Other Books by the Author

Fiction
The Jewels of Aptor (1962)
The Fall of the Towers:
  Out of the Dead City (formerly Captives of the Flame, 1963)
  The Towers of Toron (1964)
  City of a Thousand Suns (1965)
The Ballad of Beta-2 (1965)
Empire Star (1966)
Babel-17 (1963)
The Einstein Intersection (1967)
Nova (1968)
Driftglass (1969)
Equinox (formerly The Tides of Lust, 1973)
Dhalgren (1975)
Trouble on Triton (formerly Triton, 1976)
Return to Nevërÿon:
  Tales of Nevërÿon (1979)
  Neveryôna (1982)
  Flight from Nevërÿon (1985)
  Return to Nevërÿon (formerly The Bridge of Lost Desire, 1987)
Distant Stars (1981)
Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand (1984)
Driftglass/Starshards (collected stories: 1993)
They Fly at Ciron (1993)
The Mad Man (1994)
Hogg (1995)
Atlantis: Three Tales (1995)

Graphic Novels
Empire Star (1982)
Bread & Wine (1999)

Nonfiction
The Jewel-Hinged Jaw (1977)
The American Shore (1978)
Heavenly Breakfast (1979)
Starboard Wine (1984)
The Motion of Light in Water (1988)
Wagner/Artaud (1988)
The Straits of Messina (1990)
Silent Interviews (1994)
Louder Views (1996)
Times Square Red, Times Square Blue (1999)

Shorter Views

Queer Thoughts &
The Politics of the Paraliterary

Samuel R. Delany

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The Rhetoric of Sex / The Discourse of Desire

1. Apples and Pears. In the two dozen years between 1488 and 1512, Leonardo da Vinci produced a series of fascinating anatomical drawings that strike the modern viewer as highly realistic and rich with the texture and look of the bodies whose dissections he observed or, no doubt, took part in, as he drew from life—or more accurately, from death—his schemas of the blood vessels, the workings of the heart, the bladder and urinary system, the womb and the fetus inside it. These drawings are clearly and carefully observed, detailed, and rich in layerings and representations of tissue texture—and practically useless to a modern anatomist.

For as we look closer, we find there are no atriums or auricles in his depiction of the human heart; rather, he shows a two-chambered affair with only ventricles; and while here and there we can recognize the aorta and the esophagus, as well as the larger organs, the circulatory system and the alimentary system are depicted in gross form; there are no articulations shown between the stomach and the intestines (mostly absent from his drawings, though not his writings). And in an early anatomic depiction of heterosexual copulation, a “wholly fictitious piece of plumbing” (to use the commentator’s term from the 1989 catalogue of the Haywood Gallery da Vinci exhibition in London) runs from the man’s penis, bypassing the testicles, to the small of the back, where many during the Italian Renaissance believed “the seed of life” was manufactured. Indeed, hardly any vessel shown in any of Leonardo’s anatomic interiors connects up to what, today, we are fairly certain that it does.

And what are we to make of Leonardo’s depiction of the womb? For the modern anatomist, the uterus is traditionally described as pear-shaped, small end down, and connected by means of the cervix to the vaginal cavity. The pear-shaped bulge at the upper end is largely a product of the entrance into the uterus of the fallopian tubes, which, left and
right, lead back from the outer ends of the ovaries to conduct the egg to the wall of the uterine cavity.

Leonardo’s womb, however, whether it is engorged with a “four month old fetus” as in the pen and ink drawing with wash over traces of black and red chalk from 1510-12, “The Fetus in the Womb,” or whether it is without child, as it is in the 1507 drawing of pen and ink and wash on waxed paper, “The Principal Organs and Vascular and Urino-Genital System of a Woman,” is as round as an apple. In “The Fetus in the Womb,” while an ovary is indeed shown, only the vascular connection about the base is drawn; there is no connection at all from the business end of the ovaries to the womb proper. The fallopian tubes and all the muscular protruberances of the upper end are omitted as tissue irrelevancies to the womb’s presumed perfect, Renaissance sphericity. Nor is this surprising.

The assumption of the times was that the material relation obtaining between a man and his offspring was that between seed and plant. The relation between a woman and her offspring, however, was that of contiguity, sympathy, resemblance through imposed distortion—of environment to plant. Certainly, people had noticed that a child was as likely to resemble its mother or people in its mother’s family as it was to resemble its father or people in its father’s family. But the assumption was that paternal resemblances and maternal resemblances were of two different orders. You resembled your father because you were grown from his seed. You resembled your mother, however, because you spent so much time in her womb that you picked up her traits—because her food had been your food, her pains your pains, her sorrows your sorrows, her soul your soul.

In one of the notes on the drawing “The Fetus in the Womb,” in da Vinci’s famous mirror writing, we find Leonardo’s clear expression of the maternal sympathy between the body of the mother and the body of the child:

In the case of the child the heart does not beat and ... breathing is not necessary to it because it receives life and is nourished from the life and food of the mother. And this food nourishes such creatures in just the same way as it does the other parts of the mother, namely the hands and other members. And a single soul governs these two bodies, and the desires and fears and their passions are common to this creature as to all the other animated members. And from this it proceeds that a thing desired by the mother is often found engraved upon those parts of the child which the mother keeps in herself at the time of such desire and sudden fear kills both mother and child.

We conclude therefore that a single soul governs the two bodies and nourishes the two. (McCurdy 173)

The Rhetoric of Sex/The Discourse of Desire

On the same drawing, fascinating enough, there is talk of a female seed:

The black races of Ethiopia are not the product of the sun; for if black gets black with child in Scythia, the offspring is black; but if a black gets a white woman with child the offspring is gray. And this shows that the seed of the mother has power in the embryo equally with that of the father. (McCurdy 173)

But from what one knows of the range of Renaissance writings, the maternal seed, for all its presumed equality with the male, was a highly metaphorical one—just as the male “seed” was to become mere metaphor upon discovery of sperm and egg reproduction. But in the common course of things, it was generally not given much credence as long as one was within the country, the family, the race.

Leonardo died in France during the late spring of 1519.

Four years later in 1523 at the tiny town of Modena, Italy, Gabriele Fallopio was born. Soon Fallopio became canon of the Modena cathedral. He studied medicine at Ferrara, then embarked on a world tour, during which he spent a while working with the great Belgian anatomist, Andrea Vesalius. He returned to Ferrara, where he now taught anatomy, having long since switched his name to the Latin form that befit a Renaissance scholar and under which he is more widely known today: Fallopius. Thence he removed to Pisa, and from Pisa, on the installment of the new grand duke of Tuscany, Cosimo I, to Padua, where, besides the chairs of anatomy, surgery, and botany, he was also created superintendent of the new botanical garden. It was Fallopius who discovered the opening of the ovarian tube of the human female into the abdominal cavity. As well, he named both the vagina (after the Latin for scabbard) and the placenta (after the Greek for pancake). He died in Padua in 1562, a year after publishing (in Venice) his single treatise. The fallopian tubes (which retained a capital Fesuitori) into the 1830s but lost it by the 1870s) have borne his name ever since.

With Fallopius’s anatomy, the spherical womb of Leonardo gave way to the pear-shaped womb we are familiar with from the modern anatomical vision. But what I have tried to dramatize in this little narrative is the force shaping the very sight itself of a visionary as great and as revered as any in our culture. Leonardo da Vinci. It is the till-now-in our-tale unnamed structuring and structuring force that can go by no better name than “discourse.” For what has metamorphosed between Leonardo and Fallopius is the discourse of the body itself—medical discourse, anatomical discourse—and that force seems strong enough to contour what is apparent to the eye of some of the greatest
2. Interlogue One. I pause here to say that, thanks to my title, I feel somewhat like the man who shouts, "Sex," then continues on to say, "Now that I have your attention . . ."

For we have come to the real, i.e., the political, topics of my essay, which are rhetoric and discourse. Sex and desire—while they may now and again provide some of the more dramatic narratives through which we shall endeavor to show how discourse can manifest and problematize itself through rhetoric—will in my essay remain largely occasions for the exploration of rhetoric and discourse themselves.

And though we will return to sex and desire again and again, and even try to plumb them for the secrets of the misfiring of so many relations called "sexual" between men and women. men and men, women and women, we shall stray from them again and again—to areas as diverse as children's picture books and children's games around a fountain in Central Park, to tales told over a calabash of beer in the rainy season of the West African Tiv, to very similar-sounding criticisms of writers as different as Ursula Le Guin and Toni Morrison, to dimly perceived objects in a house in Amherst at the edge of dawn, to the lack of operationalism in AIDS research.

But now we ask: What is this "discourse" that has so long protruded its rhetorical stumbling block into the jargon-heavy realms of literary theory, either since the Middle Ages or World War II, depending on whose account you read?

Well, here's a tale of a tale.

3. Pictures and Books. I have an eighteen-year-old daughter. And fifteen years ago, when she was three and just beginning to read (and, even more, enjoying being read to), like so many parents of those years I noticed that there were precious few children's picture books with female protagonists. Somehow, with the exception of Frances the Hedgehog, the illustrated bestiary in these books was overwhelmingly male. This struck me as ridiculous as well as unfair—and even, perhaps, dangerous.

Who knew what happened to children whose only identificatory objects resided outside their race, their class, their sex, their gender—not to say their kind?

Indeed, having proved itself powerful enough to stabilize the process by which the nation's schools had been desegregated, an entire discourse from the fifties was already in place with its unpleasant suggestions precisely about the answers to that seemingly rhetorical question.

What was a parent to do with such books when little girl animals were simply not extant?

One book that fell into my hands, back then, was a charming and well-drawn affair, about a little bear called Corduroy. What's more, Corduroy wore a pair of denim Oshkosh overalls—as did my three-year-old on most of her days at playschool. Certainly, there was a point of correspondence. Why couldn't I simply up and change Corduroy's sex in the telling? With white-out and felt-tip pen, I went so far as to remove the he's and change the pronouns to she's—in case Iva's reading had actually progressed further than I suspected.

Then I sat down, with my daughter.

I began the story—and at the first pronoun, Iva twisted around in my lap to declare: "But Daddy, it's a boy bear!"

"I don't think so," I said. "The book says 'she' right there."

"But it's not!" she insisted.

I was sure of my argument. "How do you know it's a boy bear?"

"Because he's got pants on!"

Surely she had fallen into my trap. "But you're wearing pants," I explained. "In fact, you're wearing the same kind of Oshkosh overalls that Corduroy is wearing. And you're a little girl, aren't you?"

"But Daddy," declared my three-year-old in a voice of utmost disdain at my failure to recognize the self-evident, "that's a book!"

During the same three or four months' reading in which I was learning of the rhetorical failure of the discourse of children's picture books to provide an egalitarian array of multigendered protagonists, my daughter, of course, had been learning that discourse itself.

And the fact was, she was right—I was wrong. Corduroy was a boy. No matter how unfair or how pernicious it was or might prove, the discourse of children's books made him a boy. And that discourse was so sedimented that a single instance of rhetorical variation, in 1977, registered not as a new and welcomed variant but, rather, as a mistake self-evident to a three-year-old.

"Well," I said, "let's make Corduroy a 'she.' We'll pretend she's a girl, just like you."

Iva had also learned the discourse of "let's pretend"—surely from the same books that had taught her pants (in books) meant male. She settled back in my lap and seemed satisfied enough with the revised story.

Today, in the shade of its shelf, Corduroy has dust on its upper edge. But days ago I phoned Iva in the city where she was getting ready to go off to college next year, and—in preparation for this essay—I asked her whether she had any memory of the incident.

No, she didn't. "But once I was looking through some of my old picture
books, and I remember finding *Cardano* and realizing someone had taken a pen and changed all the he's to she's. I remember wondering why they'd done it."

4. Interlogue Two. Perhaps here is the place to state some principles, then, of discourse. Discourses are plural and are learned, with language, where they function as a particular economic level in the linguistic array. They are not a set of criteria that are to be met or missed by a text. Rather, they lodge inclusively in the processes by which we make a text make sense—by which we register a text well-formed or ill-formed. They are revisable, often from within themselves. The maintenance of a discourse, like the revision of a discourse, always involves some violent rhetorical shift—though the final effects of that violence may well be in some wholly unexpected area of understanding that the discourse affects. And most discourses worth the name have complex methods—starting with simple forgetfulness—for regularly healing themselves across such rhetorical violations. And this is also the place to recall a comment by my fellow science-fiction writer, Ursula Le Guin: Only adults confuse fantasy and reality; children never do.

From this anecdote of a parent, a child, and a picture book, it is not too great a leap to the suggestion that wherever the world appears (in Plato's phrase) "illuminated by the sun of the intelligible," the light that does the illuminating is discourse.

But what our earlier tale of Fallopian and Leonardo reminds us is just how powerful a light that is. For it may make a pear look like an apple—or, indeed, an apple look like a pear.

5. Text and Text. Here are two texts that I think might have been much clarified by the notion of discourse:

For here is a young woman, who signs herself J. R. Dunn,* writing a critique of a recent article by Ursula Le Guin in a letter to *Monad*, an informal critical journal devoted to science fiction:

> In her opening pages, Le Guin stated that: "... in the European tradition the hero who does great deeds is a white man... human women were essentially secondary, taking part in the story only as mothers and wives of men, beloved by or the seducers of men, victims of or rescued by men. Women did not initiate action, except passively... the great deeds were men's deeds."

I don't think I'm mistaken in taking this as the essay's key premise. That being so, it's unnecessary to go on any further: My argument with Le Guin lies right there.

That passage represents the standard feminist historical model in action:

that before the modern era women were victims at best, a mute inglorious mass marked by biology, allowed no contribution to any branch of human endeavor, the history of the female sex is a vast honeycomb of oppression, suffering and degradation. This interpretation has been institutionalized for two decades and it's late in the day to pick a fight over it. But I believe that it is in error, and those adhering to it are seriously contradicted by the record.

Dunn then goes on to give a catalogue of great women of accomplishment in the West, from warrior queens such as Telesilla of Argos, Zenobia of Palmyra, and Boadicea of Great Britain, on to women cultural figures, such as Sappho, Anna Commena, Juliana of Norwich, Christine de Pisan, Vittoria Colonna, and Anne Bradstreet, punctuated with a list of the great tragic heroines from Greek drama.

And toward her conclusion (I abridge), Dunn writes:

I'm not suggesting that Le Guin doesn't know any of this. I'm sure she does. It just doesn't connect. I won't speculate on why except to note that ideology tends to restrict critical thinking. This happens to the best of us. It's happened to me... .

I accept the proposition that feminism is divided into egalitarian and various radical branches. I strongly support the egalitarian position on grounds of logic and common sense. The other variants, "gender" or "radical" feminism, what have you, I can only reject, seeing the nature of the "facts" they're based on. I object to any contention that the two streams are in any way one and the same.

I'll go on to say I can picture few greater social tragedies than egalitarian feminism collapsing in the wreckage of the weirder varieties.

I hope it will not simply be a jejune exercise to point out that, in her pursuit of logic and common sense, Dunn has misread Le Guin and accomplished a truly astonishing rewrite of history—a misreading and a rewriting that can be aplied apart by the careful insertion of a notion of discourse that will, perhaps, yield us its analytical fruit.

But before I do so, I want to offer another text, this time on racial matters, that seems ripe for the same sort of misreading that Le Guin's text has fallen victim to in Dunn.


For some time now I have been thinking about... a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as "knowledge." This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American
literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence—which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture—has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. . . . There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the white male view, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States.5

It is all too easy to see, at some not-so-distant point, such a paragraph from Morrison taking its place within a critique of some fancied radical liberation movement much like Dunn's critique of "radical" feminism; and some young reader, straight from a perusal of the paperback shelves of his or her local college bookstore, bringing out the currently available paperback editions of Phillis Wheatley's Poems and the slave narratives from Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass and Harriet E. Wilson's Our Nig and Martin Delany's Blakes and the stories of Charles W. Chesnutt and novels of Iola Harper and Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright and Chester Himes and William Demby, and citing the National Book Award to Ralph Ellison and McPherson's and Johnson's and even Morrison's own Pulitzer Prize, in order to declare: "How can you say that there's a conspiracy to keep centuries of black American writers from being considered a literary presence . . . ?"

The safest place to begin to answer either Dunn's criticism of Le Guin or my hypothetical critic of Morrison is with the historical truism: Things as they are today are not necessarily the same as they were even ten or fifteen years ago, much less twenty-five or thirty, much less fifty or seventy-five years gone. We can only hope that point will hold the arguments stable long enough to look in more detail at both Le Guin's and Morrison's initial statements. For they share a number of rhetorical features.

On the one hand, "white males" are the putative villains of both passages. (Are they heterosexual? But of course. We do not even have to ask—for there is a discourse already in place that makes that at least as inarguable as the sex of Corduroy in 1977.) On the other hand, the words "tradition" and "traditional" in both take a deceptively en passant role among the opening sentences of each. And it is within the notion of tradition that what we call discourse—traditionally—hides. Articulating it might have avoided some of these subsequent problems. Had Le Guin or Morrison been able to foreground it clearly, instead of leaving it implicit under the "traditions" both are citing and for which the "heterosexual white male" more than anything else stands as a marker, a name, an indicator of a dominant current in the ideology of the present century, their passages might be less subject to such accusations and misrepresentations.

I'd like to think that if, instead of, "In the European tradition, the hero who does great deeds is a white man" Le Guin had written, "In traditional European discourse, the hero who does great deeds is a white man," Dunn's subsequent confusions might have been less inevitable.

Or if Morrison had written, "This knowledge holds that in the traditional discourse of canonical, American literature, that literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States," then perhaps my hypothetical critic might have been less confused.

Of course, discourse is a strong and meaningful concept for me. It represents an economic order of language that is apart from tradition itself as it is apart from doctrine and ideology; though it leans on aspects of all of them, as all of them lean on aspects of discourse. But I am aware that possibly what characterizes Dunn or my other hypothetical spoilt-sport critic, is that the concept of discourse may be what they themselves lack.

For what discourse does above all things is to assign import. Discourse, remember, is what allows us to make sense of what we see, and hear, and experience. Yes, the Zenobias and the Christine de Pisans, the Wilsons and Chesnotts and Hurstons were there. But discourse is what tells us what is central and what is peripheral—that is, what is a mistake, an anomaly, an accident, a joke. It tells us what to pay attention to and what to ignore. It tells us what sort of attention to pay. It tells us what is anomalous and therefore nonserious. And till very recently "anomalous and nonserious" is how the accomplishments of women, whether in the arts or in the world, were judged. And the writings of blacks in this country were, until very recently, considered even more of an accident.

The rewriting of history I've spoken of is simply that it would be hard to make a list of the works that have done more to change the discourse of gender so that, today, Dunn or I can walk into our local bookstores and buy a copy of Christine de Pisan's City of Ladies, that did not include Le Guin's works, such as The Left Hand of Darkness (1969) and The Dispossessed (1974). It would be hard to make a list of those works that had helped change the discourse of race so that we can now walk into the same bookstore and buy any of the paperback volumes in the Schomburg Library of nineteenth-century black women writers, that did not include Morrison's own novels Sula (1973) and Song of Solomon (1977).
What it is necessary to remember, in order to make discourse a strong concept, is that it is the materialist side of reason and ratiocination, of understanding and history. It is all very well to explain that electric lights were simply not very common seventy or eighty years ago. Or that, even in my own early childhood in the 1940s, our perfectly comfortable country house, which we drove to every summer, was lit by kerosene lanterns. Or that, at the same time, the country house of my uncle, a fine and upstanding judge in the Brooklyn Domestic Relations Court, had no indoor toilet facilities but only an outhouse in the back.

It is another thing, however, to explain to people today, whether they remember kerosene lamps or not, that, in a pre-electric light era, the creation of illumination always meant an expenditure of time and physical energy at least as great as that of lighting a match which is already several times more than turning on a light switch—and the vast majority of times meant an expenditure of physical energy far greater than that, an expenditure, which, to be efficient, was embedded in a social schema that involved getting candles, fuels, regularly trimming wicks and cleaning the glass chimneys, chopping wood and stoking fires, so that then even the casual creation of light in such an age was an entirely different social operation from what it is today. One might even say that, in such an age, light could not be casually created. Light was at the nexus of a great deal more physical energy and daily planning. Thus, because of our vastly different relation to it, light itself was a different social object from what it is today. And thus, every mention of light, in any text from that period, whether it be in the deadest of hackneyed metaphors or in the most vibrant and vivid poetry, is referring to a different order of object.

What we have begun to explore here, of course, is the discourse of light. It is the discourse that, explored in enough detail, can reinvigorate the evil, distant, flickering lights that haunt American writers from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Ambrose Bierce, even as they turn into clichés in the later writings of Lovecraft; we must remember that initially such lights usually meant fires in the distance—forest fires or homes caught from some light source (got out of control), which, at the time, was always a flame source too.

In the discourse of sexual roles, certainly the greatest material disturber of traditional roles was the spread, after World War II, in the late forties and early fifties (even more so than the Pill), of the home washer-dryer combination. Until that time, in any family of more than two people, the washing, hanging out by hand, and ironing of clothes took up a minimum of two full days a week; and that was what made it a foregone conclusion, as self-evident to women at the time as it was to men, that in order to have any sort of family, someone would have to have at least two days a week in a small family (of four, say), and three or more in a large one, to devote to this task.

The reduction of the week’s laundry from two or three days to two or three hours was as traumatic to the discourse of sexual roles as the introduction of electricity and the light switch was to the discourse of light.

We can say, of course, that things have changed—and have specifically changed in terms of race and sex. But I hope we have some way now of perceiving the extremely strong statement we are making when we say, for example, that the discourse of sex and the discourse of race have changed far more—catastrophically more—since 1956 (to pick an arbitrary date the year when the nation’s schools were, by law, desegregated) than has the discourse of light since World War II.

6. Interlogue Three. Etyonologically, the term “discourse” is a Latin word that refers to an old, oral, Roman race track.

At a modern race track, spectators sit in seats on the outside of the track and look in on the runners. At a discourse, however, the spectators entered the central section of the track before the race, took their seats—or more often simply walked about from one side to the other—while the racers coursed around and around them.

With such an object at its origins, it is hard to avoid metaphorizing. One entered the discourse and left it only at specified positions. The discourse encircled one; it surrounded the spectator, moving around and around him or her.

It is also hard not to speculate on the nature of its initial shift into metaphor. Though it’s anyone’s guess as to how the discourse became a metaphor for reason, understanding, and ratiocination, since discourses were places of much betting, it’s probable that the kind of head scratching, the touting up of odds, and the endless speculative conversation on the merits of the racers characteristic today of horse-racing tracks were a part of daily life at the discourse and thus prompted the metaphorical shift.

But even that’s speculation.

No one knows for sure.

Today, however, the OED gives us under “discourse”:  

1. Onward course; process or succession of time, events, actions, etc. Obs.
2. “The act of the understanding, by which it passes from premises to consequences.” (Johnson); reasoning, thought, ratiocination; the faculty of reasoning, reason, rationality.
3. Communication of thought by speech; “mutual intercourse of language.” (Johnson).
1.4 Shorter Views

And again:

1. To run, move, travel over a space, region, etc.
2. To reason. (To turn over in the mind; to think over.)
3. To hold discourse, to speak with another or others, talk, converse; to discuss a matter, confer.
4. To speak or write at length on a subject; to utter or pen a discourse. (To utter, say, speak or write formally.)

But we are basically interested here in meaning number two within the cloud of rhetorical connotations meanings three and four have set in motion—around and around it.

That arbiter of seventeenth-century prose, Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682), wrote “Hydrophobia or a discourse of the sepulchral urns lately found in Norfolk” (1658)—that is to say, a discourse of, not a discourse on. The forty-seven-page essay represents Browne’s understanding, his reasoning around, his comprehension of the urns; it presents the information from life and letters the wise doctor possessed (or that possessed him) to bring to bear upon them that made the urns make sense—and, in its concluding thanatopsis, the sense that then soared from them.

But, as I hope my brief example of Dunn has already shown, without the notion of discourse—or something that stands in its stead—there can be no sophisticated idea of history.

7. Discourse and Desire. To explore a discourse is inevitably to tell a story: At such and such a time, people did this and that; thus they thought and felt one thing and another.

One of my favorite storytellers is a Frenchman named Raymond Roussel. The method he used to tell a number of extraordinarily far-ranging and imaginative stories, as he outlined it in an essay published shortly after his death in 1934, Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres, involved taking two phrases, word for word identical or different only by, say, one letter of one word, in which every word had at least two distinct meanings, and thus had two distinct meanings as phrases. His most famous example is: Les lettres de blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard and Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard, which mean, respectively, “The white letters inscribed on the cushions of the old billiard table,” and “The white man’s letters written about the troops of the old bandit.” (Needless to say, the vieux pillard—the old bandit—in Roussel’s story is black.) Roussel saw his various tales as attempts to maneuver logically from one phrase, which we would find in the first sentence of his tale, to the second, which we would find in the last. En route, again and again, Roussel constructed incidents around phrases that had a more or less self-evident meaning but that could be reread to mean something else (“What do you do with a stiff neck?” “What do you do with a stiff . . . neck?”); I have always taken the fact that the tales of this wealthy French homosexual eccentric—when freed from the constraints of ordinary narrative discourse by the systematicity of his eccentric method—again and again swooped into the subject of race, of blacks, of Africa (Parmi les noirs, Impression d’Afrique) as a cultural index of just what a pervasive discourse race was for Europe—just as you will find, if you try the exercise in English, the secondary meanings so often have a sexual side.

The discourse of race is intimately tied to the discourse of sex; the term race, until the late eighteenth century, meant family—specifically a large, ancient, powerful family, such as the Sforza race, the Medici race. When Leonardo wrote of the “Ethiopian races” in the notes he made on “Foetus in the Womb” sometime between 1510 and 1512, one of the reasons for the plural, races, is that, within the discourse of the time, what he was saying, denotatively, was “the Ethiopian families.” The notion of “race” as we know it would seem to begin in an anxiety to locate a unit, still mediated by heredity, larger than the family yet somehow within its conceptual economy, but not coextensive with the nation. And there is no way to have heredity without sex.

But even while we have spoken of the rhetoric of sex, and explored some of the relations of those rhetorical figures, we have stayed, till now, purposefully away from the idea of desire.

Desire is a very scary and uneasy notion. Its mark is absence. Accordingly, a positivistic culture frequently finds itself at a loss to explore it or elaborate its workings.

The two doctrinal principles that most of us have access to come respectively from Freud and his most astute reader, Lacan:

Said Freud: Repetition is desire.

Said Lacan: What one desires is the desire of the Other.

There are, of course, other ways to tell stories besides Roussel’s. Roussel expended extraordinary imaginative energy to make sentences that were phonically all but identical mean different things.

But suppose we tell two apparently different stories—and try to elaborate a discursive structure in which they can be seen as one.

Despite having a daughter, I come to you as a gay black male. But it is a reasonable assumption that some straight white males linger somewhere in my heredity. I find straight white males interesting—and sometimes, personally, sympathetic. A few years ago, I wrote a book, The Motion of Light in Water," an autobiography that tried to delineate for me
what it meant to grow up in an American city as a black, gay, male writer of paraliterary fictions. In the book I talked very openly about my own particular sexual experiences and sexual fetishes.

I assumed that the book would be most interesting to others in marginalized positions, vis-à-vis those straight white males who demonize so much of marginal discourse. The book received its share of approbation from black readers (female and male), white readers (female and male), and gay readers (female and male). Nevertheless, by far the largest number of people who have come up to talk to me about it—on more than one occasion now, after one or another lecture such as this—have grabbed me by the shoulder, dragged me into a corner, sat me down, and begun to tell me their problems, then asked me, with great concern, what, from my marginal position, I thought they ought to do about them, are straight white males.

One would almost think they felt empowered to take anything the society produced, no matter how marginal, and utilize it for their own ends—dare we say “exploit it” —certainly to take advantage of it as long as it’s around. And could this possibly be an effect of discourse? Perhaps it might even be one we on the margins might reasonably appropriate to our profit or perhaps some of us already have.

Most of their problems, of course, involved their relations with females—some white, some black, some gay, some straight. I have heard an extraordinary range of stories—and what these fellows are attracted to, oh my women friends, is amazing. Some want women of one race, some want them of another, some want women with glasses and some want women who are overweight, some want women with high IQs, and some want women with narrow shoulders set slightly forward—indeed, the range of tales I have heard from these fellows since 1988 when my book was published is enough to make the variety of vanilla heterosexual male desire seem a seething pit of perversions quite as interesting as any to be found in any S&M bar, lesbian, gay, or straight.

But despite that range, I find myself again and again making the same rhetorical intervention. For here we are centrally sunk in the Discourse of Desire.

What again and again I find myself saying to these men is: Can you utter the simple statement to the troublesome object of your desire:

“I like you, do you like me?”

And what is this terror of rejection that is so strong that it almost invariably drives one half, the other, or both of these enunciations out of the realm of articulation?

Doubtless you can understand why both paired clauses are essential. If you cannot say, “I like you,” she will simply never know. If you cannot follow it with, “Do you like me?” you will never know. More to the point, if you cannot say, “I like you,” she will never know you have any emotions. And if you can’t say “Do you like me?” she will be sure, probably rightly, you are unable to evoke any interest, care, or concern with hers. This alone is why, “I like you. Let’s fuck,” does not accomplish the same communicative ends.

In three out of four cases, these fellows will eventually ask: “But why doesn’t she say it to me?”

To which I answer: “That is not the point. You’re the one who claims to be in pain. What are you going to do about it—for what I tell you is as likely to get you out of it as anything else you can do. It is certainly more effective than waiting in silent agony or clinging about in over-energetic exuberance for her to see through your sedimented silences or eruptive vulgarities your central yearning self.”

I say this rather gently, of course. For one thing one learns in fifty years is that, though most of us eventually learn to ask, more or less, for what we want, it is always more or less impossible to ask for what we need. (If we could ask for it, by definition we wouldn’t need it.) That can only be given us. Finally, we are left to conflate, inarticulately and by our behavior alone, to make sure there is as much of it available in the landscape as is possible, in the hope that, eventually, we will be fortunate enough to receive some.

But I have known a number of women who, when a man became interested in her (when he manages to communicate the first part of that oh so important “dip” which, wait around through whatever number of dates and get-togethers they feel are reasonable, for the second part—for the other shoe, as it were, to drop. And, when it doesn’t, they break off the relationship secure in the fact that there are leaving a situation where, for whatever reasons (at this point, the why is no longer her concern), their own feelings will never really be solicited—probably about anything.

I recall one young man, deeply in love with a woman who seemed, certainly, fond enough of him to accept dates with him and TV viewings with him. He asked my advice on several occasions. “But does she like me?” he wanted to know.

“Why don’t you ask?” I suggested.

“I mean, I know she likes me. But does she like me?”

“Again, if you don’t ask, you may never find out.”

“I’ve told her that I liked her,” he complained.

“Without any,” I said, “are: ‘I like you, do you like me?’ Of course.” I added, “if you ask, you risk the possibility of being told, ‘No.’ But isn’t that better than having to wait and wonder and not know for who knows how long?”
When, after much rhetoric, he allowed as how it was, I thought the problem finally reduced to that never simple matter of gritting one's teeth and indulging in that terrible bravery that has to be breached in one form or another in every situation of desire.

But a few days later, he was back.

"I can't ask her," he declared.

"You're that frightened of being told, 'No'," I asked, "that you would give up the possibility of being told 'Yes'?"

"It's not that. It's because of what it would mean if I asked her."

"What would it mean?" I asked.

"It would mean, like, well—and here, I hope what becomes clear is the structure of the discourse in which we have been involved all along—"it would mean, somehow, that I was insulting her. That she was the kind of girl who was used to guys asking her, all the time, if she wanted to go to bed with them, if she liked them—it would mean like, well, I thought she was some kind of whore. And I couldn't stand that."

"You mean," I said, "that if she had any sexual feelings for you of the sort that you have been regaling me with for the past six weeks, that have been destroying your sleep and plaguing your dreams, she would be a whore."

"Well, like, no."

"What about," I said, "like, yes."

"Well, like it,"

"But not exactly it."

"Like it, close enough," I said.

The young woman broke off the relationship after another week. And wisely, I suspect. But I hope this tale alone is enough to suggest what a violent rhetorical intervention in the discourse of patriarchy, with its saints and whores (for that of course is the discourse we speak of here), the simple bipartite statement and question, "I like you. Do you like me?" represents.

The discourse of desire, at work throughout the discourse of patriarchy, maintains such a situation, with its nebulous orders—want, need, and desire itself—notoriously impossible to pin down. For as soon as one systematically relates them (say, in the provisionally brilliant Lacanian schema: When all the elements of need are satisfied in the situation of want, the remainder is desire), ordinary language, with its italics and special emphases, manages to displace them soon enough so that all we are left is a memory of a momentary bit of rhetorical brilliance.

Well, that is the first story I tell.

But sometimes I tell a second story. Though I assure you, for all its radically different sound, it is as close in meaning to "I like you. Do you like me," as the opening and closing phrases of a tale by Roussel are close in sound.

That tale is the dark knowledge my own life in the margins provides.

Very simply, that second story runs: "The desire to be loved is sadism. The desire to love is masochism."

To unravel the track from one to the other in the complex Discourse of Desire—to show that both inhabit a single discourse—is to evoke the Freudian notion that the realm of desire is the mirror realm of ordinary motivations. Freud told us that a perversion was the opposite of a neurosis: In the childhood machinations of psychic development, either we sexualize something or it becomes a neurotic character trait.

To take pleasure from imposing your emotions on another person is sadism—a much easier translation to follow. But then, what else is the open, pleasurable, sincere, and aboveboard statement: "I like you?" Isn't that, if it's sincerely stated, a pleasurable imposition of one's emotions on another, and thus, when it is shot through with desire, a terrifyingly difficult enunciation?

To take pleasure from the emotions of others over and above your own is masochism—an equally easy translation. What else then is the open, pleasurable, sincere, and aboveboard request: "Do you like me?" Again, when such a question is shot through with desire, isn't its asking equally terrifying?

For you must have noticed—by now, certainly—that while some people are afraid of saying one, they are terrified of speaking the other—terrified to the point of sweating, heart-pounding, dry-tongued paralysis.

And the difference between ordinary fear and terror is the difference between the social fear of sexual rejection and the totality of the universe-obliterating failure of both the self and the other that hones among desire's ancient and hideously deep foundations.

Certainly we would stop our interrogations and discursive translations with the glib observation that every relation to start pleasurably, then, requires a little healthy sadism, a little healthy masochism—on everyone's part. But it is that notion of pleasure, and its dark relation to desire, that completes the identification of the tales. For, again, we all know—and know that the assignment has no necessary relation to who has what genital configuration—that there are simply too many people who, though they can manage to handle either one of those paired clauses are absolutely broken before the other.

There are too many people who can tell you what they want but who are constitutionally incapable of responding to what someone else might want. There are too many people who are endlessly concerned with what others want but seem to have the same constitutional inability to articulate their own wishes.

Again, the mark of desire is lack—and (pace Freud) repetition. So that once again, if you want to be loved to the intensity of desire—
so that you seek that situation out again and again, so that the love of
someone else inflames you, so that even another’s miming of the emblems
of such a situation is enough to excite, so that the form of anothers love is a lack in you that, no matter how many times it is ful-
filled by whatever act of love, it can never be finally and wholly sated, be-
cause it is the form of your desire itself, then your behavior in the world to
acquire what you seek must fall, one way or the other—to the extent
that it is in excess of any real possibility—into the forms of sadism.

And if what you want is to love another, again to the point of desire—
so that you seek out opportunities to do so again and again, so that the
possibility of another to love is what inflames you, so that anothers miming
that she or he approves, deserves, demands that love is enough to ex-
cite, that the form of love expressed in you is a lack, that, no matter how
many times it is repeated by your behavior, can never be finally and
wholly exhausted, because it is the form of your desire itself, then your
behavior in the world to acquire what you seek must fall, one way or the
other—to the extent that it is in excess of any real possibility—into the
forms of masochism.

"I like you; do you like me?"

But the darker and more dangerous tale revealed beneath it is a clash of
sadistic and masochistic imperatives: "The desire to be loved is sadism;
the desire to love is masochism."

For what are both these tales finally about?

Power. Power is what distinguishes the psychic discourse of desire
from the social rhetoric of sex. The rhetoric of sex commands enough
strength to make a man or a woman walk the streets of the city for hours,
to drive alone or in groups, searching for a proper gap in the communicative
wall through which desire may somehow show. But desire, to the extent
that it is a material and social discourse, commands power enough to found and destroy cities, to reform the very shape of the city itself,
laying down new avenues and restructuring whole neighborhoods
within it. And desire—paradoxically—is what holds erect that barrier to
sex that so much of our rhetoric, as well as our actions of which finally
rhetoric is a part, breaks against and crumbles.

The power involved in desire is so great that when caught in an actual
rhetorical manifestation of desire—a particular sexual act, say—it is
sometimes all but impossible to untangle the complex webs of power
that shoot through it from various directions, the power relations that
are the act and that constitute it:

You’re having sex with someone. Very well.

Whose scenario is it?

Who is exerting the most physical energy to bring it off?

What is the social value assigned to each player in the particular act?

What sorts of energy, action, and articulation are needed to transform
or reverse any one of these?

During such power analyses we find just how much the matrix of de-
sire (the Discourse of Desire and the matrix of power it manifests here
and masks itself) favors the heterosexual male, even if there is no such
actor involved. Whoever is doing what the heterosexual male would be
doing usually comes out on top. Though his 1915 footnote makes per-
fectly clear that, by the use of the word "masculine" he simply meant "ac-
active," this may nevertheless have been part of the thrust of Freud’s state-
ment: "that libido is invariably and necessarily of a masculine nature,
whether it occurs in men or in women and irrespective of whether its ob-
ject is a man or a woman." It is a statement that, if taken in the biological
sense (which the same footnote excludes from the reading), is precisely
as ridiculous as "the urge to sneeze is invariably and necessarily of a mas-
culine nature, whether it occurs in men or women."

What we on the margins have been most able to appropriate of this
discourse is the power analysis that so much of the discourse of patriar-
chy is structured precisely to mystify.

In many cases, its demystification is precisely what has allowed us to
survive.

8. Discourse contra Discourse. Rich with its materiality and explicative
force, the idea of discourse that I have been putting forward is an exciting
one and a seductive one to those first coming to history.

In 1849 the postage stamp was introduced in England. Before that
date, when a letter was sent, the recipient paid the postman on delivery.
After that date, the sender paid—and suddenly letter writing became a
species of vanity publishing. To know this is to be able to make sense of
a range of sentences found in dozens of early nineteen-century novels
that often appear as some form of "From then on, she would never re-
ceive his letters." Specifically what that means is: she refused to pay the
postman for the letters—and they were returned to the sender. At once,
we have an explanation for questions ranging from why so many letters
from before that date were preserved (what you paid for you kept), to
why there was no junk mail before then (who would pay for it?), to why
the correspondents themselves were often so witty (if you knew you had
to make your letters worth the three or four pence your recipient had
to shell out—eighty or ninety cents at todays prices—you were likely
both to write at length and to try to have something to say). We begin to
see such letters fitting into the social matrix very differently from the way
our mail does, and we begin to develop a postal discourse.
In 1851, the lead paint tube was introduced, which meant that suddenly artists could keep with them amounts of paint much smaller than in the pig-bladders full of hand-ground pigments, traditional since before Leonardo. With the invention of the metal ferrule in the same few years, which held the bristles to the brush and flattened them, it became far easier for artists to travel from their studios and paint nature; the average size of the canvases suddenly shrank; the possibility of an amateur painter became real. Hordes of painters now descended across the landscape—and Impressionism was the result, as dependent on that bit of soft lead foil as on any aesthetic considerations. The relation of the artist to society, through all the economic changes from that technological development, which, through that change, changed the relation of society to art, resulted in a major reformation of the discourse of art.

In the early 1870s at Bayreuth, Richard Wagner, at the opening of that concert hall, so as not to break the atmosphere created by the music, for the first time in Western concerts initiated the convention that audiences not applaud between movements of symphonies or string quartets; now, as the Bayreuth Festspielhaus moved on to the production of operas, he put up signs in the lobby that no talking was to occur during the performance; and, to help the audience concentrate on the music and stage action, he turned the house lights off during the performance of an opera, so that the audience watched the performance enveloped in the dark, with light only on the stage. Elizabethan theaters had performed under sunlight at the open-roofed Globe and Blackfriars Jacobean theater, as well as the theater of Racine and Molière, the later theater of Mozart and Beaumarchais, were all theaters of light. But when, under Wagner’s direction, the house lights were lowered—and the tradition spread from Bayreuth through all the opera houses and finally all the theaters of the West—a different relation was marked between art and audience, a change in the relationship, which had been growing throughout the rise of Romanticism, a change that we can read in metamorphoses of theatrical discourse.

The initial excitement from the discovery of material changes controlling discourse (these changes are often so total we do not realize they render one side or the other of a cultural discontinuity set in place by money and technology: the new and modern gas lamps, say, by which Wagner’s Festspielhaus was lighted and darkened, as well as the great steam curtain that produced the billows of effective stage fog, which, as George Bernard Shaw noted in his recollections of the Ring performances of the late 1890s, “made the theater smell like a laundry”) at first produces a kind of vertigo in the young intellectual newly alert to the complexities of history.11

It is perhaps, then, time to cite the example of the intellectual figure most responsible for the current spread of the notion of discourse as a historical modeling tool, Michel Foucault. When we have been considering the problems raised by our own studies of discourse, nothing is more exciting than the essay he published at the end of his methodological study of the problems of discursive study (The Archaeology of Knowledge, where he tears down his own former notion of “épistémès” and replaces it with a theory of discourses, utterances, genealogies, and apparatuses), “L’Ordre du discours” (“The Form of Discourse”), rather frightfully translated as “The Discourse on Language.”12 In the course of this essay, while he exhorts us to look for chance, discontinuity, and materiality, Foucault warns us away from the idea of founding subjects, originating experiences, universal mediation, and the tyranny of the signifier.

I think Foucault would be the first to remind us that, in the midst of that most anxious paragraph on our Leonardo drawing, concerning the paradox of Africa as Italy had to see it, there is that anomalous “female seed.” Look at it, research it, seek it out in a range of synchronous and diachronous texts, before deciding precisely what kind of anomaly it is.

And the current discourse of patriarchy and the Discourse of Desire that suffuses it, and—now and again, here and there at its several points—seeks to subvert it, is just as materially grounded as any of the historical ones I have cited. Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, none of the historical ones, when studied in their specificity, their discontinuity, their exteriority, are any less complex than we know from our first-hand experience the discourse of desire and patriarchy to be.

9. Interlogue Four. From the array of voices with which discourse addresses us, one insists:

“Return a moment to the homilies with which, at the end of section seven, you effected your utopian turn, and allow me to ask: Why is it necessary for sadism to be about all these emotions? Why can’t it simply be about pain? Does it take an active anticipation of your argument on my part to provoke you to the cool reason that your text keeps putting forward as your stance? Soon you will be explaining that the analogous relation between the sexual and the social that is mistaken for causal is, most generously, the structure of superstition and most oppressively the structure of oppression itself. Why, then, must you make this spurious analogy between the psychological and the sexual? You yourself have argued that The Authoritarian Personality by Adorno and the Frankfurt Group first validated the notion of the causal relation between the behavior of the Nazi bureaucracy of the thirties and forties and sexual sadism, and thus functions on exactly the same level as the discursive origin of an oppressive
structure as political as the medical institution of homosexuality that allows heterosexuality itself to come into existence. Would you actually argue that I am, whether with my breasts thrust into black leather or basket heavy in a studded jock, the One Always There, who, when everyone else is redeemed, can be thrown to the dogs, at the eye of the patriarchal cyclone you’ve already located as the straight white (need I add?) vanilla male? As you make your accusations of appropriation, surely you’ve noticed the totality of the structure you excoriate: with Jung, he steals, in the form of the anima, whatever from the straight female; with the rhetoric of ‘latent homosexuality,’ he appropriates all he could possibly use from the real thing: in the emergent rhetoric of transsexualism, as the center of discourse, as he learns that most transsexuals are lesbians anyway, he takes over lesbianism for himself (as he has it already in any number of lesbian scenes in any number of pornographic films); and now you’d toss him my whip and chains, along with that Freudian reduction that claims, in a patriarchally produced scarcity field of sexually available females, the only way he can get by is with a little ‘healthy’ sadism! Hal! I’ll take the sick kind, thank you very much. No wonder he comes out on top. That’s simply where you’ve placed him! Would you settle for some argument in which everyone, even your straight white vanilla male, needs his very own Other—and claim that is, somehow, something new? The discourse—your privileged term—has been contoured for generations: Jew, forget the insults that face its text, and look at The Merchant of Venice. Woman, forget the insults and look at Madame Bovary (“sitting like a toadstool on a dung heap,” writes Flaubert in his novel). Sissy, forget the insults, and look at Hitchcock’s Frenzy. Gay black male, look at Mapplethorpe’s Man in Polyester Suit. There’s something there (haven’t we all been told?), universal, transcendent, aesthetic—good for you. Just swallow; and always insist to yourself that what must be swallowed is something other than the self-respect that is not, of course, his. Well, neither my sadism nor my masochism runs in that particular direction. But even by talking for me this much, you excite me to the position of that dark and eccentric figure lurking at the horizon of Romanticism, speaking all you dare not resist. Well, your cowardice is not masochism. And my articulation is not sadism. Don’t think because you speak, or rather mumble, in my stead, I can somehow be silent or you can silence this rhetorical fistulae.

“What would happen if you really (i.e., politically) extirpated that metaphoric idiocy from your proposed discourse of desire—idiot not because metaphors are themselves the idiot things Western philosophers have been claiming since Plato, but because metaphors badly formed are the discursive elements that mystify and stabilize oppressive systems. Describe for me the picture book about the little bear who discovers the pleasures of pain, of degradation, and who learns the delights of giving it, receiving it. (Let’s get really radical with your white-out and your felt-tip!) You and I might even suggest, one to the other, it teaches that you must make sure to exercise such pleasures only with someone else who appreciates it, complete with ‘safe words’ for ending sessions and ‘talking out periods’ at the start (you can find such in any reasonable manual of S&M practices with which, today, I must vacate my personal reason). There’s your role model, you’ll say. There’s your certificate declaring you a member of the greater society of sexual variation. And, my friend, when such picture books are neither laughable nor politically correct, but as common as Candies, then, rest assured, I shall tell you not that I accept your Discourse of Desire in all its utopian naiveté; rather, that will be the very moment I shall at least and at last be able to hold up both and demand why my desires must be policed in the one, while his are still so untrammeled, unmarked, and free that they need not even be mentioned in the other—the reticence creating the margin across which he creates himself by creating me but across which, yes, I plunder him regularly. (Oh, sing it, honey: ‘Not only is it a boy bear, Daddy! It’s a straight, white, heterosexual, vanilla, boy bear—in case you hadn’t noticed.’) That will be the moment when at last and at least I can prove to you that precisely at the point I would seize my desire in its freedom, there you would name my particular form of it the core and kernel of all policing the embarrassing Hegelian wish to rule and be ruled. As Freud and Marx gave you tools to analyze this on its own terms, you insistently equivocate one set of causes with the other and leave democracy a consumer travesty of itself through the people’s ignorance of what this ruling and being ruled is really about—then you demonize it by claiming that, whenever it rises into articulation clear enough to signal conflict, somehow its currying political torture is itself one with sexual torture, and lay it at my terrifying, cloven foot.

“Well, I’ll tell you. Anyone who believes your vaunted power relations in a session of consensual sexual torture are the same as those in a session of imposed political torture is simply and brutally ignorant of both—and deserves (the political discourse of the time demands—as ‘shave and a haircut’ demands ‘two bits’) whatever happens . . .? ‘Him or her, my friend, no more than I.’ ‘No one deserves whatever happens.’ That deserving can only be enforced.

“Ruling and being ruled, the very deployment of political power, the walls of reality and every attempt to scale, breach, or reposition them—that is the material ground and limit of your discourse. Who speaks now is precisely the devil that discourse has placed here to frighten you off.
the very question—who lied to you that ruling and being ruled are causally entailed with my desires, just as you lied to him that, in his cowardice, he is as strong as I. But learn, mon semblable, mon frère, not that I am you; rather that you are not me—even while the organization of our oppressions may be the same. Learn, too, by so learning, how different what all your patriarchal logic tells you is an identity is from the cored out, resonant hollow of our differences.

“Those discursive identities are there to kill me, not you—whomever you, the privileged speaking subject who allows me only to function as your ventriloquized puppet, are.”

10. Interpretation and Perception. In the discussion of discourse a concept eventually must arise. It seems to be a part of the modern discourse of discourse itself. It is given by the phrase, “Interpretation precedes perception.” To understand it, we might start with an alternate narrative as to how humans perceive things. This alternate narrative of perceived meaning commences something like this.

We begin by perceiving abstract colors, shapes, sounds; eventually, by relating them to one another, to other sets of abstract colors, shapes, and sounds both temporally and spatially, we build up a picture of objects, events, and finally of reality. Once we have an objective model, we interpret it and ask what we can understand of it.

The problem with this story of perception is that, from both neurological study and introspection, it just doesn’t seem to be the way the brain—or the mind—is set up. Interpretation of vision begins, for example, as soon as light hits the retina. Cats see horizontal lines and vertical lines with different nerve bundles. And some nerve cells in the frog’s eye respond to small, dark moving dots, which might be any one of the range of edible bugs, while other nerves respond to broad patches of general color, which might be land, lily pad, or whatever. There may, indeed, be electrical impulses moving around the brain that are signs for abstract colors or even shapes. But by the time they register in anything like “mind,” interpretation of what they are has well begun.

Introspectively, we humans can supply our own evidence for the priority of interpretation over perception. I recall waking up last autumn in my Amherst apartment, in that dim period when the sky beyond the bedroom and bathroom windows was still deep blue. Looking for my hairbrush, I wondered if for some reason I’d left it in the kitchen. And so I stepped in through the kitchen door—

Ah, there it was, across the room on the small triangular table by the sink, its black plastic handle sticking out behind the edge of a colander left there from last night’s spaghetti.

I took a step across the linoleum floor—

But now I saw all this dust on the handle’s edge. Gray fluff was visible in three small heaps generally spread from one end to the other.

I took another step, and what I’d seen as a black plastic handle with the long, three-peaked mound of dust on it, became the handle of one of my kitchen knives. The handle was black bakelite. What I’d seen as dust was the light glinting off the three steel bolts that, level with the bakelite, held the blade in place…

The point here is that often we do not have enough perceptual information to make out what something is; but in such situations, we do not perceive—at first—that we have only partial information. We perceive some thing; then, sometimes only a moment later, we perceive some other thing that contradicts the first. Those contradictions are the sign that we eventually learn to interpret as incomplete perceptual information. Eventually, if the contradictions go on long enough and will not resolve, we perceive an abstract color or shape, whose substance or full form we cannot know. But such a perception represents an even higher order of interpretive complexity than the perception of concrete objects and events—rather than a simple and atomic element on which perception itself is grounded.

Abstract entities are a discourse. The person or the small dog we catch out of the corner of our eye when we know no person or dog is there becomes, when we look at it fully, an overcoat hanging from a hook on the inside of the open closet door, the overturned shoe box fallen from the chair beside the bed. Though, faithful to that other story, we might even say, "I saw something that, a moment later, resolved into a coat, or a shoe box," the truth is that, however fleeting, the something was probably something fleeting but specific—not something in general.

To become aware of this process is to become aware that some, if not all, of these mistaken perceptions relate to, if they are not controlled by, preexisting discourses. (Reason, memory, and desire told me I might find my hairbrush in the kitchen.) Once we accept the notion that we cannot perceive without already having interpreted what we perceived, however mistakenly, as something, even if our interpretation finally settles on the one we call the fact that we are seeing does not provide enough information to draw a solid conclusion about the object (and thus must remain in the realm of unresolved abstraction), directly we find ourselves asking such questions as:

Did Leonardo really see a round womb?

And, by extension, was that round womb of the order, say, of my black plastic hairbrush handle that I thought I saw across the room—or perhaps of the dust piled on the piece of black plastic that replaced it?
The Rhetoric of Sex / The Discourse of Desire

Bohanann sought solace awhile with Hamlet. But finally she found herself in the reception hut as well, faced with the request that she tell a story. And so it is the story of Hamlet that she decides to tell, sure that its universal resonance will sound out as clearly in the Tiv as it might in an Oxford seminar room.

But problems of interpretation, perception—and discourse—arise immediately.

While the tribe has an evolved and subtle concept of magic, knowledge, madness, and the relations among them all, Bohannan’s tribe has no concept of ghosts.

In the tribe, there simply were no stories of the dead returning—either believed or accepted as fantasy. Thus, the very first scene of Hamlet’s father’s ghost on the battlefields registers with Bohannan’s hearers neither as a frightening event nor as an emblem of the supernatural simply to be accepted—but as a narrative mistake. Obviously what she must mean, they explain, is that it is an omen sent by a witch. Because if you see a dead person actually walking around, you can be pretty sure that’s what it is. But as for its being the soul of the dead, that’s just silly and obviously, then, narrational error. (“But, Daddy, it’s a boy bear . . .”?) The tribe’s term for “wise man” and “witch” were the same. Thus, establishing Horatio’s position as a benign scholar was rather difficult. In that tribe there were strict proscriptions about what was appropriate to the various generations—proscriptions that served to determine what jobs as well as what topics of concern were appropriate to each; as well, those proscriptions served equally to discourage intergenerational violence:

Parents did not strike children.
Children did not strike parents.

If, in that tribe, someone had problems or complaints about you, from childhood on they presented them, either up or down the scale, to your age mates, by whom you were then judged and, if necessary, punished. Intergenerational conflicts there were likely to be the stuff of mild irony or appalling vulgarity. But the same proscriptive institutions prevented them from being the center of comedy or tragedy. Thus the whole Oedipal scenario so much fiction in the West depends on—the conflict between generations—had for Bohannan’s hearers a somewhat sleazy air; and certainly no tale that appealed seriously to them could resonate as the major conflict behind all cultural progress, somehow—in this story—gone away and gotten terrifyingly and tragically out of control. Rather, it seemed an unnecessary nastiness that ordinary social institutions ought to have obviated. Hamlet’s status as a hero was immediately in question by all the village auditors.

Finally, the borderline incest Claudius and his sister-in-law Gertrude...
indulge to Prince Hamlet's consternation was, in this tribe, de rigueur. No, certainly you didn't go around murdering your brothers. But if your father died, then simple politeness said his brother should marry his surviving wife or wives. And if he was suspected of such a murder, it's for your father's age mates to decide—not for you to do anything about.

Hamlet's madness caused equal problems—since everyone knows that madness is always the result of a witch at work somewhere. What's more, the witch has to be a male relative on the victim's father's side. (Everybody knows that.) Since he was Hamlet's only male relative in the story, obviously Claudius was to blame—

Well, yes, Bohannan had to agree. He was. But with that as the explanation for why, did any of the Western tale really remain at all . . .?

Polonius's murder behind the arras was also completely revalued in this tribe of ardent and experienced hunters, where, just before you throw your spear, you must call out, "Gamel!" whereupon anyone in the vicinity who can't see where you're throwing shouts out so that you don't hit them. When he sees the arras move, Hamlet calls out: "A rat!"

As one of the hearers commented to Bohannan: "What child would not know enough to shout out, 'It's me!'"

As the tale goes on, to turn it into a "good story," a logical story, a story where the actions were believable, where the motivations made sense to them, Bohannan's audience distorts the tale into a comic cascade whose humor for us is only subverted by its endless intricacy: Hamlet's forging of the letter that gets him out of trouble with the King of England and gets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern beheaded in his place sounds particularly suspect from Bohannan, since she, having already acted as the scribe for the tribe in its relations with the outside world, has already had to tell many of the same listeners, when they'd come to ask her to change various amounts on various bride-price documents, that such forgery is impossible and would immediately be detected.

If Bohannan can't forge a letter, how come Hamlet can?

But it is only by taking over the tale and turning it into an unrecognizable concatenation of unrecognizable people in unrecognizable situations operating through unrecognizable motivations, and finally of a significance wholly incomprehensible to us, that Bohannan's tribesmen can make any sense of the tale at all. (Laertes must have driven Ophelia mad and killed her, of course, since he's the only male relative of her generation mentioned in the tale. His attempt to avenge her death? Obviously a cover-up for deeper, more logical reasons.) And when their interpretation does manage to offer a recognizable evaluation, it is for such a different web of reasons that the similarity is really an accident rather than any shared cultural resonance.

An old man, gathering his ragged robe around him, finally tells Bohannan: 'That was a very good story. You told it with very few mistakes. . . Sometimes you must tell us some more stories. We who are elders will instruct you in their true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and have taught you wisdom.'

What Bohannan has learned, of course, is that the universal is nothing but an intricate relation of specificities. And what's more, the "universal" is quite different and distinct, cultural locale to cultural locale. The discursive wisdom that Bohannan's tale can teach us today concerns what Foucault, in "L'Ordre du discours," calls "the tyranny of the signifier." That is the notion, all too easy to fall into if one has not moved about among radically different discursive structures, that a single recognizable event, a single recognizable object, or a given rhetorical feature will have the same meaning no matter what discourse it is found in. This is the notion that impels the so-well-intentioned cultural imperialism of symbol explicators such as Jung or Joseph Campbell, who again and again seem to feel that when they find a dragon or a mandala in two widely separated cultures, somehow they have discovered the "same" or a "shared" symbol.

For me this notion exploded on my first trip to Greece, in 1965, where I quickly learned that the palm-leaf beckoning gesture by which North Americans say, "Come here," there meant, "Good-bye." The palm-down flapping of the hand by which we indicate "So long," there meant, "Come over here." The sideways movements of the head by which we indicate negation there meant, "Yes." And the single up-and-down movement of the head, which here is very close to our nod of agreement, there meant, "No." If the very signifiers for yes, no, come here, and good-bye could all reverse between, say, Paris and Athens, then the apprehension of the "same" signifier in China and Mexico, in Texas and Thailand, in India and Guatemala, must mark the existence of cultural specificity—discursive difference, rather than some bicultural obliterating, transcendent "universal"—almost always functioning in the service of some structure of economic exploitation.

Bohannan's tale is structured to throw into relief a limit of discursive disjuncture.

And that, as we have noted, is what we experience when we read Roussel.

That both use Africa as their background is, itself, controlled by the racist discourse of the West. We must not, for a moment, ever think, therefore, that our exploration of discourse is free, complete; rather, those explorations are always policed by discourses already set in place.
12. Observation and Articulation. One day in a Central Park playground in the summer of the same year in which my daughter had learned the discourse of children’s books, around a fountain and having shed all clothing an hour back, a handful of kids in my daughter’s play school group all clustered around a three-and-a-half-year-old girl named Mischkatel, who enthusiastically proposed a game to Sascha and Iva and Nord and Aiesha (this was, recall, the seventies): “Let’s see who can pee-pee the farthest!” And while I looked on—I confess, surprised—the five of them stood to the ankles in the water at the fountain’s edge—and let whiz.

The girls, of course, without exception, won—since, in general, the urinary track exits from the body proper horizontally, or even with a slightly upward tilt. And since every one was just standing there, letting fly, the little boys, who dangled a bit, had not thought to use their hands to guide their stream and so generally watered in a downward slant rather than straight out. Mischkatel, Iva, and Aiesha all more or less tied and left the two little boys, Nord and Sascha, frowning down at their self-evident lack and symbol of powerlessness, marking the male site of greatest physical vulnerability.

In a society where children play regularly naked with another, this can not be an anomaly. But I had to ask myself, sometime later, if I was empowered—as it were—to see this by a situation from not a full decade before, when, in 1969, I had lived in San Francisco, and a nude sunbathing and beer fest had started on the tarred-over roof of our Natoma Street flat. Eight or half a dozen of us were sitting around, naked, drinking bottle after bottle of beer, when, as several of us already had, a young woman got up, went to the back of the tar-paper roof, and proceeded to urinate off the edge with as high-flying an arc as anyone might want.

I remember how cool we were all being—in what, I suspect for most of us, was some astonishment. A young woman was about to speak, when a young man asked (another white male appropriation, no doubt): “How did you do that?”

Her answer was classic: “You aim, stupid.”

Then she proceeded to demonstrate how, with two fingers of one hand in a V, turned down over the upper part of the vaginal crevice, one could control the direction of one’s stream.

I am a writer.

Needless to say, I incorporated the scene (or rather one based closely on it) in my next novel. Some months after the book appeared, I received a letter, signed by a group of five women in Vancouver, that said, in brief: “Thanks.”

But the tale has its converse. In the late sixties a cheap series of charter buses ran back and forth between New York and San Francisco, generally called “The Gray Rabbit.” By the end of its run, the restroom at the back of the coach had long since lost its door. In general, with the rather free-wheeling young men and women who availed themselves of the $45 one-way fare, this was not a large problem in itself. What became a problem was that, after the first day of the trip, because of the lack of springs and the back roads, thanks to the men on the bus the restroom became pretty foul.

And the women on the bus didn’t like it.

The problem was eventually solved by a woman driver, who took a length of a two-by-four, a hammer, and some nails and fixed it into the doorway at little above chest height; she put another one behind it so that there was simply no way to approach the commode in a fully upright position. On the first of the two-by-fours she hung a sign:

YOU DON’T SIT,
YOU DON’T PEE!

The problem was more or less solved.

But the point is that women can, and some do, urinate standing up; and men can, and some do, urinate sitting down. As to arcs and distances, well, in the same conversation in which I asked my daughter about Corduroy, I asked if she remembered her infantile peeing contest. No, she didn’t, any more than she remembered the female Corduroy. But was that exclusion from her memory chance? Was it because that memory had not been stabilized by a pre-extant discourse?

Men and women do what they do—that they’re comfortable doing. But the constraints on that comfort, on who does what and when, are material, educational, habitual—feel free to call them social.

And where all three—material, educational, and habit—are stabilized in one form or another by language, we have a discourse.

From such memories I turn to others that are so like the experiences that prompted Freud to his theory of “penis envy,” when my daughter, at age four, a year after her forgotten triumph in the park peeing contest, in imitation of me, would stand at the commode with her hands on her genital region and make hissing sounds. In another series of stories I wrote about that time, you will find the detritus—and pretty much my thinking—on all the incidents above.

But is the reason such incidents as this not usually talked of—speculated over, theorized, included in our traditional elaborations of the way our culture works—because of some massive discursive exclusion? Are they simply not seen by most people because they take the form of the pear-like bulge in the upper part of the uterus—or are they simply
nispereived as something else, like the mistake of a knife for a brush? Again, that is precisely the information the structure of the discourse that has prevailed up till now means that we can never have with any real certainty about the past.

Again, that is what discursive exclusions do.

But I also asked my adult daughter, not too long ago, if she remembers ever wanting a penis. "No," she said, with some consideration. "But I certainly remember, when I was four, wanting to urinate standing up. It seemed so much more convenient."

A reasonable thought for a four-year-old who, at three, could—and had won a contest by doing so.

13. Interlogue Six. The material fact that has made it desperately important for people, when writing about sex, to write about what they have done and experienced and seen themselves, is, of course AIDS. This disease, which by February 1993 (this year), according to the always conservative statistics of the CDC, has killed more than 135,000 people in the United States, out of the more than 210,000 reported cases (1,800 of whom are children under the age of thirteen and 11,000 of whom are women), is certainly the largest material factor in the transformation of the discourse of desire and that transformation’s manifestation in the rhetoric of sex.

It is painfully ironic that Foucault, who wrote in his 1970 lecture, "L’Ordre du discours," "We are a very long way from having constituted a unitary, regular discourse concerning sexuality; it may be that we never will, and that we are not even traveling in that direction" (233), died of AIDS in 1984—for AIDS has come as close to unifying certain strands of sexual discourse as it has come to fracturing certain others.

Foucault also said, in a 1980 lecture at Stanford on political and pastoral power: "We must get rid of the Freudian schema. You know, the schema of the interiorization of the law through the medium of sex."

He did not say we must get rid of Freud but only that we must get rid of a certain reduction—and I would add, distortion—of Freud’s critique of society that is too often justified by citations of Freud, usually at his most speculative: "the interiorization of the law through the medium of sex...."

Well, what does this mean? It means an intellectual move in which the thinker notes some analogy between some aspect of a given sexual act, usually the tritest and most common one in a given culture (often our own), and some form of the culture itself or the usual psychology of those in it. At that point, the thinker claims the former as a cause for the latter, and this causal relationship is elevated to a transcendent affirma-

tion of the universal and unchangeable nature—the law—of the social (or the psychological) through the power of the sexual. Nor does it matter whether the argument is: "Because men lie on top of women during sex, men will forever dominate women during...badminton tournaments," or "Because a fatal disease is now transmitted sexually, the whole of society itself must somehow be psychologically sick and doomed to destroy itself." Sex has become the medium through which someone declares a form of the social to be "natural" law rather than considering sex itself simply another social form. At this point, we should be able to recognize the same discursive structure—and the same misapplied logic—in them all. For this is the discourse, the reasoning, of sympathetic magic, pure and simple; it is as much superstition today as it was when in 1890 Sir James George Frazer described its practice in the initial chapters of _The Golden Bough_. And it mystifies and distorts any study of the material realities (i.e., the politics) to which both the sexual and social actually respond.

But with that exhoration (a position implied in Foucault’s work, again and again) Foucault becomes easily identifiable as the enemy of all sexual spectators who would take refuge behind such superstitions, with their ideas entailed by the notion, as we usually characterize them today, that biology equals destiny. (The most recent and vociferous is, perhaps, Camille Paglia.) Similarly, Foucault had already been identified as the clear and present enemy by those who claim history is over, and that we have entered some posthistorical period (often designated postmodernism), where all discourses are homogenized and there are no discursive articulations to be found any more, thanks to the current invisibility of power; I mean, of course, the author of _Forget Foucault_, Jean Baudrillard.14

Well, Foucault also said: "While we sit discussing the word, power works in silence." But the idea that there is a nature—or a culture—outside of history, before history, or after history, to which somehow we have a clear access, partakes of a single discursive form.

There seem to be at least two ways to highlight some of the structures of a given discourse. Both may boil down to the same thing. One is the critical observation of what is around us, precisely while on the alert for things that contravene what we expect. The other way is to suffuse one discourse with a systematically different discourse and watch the places where strain and tensions result. This, in effect, is what Bohannan does with her story of the story of _Hamlet_, and it is what Foucault does again and again in the range of his work, with his insistent systematicity that grids and grids and constantly tries to locate objects schematically within them, even while, as much as Derrida, Foucault himself eventually throws
off his own gridding systems as too loose, too lax, improperly positioned, and necessarily displaced.

This is what Roussel does in his fiction; his eccentric linguistic method, by which he arrives at his progression of preposterous machines, incidents, and relations, always gives us the feeling that narrative discourse as we know it is strained, near to the point of breaking, and thus becomes a palpable object in our experience of his texts. It is too wonder that Roussel was also a favorite storyteller of Foucault's and that his early study, published in English as *Death and the Labyrinth*, is certainly—and systematically—the best single study of Roussel currently available.  

14. Conclusion. The last thing I want to speak about is a place where, indeed, the homogenization of discourses has produced an angering, murderous sexual rhetoric that fights the Discourse of Desire at every point—a social locus where two discourses that already suffuse one another must be separated out. I have already cited the mortality statistics; and, if we do not separate these discourses, those statistics may be a long, long time in leveling off their horrendous upsurge.

For it was as far back as 1987 when I realized that AIDS had become, among my friends and acquaintances, the single largest killer, beating out cancer, suicide, and heart attacks combined.

To my knowledge there have only been two monitored studies to date on the sexual transmission vectors of AIDS—certainly no more than two that have received anything approaching visible coverage. More accurately, there have been only one monitored study and one semimonitored study. That the studies agree as much as they do in their outcome is, then, surprising and heartening. But in my own informal survey, fewer than one out of ten AIDS educators knows either of the studies, of their results, or where to direct people to these studies who ask about AIDS.

What is a monitored study?

Well, other than intentionally experimenting with humans and the AIDS virus (which is illegal), a monitored study is the only way we can obtain information about AIDS transmission vectors that can in any way be called scientific.

In a monitored study of sexual transmission vectors for HIV, a number of people, preferably in the thousands, who test sero-negative are then monitored, in writing, at regular intervals, as to their sexual activity: from the number of times, to the number and sex of partners, to the specific acts performed, oral (active and passive), anal (insertive or receptive), vaginal (insertive or receptive), anal-oral (active and passive), and what have you. At the end of a given period, say six months or a year, the same people are tested for sero-conversion. The status of various HIV positive and HIV negative people is then statistically analyzed against their specific sexual activity.

Of the two studies that have been done of this sort, one by Kingsley, Kaslow, Rinaldo, et al., was published in *The Lancet* of 14 February 1987; it involved 2,507 gay men. The other, The San Francisco Men's Health Study, involving 1,035 men picked at random from a neighborhood having the highest AIDS rate in the city, was reported and described in a letter to *The Journal of the American Medical Association* of 4 April 1986. I call this last a semimonitored study because there the monitoring was done only twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of the study, and was in the form of a general survey, asking "What do you do in bed and what do you not do?" rather than the specific and regular tracking of Kingsley, Kaslow, Rinaldo, et al.

Both of these studies report, quite interestingly, a statistical correspondence of 0 percent—not 1 percent, not 3 percent, not 8 of 1 percent—0 percent of sero-conversions to HIV positive for those gay men who restrict themselves to oral sex, unprotected, active or passive (147 men in Kingsley, Kaslow, Rinaldo, et al.; an unspecified number in the *JAMA* letter describing The San Francisco Men's Health Study). The statistical correlation between sero-conversions and receptive anal intercourse in both studies was devastating. Nor was there any statistical indication that repeated sexual contact had anything whatsoever to do with transmission. Kingsley, Kaslow, Rinaldo, et al. reported eight sero-conversions to HIV positive among men who reported only a single case of anal-receptive intercourse for the duration of the study.

Should I have to point out that this renders the rhetoric of "repeated sexual contact," so much a part of AIDS education both before the 1987 study and since, murderous misinformation? Well, then, I hear an apologist for the status quo of (lack of) AIDS information say, maybe it applies to some other areas of sexual behavior besides anal intercourse? To which I can only say: "Tell me where." No: Many men who believed such rhetoric applied to anal intercourse and based their sexual behavior on it are now dead. It's that simple.

There has been no dissemination of information of any monitored studies for sexual transmission of the HIV virus from and/or to women. I can only assume, after three years' research, that such a study has not been done. And with an epidemic that has caused more than 135,000 deaths in ten years, and 11,000 cases among women, this situation is a crime whose statistics are reaching toward the genocidal.

A monitored study is a powerful discursive machine for producing a set of highly operationalized rhetorical figures—of the sort we call evidence in situations such as this. In a monitored study, is there room for
mistake, or lying, or distortion? Certainly. But the knowledge obtained is still preferable to the alternative.

There is, of course, another discourse that produces its own rhetorical array. A person is diagnosed HIV positive or with full-blown AIDS, and the doctor asks: "Any idea how you got it?"

And the patient, possibly trying to think what he or she was doing sexually six months or so ago, possibly relying on what he or she already "knows," gives an answer. Logically, however, this cannot be evidence in an attempt to find out how AIDS is transmitted, if only because it presumes the answer is already known to the question we are trying to learn the answer to. Is it necessary here to stress that people, especially in sexual situations, will lie, will forget, or will misremember pears for apples or even hairbrushes for knife handles—for any number of discursive reasons, in a discourse that has undergone catastrophic changes without cease over the last ten years? Nevertheless, the information gleaned from this second discourse is regularly overlaid, called fact, and used to displace information from the first. Otherwise responsible publications regularly report that now 8, now 16, now 12 percent of men have gotten AIDS from oral sex, now 1, now 2, now 3 percent of men have gotten AIDS from prostitutes, when the most they can mean is that this is what a certain percentage of men, when diagnosed with AIDS, have said when asked, in a discursive field whose precise discursive form is that we do not know what vector possibilities (because they have not been adequately researched) and, thus, almost anything may be said and be believed. This, then, is the discourse of popular belief.

Purposely leaving needle transmission aside, we "know" (that is, the studies that have been done strongly suggest) only two facts about the sexual transmission of AIDS: that it is not transmitted by oral-genital sex between men. And that it is transmitted easily and effectively through anal sex.

Anything else we might say about its sexual transmission is all in the realm of superstition. Sometimes superstitions turn out to be true. But in a situation of such moral concern, what can be gained for the Discourse of Desire through this appalling and institutionally supported ignorance? Please: If you—heterosexual or homosexual, man or woman—are concerned about the sexual transmission of AIDS, demand of me that monitored studies be initiated, be rigorously overseen, and their results be widely disseminated.

For the rhetoric of sex is complex; and the discourse that organizes it, that makes it make sense for our culture, is patriarchy. Study it, know it, critique it, cut it up and anatomize it any way you would like. The Discourse of Desire in its contemporary form, as it here and there subverts patriarchy, is a good deal younger than the oldest of my readers. The rhetoric of desire's discourse has only begun to sediment in the course of such personal and political intervention. Encourage it through your own discussions.

Thank you.

—Amherst 1993

NOTES


9. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Selected Letters, ed. H. J. Jackson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). From the introduction by the editor: "The introduction of the postage stamp in 1840, six years after Coleridge's death, significantly altered the situation of correspondents. Until then, recipients paid postage; the writers themselves were responsible for making letters worth paying for. As objects paid for, letters had a certain status: they were shared with family and friends; in most households they were preserved and periodically reread; and on the death of the letter-writer, they were customarily returned to the family as part of the estate."


13. Laura Bohannan, "Shakespeare in the Bush," in *Ants, Indians, and Little Dinosaurs*, ed. Alan Teresi (New York: Scribner, c. 1975). (I would like to thank Margaret Minsky, who is responsible for my having my most recent copy of this delightful piece.)


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2

Street Talk/Straight Talk

1. Discourse—an order of response, a mode of understanding, for which various rhetorical features may function as symptoms. Yet rhetoric is never wholly coextensive with discourse. Discourse and rhetoric control one another, yes—but precisely because of that control, neither is wholly at one with the other.

Nevertheless—the relation of discourse to rhetoric is not the arbitrary relation, negotiable by introspection, of signified to signifier; it is the determined relation, negotiable by analysis, of the unconscious to the enunciated.

2. According to the discourse of "Discourse," rhetoric is quantifiable, particular, arrives in delimitable units, while meanings, to quote Quine (8), cannot be "individuated." Consider, then, four modes of rhetoric:

*Street talk:* Brutal, repetitious, vulgar, it marks a subdiscourse of ignorance, rumor, misunderstanding, and outright superstition. It is fixed—now on the aggressive, now on the sexual, now on the cupidously acquisitive. The rhetoric of an underworld, its raison d'être is lying; in the pursuit of myriad dishonesties and selfishnesses, "getting over," as it most recently characterizes a major factor of its own enterprise. It arises in sexually high dimorphic idiocies: But whether we move in the realm of gossip or of braggadocio, whatever its topic, the very banality of its endlessly repeated circuits makes it the mark of the limited, the ilicit, a moment away from brute dumbness in one direction, a moment away from the linguistic zero of pure chatter in another.

*Straight talk:* Indicating it with the rhetorical mark reserved for it by "street talk," it is mellifluous, precise, sophisticated: The subdiscourse it takes for itself is "the learned," the characterization of itself it employs in the acknowledgement of its own truth. It functions to mediate between truth and knowledge, and thus is saturated by both. It functions to resolve disorder, to clarify confusion, to calm and commingle the diverse