷ Leslie Ann Minot, 'Roland Barthes', in *Reader's Guide to Gay and Lesbian Studies*, ed. Timothy F. Murphy (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 77.

⁸ 'Incidents' and 'Soirées de Paris', Barthes's Moroccan fragments from 1968-1969 and a series of diary-like accounts of his evenings in Paris a year before his death, together with two other previously published short texts, were published by Seuil in 1987 in one volume under the title of *Incidents*. François Wahl, Barthes's long-time editor at Seuil, who was himself openly gay, emphasized in his preface that Barthes was getting increasingly ready to publish these diaristic autobiographical manuscripts. See Roland Barthes, *Incidents* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 7-10. Translated by Richard Howard, the English edition of *Incidents* was published by University of California Press in 1992.

⁹ See Antoine Compagnon, 'Barthes's Open Secret', *Times Literary Supplement* 4688 (5 February 1992): 5.

¹⁰ Compagnon, 'Barthes's Open Secret', 5.

¹¹ D. A. Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 17.

¹² Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, 7.

militant approach: 'Like a good trainer in one of those gyms surely never frequented by the Proustian Barthes, Miller "develops" Barthes' gay muscle and, by no means incidentally, encourages us to think in entirely new ways about what gay writing might mean and be.'¹³

At the same time, Miller faults Barthes for the way in which his silence on his sexual identity complied with homophobia and the closet. He sees Barthes's relation to the act of gay self-nomination as 'phobic', and points out that in *Soirées de Paris*, this phobic attitude boils into a state of hysteria and collapses into despair.¹⁴ In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick shares the same position that silence or 'closeted-ness' is as much a 'speech act' as confession, and considers Barthes's utopian fantasy of moving beyond the 'binary prison' of gender differences 'premature'.¹⁵ It is only in her later writing that she critically reflects back on the 'paranoid reading' of Miller and calls for a 'weaker', more relaxed, and more pluralistic 'reparative reading' that tends towards Barthes's Neutral.¹⁶

Among the sympathizers of Barthes, literary critic Pierre Saint-Amand repudiates very early on the 'muscle building terrorism' of D. A. Miller, whose 'trial' of 'discretion' assigns Barthes precisely to the 'normative and essentializing categories' which the latter tries to avoid.¹⁷ Saint-Amand eloquently points out that the Barthesian sexuality rejects the erectile-phallic model of the homosexual in favour of a 'horizontal erotics'; it corresponds, according to him, more to an ontological model of 'diffraction' which Barthes had himself described as 'a dispersion of energy in which there remains neither a central core nor a structure of meaning'.¹⁸ In this sense, the 'happy, gentle, sensual, jubilant sexuality' that Barthes aspires is 'not necessarily feminine', but the one that 'permits instead the diffraction of the two genders'.¹⁹ In a forceful article that examines Barthes's relation to identity politics as well as the complex meaning of 'coming out', Andreas Bjørnerud arrives at a similar conclusion by emphasizing the 'state of infinite expansion' of Barthes's 'happy and perverse sexuality', which he sees as representing a utopian wish to 'return to a polymorphous perversity presumed to be prior to the subject's entry into the symbolic'.²⁰

D. A. Miller's and other critics' quick recuperation of Barthes into the gay community and the subsequent 'reparations' of Barthes's 'true self' all happened for a reason: the subject in question never wrote explicitly, definitely as a gay man, nor did he associate himself with any activities that could vaguely point to the direction of the soon-to-come LGBT studies. Not only did he die ten years before the invention of the

¹³ See Bersani's blurb on the inside cover of *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*.

¹⁴ Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, 28.

¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 3-4, 10.

¹⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51. For a discussion on 'paranoid reading' and 'reparative reading' and Sedgwick's changing positions on Barthes, see Heather Love, 'Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', *Criticism* 52.2 (2010): 235-41, and Nicholas De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012), 18-9, 118, 131.

¹⁷ Pierre Saint-Amand, 'The Secretive Body: Roland Barthes's Gay Politics', *Yale French Studies* 90: 'Same Sex/Different Text? Gay and Lesbian Writing in French' (1996): 154.

¹⁸ Saint-Amand, 'The Secretive Body', 158; *RB*, 143.

¹⁹ Saint-Amand, 'The Secretive Body', 158.

²⁰ Andreas Bjørnerud, 'Outing Barthes: Barthes and the Quest(ion) of (a Gay) Identity Politics', *New Formations* 18 (1992): 126.

term 'Queer', but he also avoided voicing any opinion on gay activism, feminism, paedophilia, AIDS, subjects that greatly occupied, for example, late Foucault, as well as younger gay writers who were writing in the 1970s and 1980s: Guy Hocquenghem and Hervé Guibert.

Yet Barthes's homosexuality, as Graham Allen rightly points out, in ways which 'are oblique and beyond summary, hovers over and resonates through many of his major texts: *S/Z*, *Empire of Signs*, *A Lover's Discourse*, *Mythologies*, even *The Fashion System*'.²¹ One of Barthes's rare 'declarations' on the subject occurs through an approval of a younger writer's bluntly explicit homosexual accounts. In his preface to Renaud Camus's *Tricks*, Barthes speaks of homosexuality as a sociocultural phenomenon:

Homosexuality shocks less, but continues to be interesting; it is still at that stage of excitation where it provokes what might be called feats (*prouesses*) of discourse. Speaking of homosexuality permits those who 'aren't' (expression already criticized by Proust) to show how open, liberal and modern they are, and those who 'are' to bear witness, to claim their rights, to militate. Everyone gets busy, in different ways, whipping it up.

Yet, to proclaim yourself something is always to speak at the behest of a vengeful Other, to enter into his discourse, to argue with him, to seek from him a scrap of identity: 'You are . . .' 'Yes, I am . . .' Ultimately, the attribute is of no importance; what society will not tolerate is that I should be . . . *nothing*, or, more precisely, that the *something* I am should be openly expressed as provisional, revocable, insignificant, inessential, in a word irrelevant. Just say "I am," and you will be socially saved.²²

Society, in its desire to classify its members, wants to give a name to everything and everyone. In *Roland Barthes*, Barthes talks about this process in terms of being 'pigeonholed, assigned to an (intellectual) site, to residence in a caste' (*RB*, 49). In another article called 'The Image', he compares societal languages to boiling microsystems; they harden the 'image' of oneself and turns it into a potato chip: 'What I believe the other thinks of me' is just like frying chips – put a slice of potato into a frying pan and watch it being not destroyed, but 'hardened, caramelized, made crisp' (*RL*, 355).²³ Fighting the systems of language entails a refusal to let the image of oneself (what today we call 'identity') 'take', to prevent it from being encircled, sizzled, hardened and browed. To reject the social injunction can be accomplished by means of a form of silence that consists in saying things *simply*, and speaking *simply* belongs to the art of writing. Renaud Camus's *Tricks*, a graphic narrative of twenty-five brief 'minimal relations' a young gay Frenchman encounters from Paris to Milan, from New York City to Los Angeles, offers a good example of what Barthes calls 'neutral writing':

Renaud Camus's *Tricks* are *simple*. This means that they speak homosexuality, but never speaks about it: at no moment they invoke it (that is simplicity: never to invoke, not to let Names into language – Names, the source of dispute, of arrogance, and of moralizing). (*RL*, 292; *OC*, V, 685)

²¹ Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 98.

²² Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (henceforth *RL*), trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 291-2; *OC*, V, 684; translation modified.

²³ The French version of this article can be found in *Prétexte: Roland Barthes, Colloque de Cerisy*, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1978), 304-305.

In an interview Renaud Camus gives many years later, the now established writer reveals that his intention to write *Tricks* was indeed to ‘get rid of that question of homosexuality’, *get rid of it*, in order to ‘stabilize’ it in its ‘simplicity, its naturalness, its tranquil *être-là* (to be)’.²⁴ To treat homosexuality ‘as if it were not a question, or as if it were resolved’ is a way to include it in the general, rather than specific discourse. Barthes qualifies this simple manner, far away from any demonstration, any proselytizing, any provocation, ‘neutral’ writing (*RL*, 292; *OC*, V, 685).

There exists, however, a logical tension in Barthes’s notion of neutral writing. On the one hand, it posits a purely descriptive, non-hysterical way of telling that prioritizes utterance over message; on the other hand, it exhibits an inner violence and has the power to ‘thwart the Image’, to corrupt ‘languages, vocabularies’ and to destabilize social names and categorizations. Does the Neutral dodge or attack? How can it be both non-conflictual and combative? In his course at the Collège, Barthes points out that it is precisely the ‘twinkling’ part of the Neutral: it oscillates between a Zen attitude and a ‘cheating’ with language systems. It needs sometimes to go outside culture or shift the past-present cultural codes in order to find new space in the current symbolic fabric. The Neutral is in fact ‘purely reactive; it is a reactive desire’ (*N*, 68; 101). In an unexpected personal confession, Barthes adds that the reflection on the Neutral, for him, is a ‘manner’, a ‘free manner’ to be ‘looking for [his] own style of being present to the struggles of [his] time’ (*N*, 8; 33).

S/Z: The Neutral, or the ‘Nothingness’ In-between Structures

In a recent book on the ‘Afterlives’ of Roland Barthes, Neil Badmington reminds us how Barthes’s analysis of *Sarrasine* stresses the significance of rereading.²⁵ Barthes indeed devotes a short section in the beginning of *S/Z* to emphasize the importance of this ‘anti-commercial’ gesture: a text should not be an object one throws away after a story is ‘devoured’; instead, it requires the ‘return’ of the reader to become plural, ‘different’ from its previous self.²⁶ ‘Rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology (“this happens *before* or *after* that”) and recaptures a mythic time (without *before* or *after*)’ (*S/Z*, 16; *OC*, III, 131). Writing these lines, Barthes refers of course to the object of his study, Balzac’s *Sarrasine*, but he also alludes to a major interpretational paradigm that he had just introduced several pages earlier, and the reception of which will soon shake literary studies: the ‘readerly’ (*lisible*) and the ‘writerly’ (*scriptible*). Almost all commentators of *S/Z* seem to want to first pass the test of explaining what they understand as the ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’. Some emphasize the temporal divide: the ‘readerly’ texts are the classic, ‘transparent’ tales that require no special effort to understand, and the ‘writerly’ texts are the modern, ‘avant-garde’ ones whose meaning is not immediately evident and demand effort on the part of the reader.²⁷ Others highlight the difference between the (passive) ‘consumable’

²⁴ Bruno Verrier, Charles A. Porter, and Ralph Sarkonak, ‘An Interview with Renaud Camus’, *Yale French Studies* 90: ‘Same Sex/Different Text? Gay and Lesbian Writing in French’ (1996): 13.

²⁵ Neil Badmington, *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 117.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 15-16; *OC*, III, 130-1.

²⁷ Jonathan Culler, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 22.

object and the active 'pure' writing experience.²⁸ Yet others discern the influence of the *Tel Quel* group (especially the notion of intertextuality) and accentuate the shift from authorial intention to textual production. *S/Z* impresses many critics because of the explosive disruption the 'writerly' plays on the 'readerly'. Barthes is able to uphold the frame and the narrative thread of a traditional story from start to finish while cutting it up into unrecognisable units and introducing total chaos into it: '*Sarrasine* represents the very confusion of representation, the unbridled (pandemic) circulation of signs, of sexes, of fortunes.' (*S/Z*, 216; *OC*, III, 299) *S/Z*, writes Jonathan Culler, 'is Barthes's summa because it displays powerful scientific and metalinguistic drive', yet at the same time it 'opens with what Barthes and others have regarded as a renunciation of the structuralist project', inviting us to explore its 'unmasterable evasiveness, and the way it outplays codes on which it seems to be based'.²⁹

This is indeed how *S/Z* is received in most literary studies: 'an extreme case of both structuralism and post-structuralism',³⁰ a Janus head pointing to rigorous structural analysis of narrative and to a jumbled experimental site of textual dissemination. Very few commentators, however, go beyond this paradox and study the relation between the 'unmasterable evasiveness' and Barthes's own view on sexuality. It is as if we have one camp of critics concentrating on the structuralism/post-structuralism blending, and the other camp of feminist and Queer critics foregrounding the sexuality/gender issues, but the two rarely explore together the 'mythic', 'tacit' dimension of *S/Z*.³¹ The 'rereading' I propose here is nothing but a bridging of the two perspectives, or a reading of what has in fact already been said in the seminal work, but that which has fallen out of the debates of literary history (structuralism vs. post-structuralism vs. deconstruction) as well as of Queer studies: the gender neutral.

S/Z figures in Barthes's corpus as a central piece that explores the question of gender (in)-difference and the Neutral. At first sight, Balzac's half-fantastic, half-detective strange tale resembles anything but the 'neutral'. Every element in it is *signified*, from clothing to jewellery, from gestures to voices, and the final message of the story ('behind every great fortune there is a great crime') is hardly ambiguous. Barthes, however, reads the novella laterally. He cuts the thirty-page story into five hundred 'lexias' (lexical units each consisting of a few words or a few sentences) and analyses them according to five 'major codes': two pertaining to the decoding of action and narrative progression (the 'proairetic' code and the 'hermeneutic' code), and three relating to the production of meaning (the 'semic' code, the 'symbolic' code and the 'cultural' code). According to Barthes, *Sarrasine* is not a form of neutral writing in its style, but the structural play inherent in the tale *releases* the figure of the Neutral, in that meaning is often produced not *within* the codes and structures but *from* the indeterminacy between these oppositional codes and structures.

Sarrasine tells the ill-fated love of the French sculptor Sarrasine for Zambinella, a Roman castrato whom Sarrasine wilfully persists in mistaking for a woman despite the many early warnings he receives. The story is structured as an embedded narrative. In the first, 'framing' part, the narrator attends a party organized by the rich family Lanty. He is accompanied by a beautiful young Marquise named Madame de Rochefide,

²⁸ Allen, *Roland Barthes*, 88.

²⁹ Culler, *Barthes*, 73-4.

³⁰ Culler, *Barthes*, 74.

³¹ With the exception of readings by Carolyn Dinshaw, Andreas Bjørnerud, and Leslie Hill which I will discuss further into the article.

whom he hopes to seduce. Both of them notice the presence of a strange, mysterious, richly adorned old man, to whom the Lanty family shows a strange devotion. Madame de Rochefide wants to find out the secret of this old man, and the narrator agrees to tell the story on the condition that she join him the next evening at a late hour.

The second, 'inserted' part tells the passion Sarrasine feels for the opera singer Zambinella. Sarrasine, a talented young sculptor with a bizarre and confused character, goes to study in Italy in 1758 after having worked with the best master sculptors in his own country. At the theatre of Argentina, he falls in love with the *prima donna*, Zambinella, in whom he sees the perfect female body. Attending the opera every night, Sarrasine eventually meets with his beloved and carves a statue for her in his workshop. Zambinella is at once encouraging and resisting, affable and evasive. Frustrated by this attitude, Sarrasine decides to abduct his ideal woman after her private performance at the house of the ambassador. There, surprised to see Zambinella dressed as a man, he learns from a guest (Prince Chigi) that in Italy women never go on an opera stage. In other words, Zambinella is a castrato. Engulfed in shock and utter disbelief, Sarrasine abducts the *musico* and attempts to murder him, but is killed himself by the henchmen of Cardinal Cicognara, Zambinella's protector. Cardinal Cicognara takes possession of the 'Zambinella statue' and has it reproduced in marble, which later becomes the model of 'Adonis,' a painting by Vien displayed in the salon of the Lantys. The narrator then reveals that the old man at the Lantys' house, who was also the model for the young man in 'Adonis,' is Zambinella, Madame de Lanty's own uncle. Madame de Rochefide, upon finding out the mystery, breaks her deal with the narrator. The story has disgusted her and she wants to be left alone.

Sarrasine fascinates Barthes because it is one of the rare stories in classic literature that make *castration* (the state of being castrated), 'an anecdotal condition', coincide with *castration*, 'a symbolic structure' (*S/Z*, 163-4; *OC*, III, 255). At the heart of the mystery which the young woman asks the narrator to unveil lies an emptiness, or 'nothingness', a tale of castration.³² The success of the story is based on a structural artifice: the confusion of the symbolic and the hermeneutic. *Sarrasine* makes the search for truth at the hermeneutic level (*Who is the old man at the party? What happens to Sarrasine and Zambinella? What's the relation between Zambinella and the old man?*) coincide with the search for castration at the symbolic level (*Where is castration in the story?*), and it makes the one definite piece of truth – Zambinella's lost phallus – an 'anecdotal' fact:

The coincidence of the two path is effected (structurally) by keeping one or the other from ever being determined upon (indeterminacy is a "proof" of writing): aphasia concerning the word *castrato* has a double value, whose duplicity is insoluble: on the symbolic level, there is a taboo; on the operative level, the disclosure is delayed: the truth is suspended *both* by censorship and by machination. [...] [T]his story's [...] unique value: 'illustrating' castration by being-castrated, like with like, it mocks the notion of illustration, it abolishes both sides of the equivalence (letter and symbol) without advantage to either one; the latent here occupies the line of the manifest from the start, the sign is flattened out: there is no longer any 'representation.' (*S/Z*, 164; *OC*, III, 256)

In Balzac's story, the word 'castrato' is never pronounced. Zambinella, avoiding Sarrasine's passionate kiss, comes close to saying it once, timidly: 'And if I were not a woman?' But her hint is immediately rejected by Sarrasine's confident voice: 'What a

³² Allen, *Roland Barthes*, 86.

joke! Do you think you can deceive an artist's eye?' (S/Z, 166, OC; III, 257-8). Later in the story, when Prince Chigi reveals the truth to Sarrasine, the nobleman also does not feel the need to pronounce the word: 'don't you know about the creatures who sing female roles in the Papal States?' 'I am the one, monsieur, who gave Zambinella his voice.' (S/Z, 184, 185; OC, III, 273) The figure of the castrato, being outside both sexes, as Barthes suggests, should ideally be described by a neutral pronoun (like the *neuter* in Latin). But since the *neuter* does not exist in French, one can only describe the castrato with an ambiguous term, morphologically feminine and semantically applicable to both sexes. 'Créature' is precisely such a word. The castrato is the 'neutral of the castration' (S/Z, 46-7; OC, III, 157).

But who castrates whom in *Sarrasine*? How can Zambinella be both an incarnation of *castration* and indifferent to castration? If Zambinella is both 'Super-Woman, essential, perfect woman' and at the same time 'sub-man, castrated, deficit, definitely less' (S/Z, 72; OC, III, 178), how do we determine the sexual difference and the power between two sexes? In one of the early insightful readings of S/Z, Stephen Heath points out that Barthes's original approach to *Sarrasine* involves a constant 'displacement'. To displace is to capture the 'secrets of the form', to shake up the 'habits of intelligibility' of the *doxa*.³³ The first displacement consists of a shift from sexual difference to the dialectics of castration, the acrobatics of which is achieved by a *difference* internal to femininity:

Sexual classification is not the right one. Another pertinence must be found. It is Mme de Lanty who reveals the proper structure: in opposition to her (passive) daughter (Marianina), Mme de Lanty is totally active: she dominates time (defying the inroads of image); she radiates (radiation is action at a distance, the highest form of power); bestowing praises, making comparisons, instituting the language in relation to which man can recognize himself, she is the primal Authority, [...] In short, the precursor of Sappho who so terrifies Sarrasine, Mme de Lanty is the castrating woman, endowed with all the hallucinatory attributes of the Father, power, fascination, instituting authority, terror, power to castrate. Thus, the symbolic field is not that of the biological sexes; it is that of castration: of *castrating/castrated, active/passive*. (S/Z, 36; OC, III, 147-8)

In Balzac's tale, Barthes reads a total reversal of the Freudian and Lacanian model(s) of castration. Several of his 'lexias' emphasize the 'empowerment of women' and/or the 'depowerment of men.' The Count de Lanty, for example, is a 'negligible, lost father'; described by Balzac as 'small, ugly and pock-marked', he 'joins the discarded men of the story, all castrated, cut off from pleasure' (S/Z, 38; OC, III, 150). The narrator, originally a powerful, seductive figure (he possesses the story to mystery), gradually loses to Madame de Rochefide's volte-face: she breaks the deal with him and he has told the story for nothing. By reversing the classical double equation, masculine = active, feminine = passive, has Barthes aligned himself with the feminist 'camp'? Is he advocating a certain type of pan-femininity, or, as Stephen Heath puts it, is he risking the return of 'a certain myth of the "feminine"'?³⁴

In her robust feminist critique of Barthes (and Foucault), Naomi Schor acknowledges the soft and seductive nature of Barthes's texts on the body and its pleasures (texts posterior to S/Z), but claims they 'participate nonetheless in a

³³ Stephen Heath, *Vertige du déplacement* (Paris: Fayard, 1974), 20.

³⁴ Stephen Heath, 'Barthes on Love', *Sub-Stance* 37-38 (1983): 105.

masculine discourse on sexuality'.³⁵ In the case of *S/Z*, not only 'no change has really been effected in the representation of woman', since Mme de Lanty essentially gets reclassified as a 'fearsome' 'castrating woman', but also Barthes's denial of woman's specificity is carried out through a second 'textual displacement': from castrating/castrated to animate/inanimate.³⁶ In an essay entitled 'Masculine, Feminine, Neutral', the early version of what was to become *S/Z*, Barthes indeed suggests that although the 'apparent centre' of *Sarrasine* is 'sexuality' (*le sexe*), the centrality of sexual difference is illusory, a lure.³⁷ Take, for example, the dress code (an important item for narration), the novelist can only describe it in two terms: the masculine and the feminine. Yet Balzac 'continuously needs a third sex, or a lack of sex'; he is then left with a choice to 'define the *castration* either as a simultaneous mix of masculine and feminine (it is the costume of the old man), or as a succession of the two (Zambinella dresses as woman, then as man)'.³⁸ Like the use of pronouns, this choice of distribution in dress code reflects well the difficulty that the novelist encounters to symbolically place the castrato in the institutional structure of sexes, which is binary, since

the neutral cannot be directly implicated in a sexual structure; in Indo-European languages, the opposition of the masculine and the feminine is less important than that of the animate and the inanimate; indeed, it follows from it:

Animate (Masculine/Feminine)/Inanimate (Neutral).³⁹

Barthes thus reads *Sarrasine* as a tale that follows closely the binary linguistic codes of the masculine and the feminine. It oscillates between the two but it respects the linguistic rules. The 'metaphorical transgressions' take place in fact within the dual category of the animate/inanimate and not within that of the masculine/feminine. 'Zambinella is not a transvestite boy, she is an inanimate being disguised as an animated being.'⁴⁰ All ambiguity concerning the 'nature' of Zambinella is thus 'not of the invert, but of the thing'. The entire novella is built on the paradigm of life and death, and not directly on sexual difference.

So, the apparent centre of *Sarrasine* is sexuality, but that sexuality of 'neither-nor' has no place in the symbolic structure within which the story unfolds. Barthes suggests that the figure of the castrato is the opposite of Name. Undeterminable between *he* and *she*, it is *nothing*. Sarrasine, sword in hand, cries to Zambinella: 'You are nothing, if you were a man or a woman, I would kill you, but...' (*S/Z*, 196; *OC*, III, 284) Zambinella, however, cannot be annihilated because, having already been castrated, he is '*outside all classification*', the Neutral itself. How to reach what transgresses, asks Barthes; not the internal order of the sexual paradigm, but 'the very existence of difference which generates life and meaning' (*S/Z*, 197; *OC*, III, 284)?

The tragedy of *Sarrasine*, in the end, is that of a man who confuses his own (artistic) fantasies with the established ideas embodied in the cultural codes of his time.

³⁵ Schor, 'Dreaming Dissymmetry', 99.

³⁶ Schor, 'Dreaming Dissymmetry', 102-3.

³⁷ Roland Barthes, 'Masculin, Féminin, Neutre', in *Échanges et Communications: Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss à l'occasion de son 60ème anniversaire*, ed. Jean Pouillon and Pierre Maranda, vol. 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 899; Schor, 'Dreaming Dissymmetry', 102. All references to Barthes's article are my own translations, unless otherwise specified.

³⁸ Barthes, 'Masculin, Féminin, Neutre', 899-900.

³⁹ Barthes, 'Masculin, Féminin, Neutre', 900; cited in Schor, 'Dreaming Dissymmetry', 102.

⁴⁰ Barthes, 'Masculin, Féminin, Neutre', 900.

And his 'mishap' arrives at two levels. Being a Frenchman, Sarrasine first subscribes to the culture cliché of his country. His persistent belief in Zambinella's femininity results from what Barthes calls an 'approximate syllogism' of endoxal truth: the Woman is beautiful, weakness is pleasant; Zambinella is beautiful, weak and amiable; therefore, Zambinella is a woman.⁴¹ His acceptance of femininity as super-essence and virtue, in other words, paradoxically 'castrates' him. But Sarrasine dies also for a bitter reason: his own cultural codes become less relevant in Italy. That is, in the oddly composed 'farrago' of societal codes that forms the everyday 'reality', one hole in the symbolic fabric could lead to catastrophe. Sarrasine misses one piece of information in the worldly Roman society that he thinks he can conquer but to which he remains a stranger: the code of opera singers in the Papal States. Sarrasine dies thus 'from a gap in knowledge ('Don't you know...'), from a blank in the discourse of others' (*S/Z*, 185; *OC*, III, 274).

The irony of being too drenched in one's own cultural *doxa* and yet not enough informed about the codes of a neighbouring 'other' brings us to a last 'displacement' in Barthes's 'in-difference' to the gender divide, what I would call an 'anachronic' (after Barthes's fashion in *The Neutral*) or 'anti-communitarian' look-away. In her reading of *S/Z*, Carolyn Dinshaw rightly speaks of the book's 'queer relation to the past'.⁴² She brings up a rarely discussed 'face-to-face' moment between the Medieval and the Modern. During Sarrasine's first meeting with Zambinella, when the infatuated artist carries his object of desire off to a boudoir and tries to ravish her, Barthes interposes himself and evokes the concept of 'the scene':

[T]he endless confrontation of two different codes communicating solely through their interlockings, the adjustment of their limits (dual replication, stichomythia). A society aware of the – in some sense – linguistic nature of the word, as was medieval society with its Trivium of the arts of speech, believing that is not the truth which brings an end to the confrontation of languages, but merely the force of one of them, can then, in a ludic spirit, attempt to encode this force, to endow it with a protocol of results: this is the *disputatio* [...]. (*SZ*, 154-5; *OC*, III, 248)

Dinshaw reads this 'scene' primarily as a fused moment between the past and the present, each allowing the other to relativize its rigid codes and make the (impossible) sexual encounter melodramatic, if not ludic.⁴³ But the 'ludic spirit' of the Medieval mirrors also strangely the modern-day melancholy: both Sarrasine and Zambinella are solitary figures cast out by their society, portrayed here as censorship, closure and misunderstanding. If Zambinella, the last generation of castrati surviving during the Restoration, is an allegory of 'the radical divide that separated the old society from the new', Sarrasine, the 'maladjusted asocial person' (*sauvage inadapté*) represents the 'combat of the artist against society'.⁴⁴

S/Z is Roland Barthes's very personal reading of Balzac's short story. Dinshaw notes that because of this Queer 'impulse' towards the past, 'the prospect of community is very unclear'.⁴⁵ For Barthes, Sarrasine is an 'irreducible individual', but in our society, '[w]e accept types, but not individuals... But what about a person who is absolutely alone? Who isn't a Breton, A Corsican, a woman, a homosexual, a madman,

⁴¹ Barthes, 'Masculin, Féminin, Neutre', 905; see also *S/Z*, 184; *OC*, III, 275.

⁴² Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 40.

⁴³ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 43.

⁴⁴ Barthes, 'Masculin, Féminin, Neutre', 898-9.

⁴⁵ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 45.

an Arab, etc.? Somebody who doesn't *even belong* to a minority? Literature is his voice.'⁴⁶ Andreas Bjørnerud shrewdly argues that in retelling Balzac's narrative, Barthes has become himself a writer, whose primary motivation is not the displacement of the gender binary, but the 'reinscription' of the figure of the Neutral within the same cultural fabric.⁴⁷ Zambinella, as we have seen, is the very embodiment of the body 'beyond the binary', 'the transgression of the Antithesis, the passage through the wall of opposites, the abolition of difference' (SZ, 215; OC, III, 299). But if the quest for her fleeting essence is what made Sarrasine die, the story of her being a 'static nothing beyond meaning' is nonetheless told, and he/she returns as a haunting hollowness that disturbs the same 'proper' bourgeois society. Thus, the writer (Barthes) here, concludes Bjørnerud, 'may be motivated by a regressive desire to escape culture altogether, but the discovery, that Zambinella's in her/his lack, that his/her being is not utopically beyond, but atopically within culture, returns the writer to cultural convention in order to dispossess it, to disappropriate that which was proper [...]'.⁴⁸ The political gesture of Barthes is never to lead his reader beyond the *doxa*, but to make him/her feel that the *doxa* can be and has been continuously and significantly shifted.

The Eternal Smile of the Androgyne

I would like to return to Naomi Schor's initial question 'whether or not Barthes's discourse of indifferentiation ends up re-essentializing woman and/or denying her specificity altogether'.⁴⁹ Schor does not have a definite answer to the question but she rightfully notices that Barthes's movement away from sexual difference is more than a 'displacement'; it is a '*clinamen*, or swerve': 'Whereas displacement denotes a *shift*, the *clinamen* [...] denotes a *shift away from*'.⁵⁰ In his compelling article on 'Barthes's Body', Leslie Hill acquiesces to this view by replying that Barthes 'does not so much avoid sexual difference as to dissolve it into the larger problematic of textual difference'.⁵¹ But he also acknowledges that such a constant displacement into the 'mode of textuality' would push the sexual difference to the 'point of no return'; in fact, sexual difference would only re-emerge as 'plural existence of the body and bodies, not the fantasmatic confrontation of bodies over the sexual divide in a way which makes gender into a superior truth and anatomy a commanding destiny'.⁵² Barthes confirms this position in a distant and rather uneasy manner in *Roland Barthes*, speaking of himself in the third person:

He often resorts to a kind of philosophy vaguely labeled *pluralism*.

Who knows if this insistence on the plural is not a way of denying sexual duality? The opposition of the sexes must not be a law of Nature; therefore, the confrontations and paradigms must be dissolved, both the meanings and the sexes must be pluralized: meaning will tend toward its multiplication, its dispersion (in the theory of Text), and sex will be taken into no topology (there will be, for example, only *homosexualities*, whose plural will

⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, *Sollers Writer*, trans. Philip Thody (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 37.

⁴⁷ Bjørnerud, 'Outing Barthes', 129-30.

⁴⁸ Bjørnerud, 'Outing Barthes', 130.

⁴⁹ Schor, 'Dreaming Dissymmetry', 100.

⁵⁰ Schor, 'Dreaming Dissymmetry', 103.

⁵¹ Leslie Hill, 'Barthes's Body', *Paragraph* 11.2 (July 1988): 123.

⁵² Hill, 'Barthes's Body', 123.

baffle any constituted, centered discourse, to the point where it seems to him virtually pointless to talk about it). (*RB*, 69; *OC*, IV, 648)

Does Barthes really deny sexual difference? Or does he simply want to be left alone, spared from the 'constituted' discourses on gender and sexuality? How uncomfortable is he to talk about his own body and sexuality, things he would rather leave in the dark, outside any systems of language? Leslie Hill affirms that Barthes's position remains 'undecidable', but 'aporia' being the intrinsic attribute of the Neutral, this should not prevent us from further discussing the issue. He then stages a cunningly humorous 'infinite conversation' between a confrontational feminist who does not want to let Barthes 'off the hook' and a cornered male reader (deconstructionist?) who wants to defend Barthes but who cannot quite achieve his goal:

– (She): By changing us all into neuters, just different from ourselves, Barthes just keeps on adding to a dominant view of male sexuality as the unquestioned norm. Where does Barthes ever address the issue of sexual difference except in terms of language and castration?

– (He): But what would you prefer? For Barthes to attempt a systematic account of how men and women write or read differently, assuming it could be done or even worth trying?

– (She): Not necessarily, I'm saying that I don't find any positive image of my own body in the whole of Barthes and I think all this business about the body is incredibly one-sided.

– (He): If it comes to that, I probably agree, and I can't say for certain that I find my own body in Barthes either.⁵³

In order to appease this bickering between the feminists and the post-structuralists/deconstructionists, I would like to devote this last section to a brief examination of the figure of the androgyne. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes presents the Neutral as a 'veritable *époque*, a halt that puts a stop in the distance to all accepted values (accepted by oneself).'⁵⁴ This force of *suspension* is indeed what I have been emphasizing in my previous analyses. Here, I would like to turn to another dimension of the Neutral that Barthes highlights toward the end of his Collège de France lectures on 'The Neutral': the Neuter not as 'Neither...Nor', but as 'both at once', 'at the same time', or 'that alternates with' (*N*, 190; 239). The central figure that demonstrates this definition of the Neutral is the figure of the androgyne.

We recall that Barthes originally borrows the term 'neutral', or 'degree zero', from the Danish linguist Viggo Brøndal.⁵⁵ In his *Essais de linguistique générale*, Brøndal introduces the term 'complex' immediately after the term 'neutral', as its opposite: 'if the term neutral is defined by the fact of not being negative or positive, the term complex will be defined, on the contrary, by being both negative and positive.'⁵⁶ Barthes's initial presentation of the term Neutral does not directly involve the 'complex', but he includes it willingly in what he calls the 'third term', a crucial outside

⁵³ Hill, 'Barthes's Body', 124.

⁵⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, with a Note on the Text by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 65; *OC*, IV, 260; translation modified.

⁵⁵ 'We know', writes Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero*, 'that certain linguists posit the existence of a third, neutral, or zero term in-between the two poles of a give opposition.' See *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 76; *OC*, I, 217; translation modified. See also *supra*, n. 3.

⁵⁶ Brøndal, *Essais de linguistique générale*, 17.

force that dismantles the oppositional binarisms: one can either ‘unite A and B, complex operation’, or ‘annul the opposition of A and B’ (N, 7 and 214, n. 11; 31 and n. 10). In the last session on ‘The Neuter’, Barthes claims that he wants to perform a structural U-turn, a *coup de théâtre*: The Neuter will be ‘the complex’: ‘not what cancels the genders but what combines them, keeps them both present in the subject, at the same time, after each other, etc.’ (N, 191; 239) The leading actor of this session on the Neuter will be the figure of the androgyne.

Barthes defines the androgyne as ‘a mixture, a dose, a dialectic, not of man and woman (genitality), but of masculine and feminine. Or better yet: the man in whom there is feminine, the woman in whom there is masculine.’ (N, 193; 242) The androgyne first appears as a ‘nobler’ version of the hermaphrodite. Barthes sees the historical representations of the hermaphrodite tend to accentuate its anatomical monstrosity. The word is associated with bestiality or dullness, whereas the androgyne does not always connote a direct relevance to genitality. The latter refers more to the fusion of virility and femininity insofar as it ‘connotes union of contraries, ideal completeness, perfection’ (N, 192; 240). What distinguishes the hermaphrodite from the androgyne is ultimately a ‘value decision, an evaluation: a passage to metaphor’ (N, 192; 240).

The examples Barthes gives of the androgyne are what we normally refer to as decadent dandies. In Barthes’s own words, they are men ‘dipped, bathed in femininity’ (N, 193; 242): Hyacinthe, the good-for-nothing aristocratic in Zola’s little-known novel, *Paris* (1898), or Thomas de Quincey, as he is idealized in Baudelaire’s *Artificial Paradises*. Barthes claims since he can only speak from the perspective of man, his approach to the neuter will always be a ‘veiled femininity’. This means indeed that Barthes would only speak of an *asymmetric* neuter: it is the ‘man in whom there is feminine’, and not the contrary.

Barthes’s development on the figure of the androgyne recalls easily other poststructuralist approaches to femininity, notably Deleuze’s concept of ‘becoming woman’ in *A Thousand Plateaus* and Derrida’s dramatization of female ‘distantiation’ and ‘veiling’ in *Spurs*.⁵⁷ Both, as we know, reject imitable or assumed forms of femininity and posit the ‘feminine’ as an active process of creation and/or of difference. But Barthes’s ‘feminine’ reverts oddly to the masculine. Taking up Freud’s analysis of the hidden vulture in Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘The Virgin and Child with St. Anne’,⁵⁸ Barthes first associates the feminine with the ‘androgynous nature of the mother’, namely, ‘breast + penis in erection’, then adds that the androgyne ‘would be any subject within whom there is something maternal’ (N, 194; 243). As if this ‘amoral oscillation’ were not enough, he adds that we could freely extend the figure as we wish: we could, for example, ‘derive, dream, arouse the figure of the father-mother, of the maternal

⁵⁷ See Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 275-80, and Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, intr. Stefano Agosti, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 37-61.

⁵⁸ According to Freud, the Virgin’s garment in Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting reveals a vulture when viewed sideways. In *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, his book-length analysis of Leonardo da Vinci’s life, childhood, and art, Freud provides a detailed interpretation on the relation between the hidden vulture and the painter’s overdependence on his mother. See Sigmund, Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, trans. Alan Tyson (New York: Norton Library, 1964).

father, of the father with breasts: of the tender father: figure absent from our Western mythology, significant lack' (N, 194; 243).

What is highly original in Barthes's concept of the Neutral its total indifference not only to the biological divide, but also to the question of gender construction and performativity, as if human beings have long been divided into individualities, fragments of body marked by various (symbolic) codes, affects, pleasure-seeking erogenous zones, finally, voices, if they are necessary. Derrida develops a few years later a very close concept of the 'neuter' which he calls the 'sexual otherwise', not the neutralization which can 'reconstruct the phallogocentric privilege', but the one consists of 'the multiplicity of sexually marked voices', 'of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each "individual"'.⁵⁹ To the grimace of the blandly oppressive stereotype, which seeks to flatten difference, the Neuter replies, says Barthes, not with indifference, but with reserve, discretion, oscillation, and the eternal ambiguity of a smile. I would like to quote in full the closing words of the course on the Neutral, as the only way to exit its 'aporia':

From that (I will stop here), going back to Freud and Leonardo, we might perhaps say that the Neutral find its feature, its gesture, its inflection embodies in what is inimitable about it: the smile, the Leonardian smile analyzed by Freud: Mona Lisa, St. Anne, Leda, St. John, Bacchus: smiles at the same time of men and women: smiles-figures in which the mark of exclusion, of separation cancels itself, smiles that circulate from one sex to the other: 'the smile of bliss and rapture which had once played on his mother's (Caterina's) lips as she fondled him.' Even if the biographical reference seems to me too specific, too anecdotal, there is this truth: the idea that the genital paradigm is baffled (transcended, displaced) not in a figure of indifference, imperviousness, or dullness [*matité*], but of ecstasy, enigma, gentle radiance, and the sovereign good. To the gesture of the paradigm, of conflict, of the arrogance of meaning, represented by the castrating laughter, the gesture of the Neutral would reply: smile.

Exit the Neutral. (N, 195; 243)

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⁵⁹ See Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald, 'Interview: Choreographies', *Diacritics* 12.2 (Summer 1982): 76, and Jacques Derrida, 'Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida', in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine & Paul Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987), 199.

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Genul neutru. Recitind opera lui Barthes *S/Z* și figura androginului

Rezumat

Neutrul este un concept târziu pe care Barthes l-a teoretizat în cursul său de la Collège de France în anul 1978. Definit ca instanță de „retragere” sau de „oscilare” care produce o eschivare sau care neutralizează paradigma (opozițiile binare), acesta nu s-a referit niciodată în mod direct la chestiuni de gen sau de sexualitate. Însă sensurile sale sexuale sunt resimțite foarte intens în operele lui Barthes. Având în vedere reticența lui Barthes la propria lui homosexualitate și interesul său în fragmentele/ jurnalele sale autobiografice care au fost publicate postum și care au fost analizate de comunitățile de feminisți și de teoreticieni de studii *queer*, demersul propus pare a fi folositor pentru a revizita câteva din scrierile sale pentru a înțelege mai bine viziunile sale asupra diferenței sexuale, a homosexualității și asupra politicilor de identitate. *S/Z*, analiza brilliantă a lui Barthes asupra nuvelei lui Balzac apare ca un text-cheie care anticipează figura neutrului, aducând în același timp indicii asupra relației dintre propria sexualitate a lui Barthes și opera sa. Cincizeci de ani după „Controversa structuralistă” de la Universitatea Johns Hopkins, ne întrebăm cum putem citi această exemplară analiză (post)structuralistă într-un mod care reînscrisă chestiunea centrală a sexualității și a genului, precum și pe aceea a *in-diferenței* de gen. Ne propunem o recitare ospitalieră a operei *S/Z* care deschide un dialog dintre studiile *queer* și diverse tipuri de studii literare.