

Spiralling Relations: Barthes, Kant, and Balzac

Bryan Counter

In *S/Z*, his famous reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes makes one of his many distinctions regarding types of literature, namely, the distinction between 'le *scriptible* [the *writerly*]' and 'le *lisible* [the *readerly*]'.¹ He sets up this distinction in terms of writing – on the one hand, 'ce qu'il est possible d'écrire [what it is possible to write]' and, on the other hand, 'ce qu'il n'est plus possible d'écrire [what it is no longer possible to write]'.² Barthes makes this distinction in the context, in particular, of the practices of reading and writing, though – as I hope to bring more directly into focus throughout this essay with reference to Kant's third *Critique* – at issue is also the event of creation, and indeed the very possibility of aesthetic experience more broadly. Whereas the readerly is also the classic text, the writerly text is, at least implicitly, aligned with a newer, more 'difficult' (but therefore also a more open) kind of text. Barthes writes that 'Des textes scriptibles, il n'y a peut-être rien à dire [There may nothing to say about writerly texts]', suggesting also that they are rare; the writerly text is not a kind of text exactly, but instead 'c'est nous en train d'écrire [is ourselves writing]'.³ Therefore, what is in question in writerly texts can be said specifically to be the way in which we respond to them – which, if it is by writing, is by no means a passive, merely consumerly (perhaps, readerly) response.

And yet, as Barbara Johnson points out in her review of *S/Z*, though favour is given to the writerly, Barthes proceeds to turn his critical eye to an eminently readerly text, Balzac's *Sarrasine*. Johnson writes: 'With this value system, one would naturally expect to find Barthes going on to extoll the play of infinite plurality in some Joycean or Mallarméan piece of writerly obscurity, but no: he turns to Balzac, one of the most readerly of readerly writers, as Barthes himself insists.'⁴ What Johnson identifies here is the way that Barthes's apparent hierarchies or binaries tend to turn inside out upon his operation of them: 'Although Balzac's text apparently represents the negative, readerly end of the hierarchy, Barthes's *treatment* of it does seem to illustrate all the

characteristics of the positive, writerly end.⁵ It is worth nothing that, while the ‘category’ of the readerly might seem to adhere straightforwardly to its object, the writerly does not. This means that they cannot simply be opposed, and indeed their possible overlapping should not, in the end, be a surprise. A single text, it seems, can be the site of both the readerly (in its more objective, textual make-up) and the writerly (in the singular act of reading performed upon it).

My purpose in beginning in this way is not to set up a close reading of *S/Z* in general, or, strictly speaking, either of Barthes’s reading of Balzac or of his counterintuitive gesture in complicating the readerly/writerly distinction – although, in part, I will turn in what follows to another text by Balzac, and even one published just the year following *Sarrasine*. Instead, what I wish to do here is to pose the question of what exactly is the value of finding the seeds of the new in the old, so to speak, via novel means of interpretation. In other words, beyond our surprise at Barthes making the readerly writerly, what are the stakes in doing so? What does such a gesture, indeed, such a possibility, point toward? To begin situating this question, I wish to turn to another important distinction, this time one made by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* regarding the reflective aesthetic judgment and the respective roles of art and nature within it. However implicitly or indirectly, this mirrors the distinction between new and old, writerly and readerly.

There is a temporal aspect to the distinction between art and nature for Kant, insofar as our ability to distinguish between them is related to our ability to cultivate taste and to discern what deserves the designation of beautiful when there is no rule available for doing so. Kant writes in the introduction:

To be sure, we no longer detect any noticeable pleasure in the comprehensibility of nature and the unity of its division into genera and species, by means of which alone empirical concepts are possible through which we cognize it in its particular laws; but it must certainly have been there in its time, and only because the most common experience would not be possible without it has it gradually become mixed up with mere cognition and is no longer specially noticed.⁶

What this moment of anthropological history reveals is something that has an analogy on the level of subjective memory: pleasure in the beautiful depends, at least in part, on surprise or spontaneity. However, even here it is clear that this spontaneity is not due, necessarily, to a newness in terms of object, or to any novelty in the object that would be objectively legible to an onlooker. Kant writes of ‘The spontaneity in the play of the faculties of cognition, the agreement of which contains the ground of this pleasure [in the aesthetic judgment]’, making it clear that the requisite surprise lies on the subjective side.⁷ At any rate, if it is possible for us, in the long view, to lose sight of the beauty we once found in nature, it is also possible to reconnect with or reexperience this beauty when we are surprised in the moment of aesthetic judgment, whether or not we are familiar with the object in question or have a concept available for it. This means that, while the natural beauty of the rose is emblematic because we have no concept for its form, we – especially taking into consideration our contemporary indexing of more and more objects of botany, and nature at large, under ever-widening branches of knowledge – risk always the *sense* of a form through sheer familiarity with such objects; and yet, despite this risk, the possibility for beauty is not thereby foreclosed.

Something similar might be argued with regard to Barthes’s distinction between readerly and writerly, and especially in his otherwise provocative gesture of finding the writerly in a ‘readerly’ text, and the way in which the perverseness of this gesture has to do with both time and reading. In *Le Plaisir du texte*, Barthes speaks precisely to the above paradox in Kant: ‘Le texte de Plaisir n’est pas forcément celui qui relate des plaisirs, le texte de jouissance n’est jamais celui qui raconte une jouissance. Le plaisir de la représentation n’est pas lié à son objet [The text of pleasure is not necessarily the text that recounts pleasures; the text of bliss is never the text that recounts the kind of bliss afforded literally by an ejaculation. The pleasure of representation is not attached to its object]’.⁸ While the object or the text prompts the reception or reading that is at question, this reception or reading does not necessarily *depend*, one to one, upon that object. At any rate, what might be considered an ‘against the grain’ look at texts on the one hand and art or even aesthetic experience itself on the other proves instructive.

In his discussion of beautiful art, Kant writes:

In a product of art one must be aware that it is art, and not nature; yet the purposiveness in its form must still seem to be as

free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature. On this feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive powers, which must yet at the same time be purposive, rests that pleasure which is alone universally communicable though without being grounded on concepts. Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature.⁹

In the context of the *Critique*, this play and tension between nature and art is mediated by genius, which comes from nature and yet permits the creation of beautiful art. According to Kant, ‘**Genius** is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art. Since the talent, as an inborn productive faculty of the artist, itself belongs to nature, this could be expressed thus: **Genius** is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) **through which** nature gives the rule to art’.¹⁰ Genius, then, communicates between nature and art, and perhaps troubles our ability to distinguish between the two – although, at the same time, it gives us the injunction of doing so. Though this question is posed in the context of a more complex discussion of thin (‘having genius’) and thick (‘being a genius’) genius, I am thinking here of Robert R. Clewis’ question, which anticipates what will follow in this essay: ‘can the capacity for genius come up with original nonsense, or must its products and creations at the same time be *exemplary*?’¹¹

But the lines above also reveal both a writer and a reader – or at least the respective ideas of writer and reader – at work, each of whom is holding two contradictory possibilities or techniques in mind. The way we distinguish between nature and art, as well as how we estimate the stakes of this distinction, has largely to do, each and every time, with a specific context of reception and interpretation. Counterposed to the spontaneity of the beautiful in nature is the artist’s calculation and technique, which we can often detect, and which turns our focus back on the fact that what we are perceiving is, in fact, art. Far from being a point in the artist’s favour, this breaks our engagement with the work.¹² The feeling of trickery, whether it is direct imitation (to use Kant’s example, a young boy’s imitation of birdsong) or otherwise, is met at the same time by the possibility that we are being ‘tricked’ by the artist or author. In short, what is purposive in art ‘must nevertheless not seem intentional’.¹³ This requires that the work of art keep hidden its

‘academic form’, meaning that it cannot show ‘any sign that the rule has hovered before the eyes of the artist and fettered his mental powers’.¹⁴

The field of this problem is expanded when we consider newer forms: avant-garde writing or music, or nonrepresentational art. Here, the question is not so much one of trickery as it is one about overly calculated novelty. The work of art must surprise us while not seeming like it was designed to be surprising, shocking, or *new*. Part of this problem must contend with the historical question of what is ‘avant-garde’ about it – i.e., what rules it is breaking from. It is not a question of what art is more ‘realistic’, as Barthes might argue, and the case can readily be made that certain innovative, abstract forms may in fact be more realistic than representational works, in terms of the affects they are capable of prompting, for example. But even this possibility folds in upon itself when we consider that the work of art might feel calculated, too redolent of ‘academic form’, with the purpose of surprising the viewer. Perhaps Barthes’s gesture of seeming to assign certain objective effects to certain kinds of texts, and his subsequent subversion of that gesture, reveals a tenuous but profound relationship between subject and object, author and text.

Working within literary studies, a discipline so explicitly concerned with authorship, textuality and, indeed, writing, we are constantly brought up against these very issues. We are frequently pressured to consider the *intentions* of works we are assessing, whether or not they are immediately legible, and whatever their genre or origin. The distinction between *scriptible* and *lisible* is much more of a distinction about ways of reading than one about works of literature, which also means that it is implicated in our (and Barthes’s) desires as readers. Referring to Johnson’s review of *S/Z*, Patrick Bray argues that ‘Barthes’s distinction between readerly and writerly texts breaks down precisely because Barthes does not account for his own desire in his reading’.¹⁵ While Barthes’s readerly desire is often more present than he lets on (and perhaps than Bray lets on), I find this potential ‘breakdown’ to be indicative of a problem inherent in interpretation – at least, the sensitive kind of interpretation Barthes is concerned with – rather than a failure of reading. After all, the above lines from Kant seem to raise a similar question about how we encounter beautiful art and objects of natural beauty out in the world. But the question remains: if we regard the beautiful work of art as if it were nature, nevertheless knowing that it is art, and vice versa, is this not a case of mere circularity? How do we *really* distinguish between nature and art, and

furthermore, how do we distinguish between what is natural and artificial *within* art? In turn, what is at stake in regarding the readerly as if it were writerly – particularly if neither can be said to be an external category applying objectively to texts?

In a way, it would seem that any approach to these questions would need to turn to nature. At the same time, since I am beginning not exactly with Kant's philosophical aesthetics, but rather with Barthes's readerly/writerly distinction – which is not only a distinction in ways of reading, but also, following from Lucy O'Meara's work on Barthes, an eminently *subjective* way of reading specific to Barthes himself – reading, and the work of literature, will be my starting point.¹⁶ I will follow Barthes's perverse gesture of locating the *scriptible* in Balzac by focusing my reading on another text of Balzac, his 1831 novel *La Peau de chagrin* [*The Wild Ass's Skin*], which is largely concerned with the problem of nature and the role of the human will. Owen Heathcote intensifies Barbara Johnson's acknowledgement of the irony at play in Barthes's decision to devote *S/Z* to a reading of such a readerly text, writing that 'the division of the text into *lexies* makes it seem open-ended, autonomous and impersonal. It is no longer the narrator or even Balzac directing operations but the text itself'.¹⁷ Here, we arrive at the point. What Barthes does with Balzac's *Sarrasine* upends any possibility of a readerly approach: he *makes* it writerly, meaning also that he reads it in a writerly way, and therefore as a writerly text. Heathcote suggests that Balzac can be said to be theorizing, in his fiction, not only about literature, but about theory itself.¹⁸ In what follows, and with the above in mind, I wish to argue that Balzac's theorizing in *La Peau de chagrin* concerns not only theory, but the various ways that chance – as a stand-in for the kind of spontaneity that Kant writes about with reference to the aesthetic judgment – is operative in aesthetic experience. This will prove helpful for beginning to understand how the readerly and the writerly are related to nature and art as discussed by Kant. In turn, this will illuminate the tension between the readerly and the writerly in Barthes's own thinking about literature, anchored particularly in a consideration of the experience of reading.

Reading its beginning from the perspective of its overall trajectory, nature in *La Peau de chagrin* is foreshadowed by, and ultimately deeply imbricated with, the workings of chance. The novel begins with the as-yet-unnamed Raphaël de Valentin entering a gambling hall in the Palais-Royal. As we ascertain in the early pages, his goal is to allow the outcome of a single

wager to decide his fate – that is, whether he will continue living, or kill himself. From the start, his engagement with chance is doubled. Not only does he stake his bet, whose consequences will in turn be decided according to the chance of the game itself, but he even leaves the placing of the wager up to chance: he ‘jeta sans calcul sur le tapis une pièce d’or qu’il avait à la main, et qui roula sur noir [blindly threw on to the cloth a gold coin he had been holding. It rolled on to black]’.¹⁹ In fact, he does not even realize that he has had a losing outcome until the coin is raked in by the croupier, at which point ‘il affecta l’air d’un Anglais pour qui la vie n’a plus de mystères [...] Combien d’événements se pressent dans l’espace d’une seconde, et que de choses dans un coup de dé! [he put on the air of an Englishman who sees no further mystery in life [...] How many events can be crowded into the space of a second! How much depends on the throw of a dice!]’.²⁰ The croupier sees the effect of this loss on Raphaël (‘Voilà sans doute sa dernière cartouche [I bet that was the last shot in his locker!]’), but significantly it is ‘un habitué [an old *habitué*]’, one whose habit is to gamble, to bet on chance, who can read Raphaël’s demeanor all too accurately: ‘C’est un cerveau brûlé qui va se jeter à l’eau, répondit un habitué en regardant autour de lui les joueurs qui se connaissaient tous [“A young idiot who’s going to jump into the river!” said an old *habitué*, looking round him at the gamblers, who all knew one another]’.²¹

Shortly after this scene, Raphaël wanders into the shop where he will acquire the titular skin, a magical skin from a wild ass, which fulfills his desires at the price of the skin’s diminishing, and his life forces along with it. After learning of Raphaël’s plans of suicide, the shop attendant offers him the skin, notably saying: ‘je veux vous faire plus riche, plus puissant et plus considéré que ne peut l’être un roi constitutionnel [I propose to make you richer, more powerful and more respected than a king can be – in a constitutional monarchy]’.²² Immediately running into some friends upon exiting the shop, Raphaël marvels at the sudden alteration of his demeanor and the deferral of his death, as if it were heralded by the very same skin: ‘Quoiqu’il lui fût impossible de croire à une influence magique, il admirait les hasards de la destinée humaine [Although he found it impossible to believe in the intervention of magic, he was lost in wonderment at the changes and chances of human destiny]’.²³

What I have highlighted thus far in the text concerns nature only obliquely, though this is perhaps what is truly meant by ‘nature’ in the Kantian

sense – that is, not merely objects of nature, and not only what is in opposition to artifice, but rather, within everyday life and within the relations between things and people, what comes about in an uncalculated way. The work of chance, considered apart from its more obvious and basic employment in games of chance such as roulette, is profoundly *natural*, and this will become clearer in the following pages, as we move further away from the gambling scene, which thus serves as misdirection regarding the role of chance in the novel.

While the rest of the novel's first part is largely occupied with Raphaël's initial wish to dine and drink extravagantly with his friends, the second part finds him in that same environment narrating his own life in past-tense, looking back to the life that led up to the novel's beginning and his plans for suicide. After telling this tale, which revolves largely around his unrequited infatuation with the beautiful Foedora, he returns to the present moment and reveals the skin, and its powers, to his friends. He wishes for an immense income, and upon awaking, is notified that his uncle has died, leaving him with six million francs. As if in disbelief at the proof of the skin's powers, and annoyed by his friends' sarcastic requests for donations, this section ends with Raphaël attempting to forget the power he now wields as a result of possessing the skin. Citing this moment, Peter Brooks finds *La Peau de chagrin* exemplary for the way in which it 'violates the usual structure of desire in the novel, which is oriented toward the end'.²⁴ This moment where Raphaël seems to remember that he possesses the skin and can have anything that he wishes means that the first-person narration includes a moment in which it once again reaches the very beginning of the novel itself and thereby marks an instance where 'the story of the past catches up with the present, intersects with it, in a formulation of the desire that subtended the story of the past'.²⁵ Equally as interesting, I would argue, is the inability of this supernatural wish-fulfilment (embodied by the skin) to fully eliminate the role of chance in desire, and, as I will argue through a discussion of Raphaël's encounter with the natural world late in the novel, in aesthetic experience. As is already clear, chance is not mere randomness; it can perhaps more accurately be described as our general inability to 'read' or interpret something before truly reading or encountering it.

The skin's limitations are borne out by the third part of the novel, which takes place some time after the first two parts. At this point, having exercised the skin many times, to the detriment of both it and his health, we

find Raphaël ill. He attempts to stifle his desires in hopes of prolonging his life, a change that also suggests a shift in his attitude toward chance. As Warren Johnson writes, '*vouloir* figures the flux of energies that attempt to bring the outside within the individual's grasp, to impose his stamp on the inescapably alien'.²⁶ In this final part of the novel, Raphaël avoids willing altogether, and he instead attempts to live in a passive way, almost merging with the natural world around him. If, as Bray writes, the magic skin, 'as the concrete materialization of the old man's theory of will, lets Raphaël interpret his past with a teleological certainty, even as he seems incapable of acting in the present or caring about the future',²⁷ the situation in this moment is arguably reversed: Raphaël, seeking to preserve his life force (rather than expend all of his desire in a mad orgy of decadence), suppresses his will in an attempt to preserve the very possibility of the future, even if this means the next moment only. While this, on the face of it, may seem to be emblematic of a teleological impulse, it is not difficult to see that Raphaël at this point has progressed to a more intimate understanding of chance. Being in touch with chance to the point of truly comprehending it, it turns out, does not amount to being immersed in gambling, nor does it equate simply and unproblematically to a complete renunciation of will.

On the run after winning a duel, Raphaël comes across a family living in a small cottage and takes up with them. As his health continues to deteriorate, he seems to grow increasingly attuned to nature:

se familiarisant avec des phénomènes de la végétation, avec les vicissitudes du ciel, il épiait le progrès de toutes les oeuvres, sur la terre, dans les eaux ou dans l'air. Il tenta de s'associer au mouvement intime de cette nature, et de s'identifier assez complètement à sa passive obéissance, pour tomber sous la loi despotique et conservatrice qui régit les existences instinctives.²⁸

familiarizing himself with the phenomena of vegetation and the vicissitudes of the weather, he studies the sequence of all processes of change, on the land, in the water and in the air. He attempted to associate himself with the intimate movement of this natural order around him, to identify himself so completely with its passive obedience that he might come under the despotic law that governs and protects all creatures that live by instinct.²⁹

Some pages earlier, describing the landscape surrounding him, the text reads: ‘C’était une nature naïve et bonne, une rusticité vraie, mais poétique, parce qu’elle florissait à mille lieues de nos poésies peignées, n’avait d’analogie avec aucune idée, ne procédait que d’elle-même, vrai triomphe du hasard [Here nature was simple and kindly, giving an impression of rusticity both genuine and poetic, blossoming a world away from our contrived idylls, with no reference to the universe of ideas, self-generated, the pure product of chance]’.³⁰ In both instances, chance is aligned with nature insofar as Raphaël strives to become more attuned to what is natural, and therefore to exert less of his will. Balzac names specifically nature’s ‘passive obéissance’, meaning the passive obedience both *of* and *to* nature. Chance, again, looks like something else entirely than a simple game or a wager, and seems closer to an interpretive position wherein Raphaël understands nature insofar as he begins to move closer to it, rather than simply subjecting himself to it. Raphaël’s familiarity with, or indeed his alignment with, nature is passive in a way that reaches beyond the superficial instance of passivity borne out by a game of roulette. David F. Bell stresses that the French *hasard*, in contradistinction to ideas of fortune, encounter, and contingency, ‘does not depend on order for its definition. It suggests, on the contrary, that chance is primordial, that it precedes order’.³¹ That is, although chance is excessively thematized in the opening gambling-hall scene of *La Peau de chagrin*, Mallarmé must be kept in mind insofar as the throw of the dice not only does not abolish chance, but furthermore does not even come close to exhausting chance. Instead, chance is perhaps always at play naturally, even in Raphaël’s decision to forestall his suicide, once the dice have been cast, which leads him to the shop where he finds the skin. Chance is primordial both within and beyond decisions made when chance is not explicitly thematized.

What does all of this have to do with nature, with the work of art, with literature, and above all with the *scriptible* and the *lisible*? To come full circle — that is, to come back to Barthes, by way of Kant — it will be necessary to return to the question of writing in particular. In the brief second chapter of *Unwrapping Balzac*, Samuel Weber’s reading of *La Peau de chagrin* proper begins, appropriately, by considering the ‘très spirituelle épigraphe du livre’: the literally serpentine arabesque taken from Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, included at the beginning of Balzac’s novel in altered form. Commenting on this alteration, and how the figure shifts from ‘an ambiguous gesture punctuating a chain of discourse’ to ‘simple representation, a symbol,

whose function is precisely to safeguard, not interrupt, the continuity of that chain', Weber writes:

Whereas Sterne begins his novel with a *reductio ad absurdum* of causality, and with it of the linearity upon which all conventional narration depends, in order then precisely to explode that linearity by exploiting the (non-linear) ambiguity of the linguistic sign itself, Balzac's writing remains pledged to just that linearity, whether as the continuum of the 'drame', its 'courant', or as the symbol which speaks for itself, without fear of contradiction: 'comme le *dit* la très spirituelle épigraphe du livre'.³²

Whether in Sterne's original or transformed for inclusion in *La Peau de chagrin* – that is, whether 'ambiguous gesture' or 'simple representation' – this arabesque concerns, above all, narrative and interpretation. In the first instance, it points out the many digressions along the course of a life conceived as a narrative, and in the second, it suggests a winding path that we have no choice but surrender to, participate in, no matter the decisions that we make along the way. As Weber notes, 'The Kantian problematic of the Third Antinomy, the relation between causality and freedom, which forms Sterne's point of departure (in this respect, Kantian *avant la lettre*) remains a distant prospect, something to be confronted at the end, if at all'.³³ In other words, forces such as chance, fate, narrative, and meaning can only be clearly assessed after the fact, and never before. This is one reason why the gambling-hall scene leads the reader, and Raphaël, astray. Taking up the play of chance in Balzac's text – as well as in Barthes's, where he makes more than one reference to chance in selecting *Sarrasine* as the topic of *S/Z* – it might be argued that chance becomes ironized when viewed from the point of interpretation.³⁴ We might become aware of chance when it makes itself known in a moment of encounter, but only the most cursory understanding of chance will lead us to believe that we can predict such encounters. After all, how might we rightly say of a novel, by necessity *authored*, that it seems to involve chance in the sense we have been discussing it so far – that is, that the novel (or its choice as the subject of a critical study) is in any way truly random, neutral, natural? Even Barthes's choice of *Sarrasine* as the focus of *S/Z* came about through a process of research, which is by necessity focused and thorough; and yet the

path to the text had all stamp of *hasard*, and that path is only clarified upon meditating on the text itself.

Barthes's later engagements with chance call upon a gesture of openness, of *preparing* for chance, whether the 'random' ordering of topics throughout the seminars, or even his general disavowal of mastery in the classroom. But chance cannot be directly engaged: it is not the opposite of making a decision, and at the same time it resists, to a certain extent, our attempts to bring it about – to touch on Barthes's seminars once more, the alphabetical ordering of topics is just as random as his use of the lottery to order them the next time around.³⁵ Drawing upon the alphabet is just as arbitrary as drawing from a process of 'randomisation', though the latter is more obvious.

Finding *hasard* in a process that is less legibly 'random', I would argue, aligns closely with the non-reliance on objects in the Kantian aesthetic judgment, especially when we are faced with a sweeping judgment: though a single rose may be the object of taste, 'the judgment that arises from the comparison of many singular ones, that roses *in general* are beautiful, is no longer pronounced merely as an aesthetic judgment, but as an aesthetically grounded logical judgment'.³⁶ In other words, and as a result of Kant's pronouncement here, sometimes what serves as a figure for a certain judgment or experience, such as the rose stands in for the judgment of taste, still resists becoming the object of an *actual* singular judgment or experience. Furthermore, it perhaps resists becoming so even more emphatically, due to the danger inherent in its status as a figure or prime example.

To end, I want to turn to the practice of asemic or illegible writing, which intensifies these questions by serving at once as literally a figure for writing – being itself non-signifying writing – as well as suggesting itself as a 'figure' for aesthetic judgment at large, due to its troubled (and also exemplary) relationship to meaning. In *Asemic: The Art of Writing*, Peter Schwenger begins by writing that 'In the case of *asemic* it is meaning itself, or rather the sign's capacity to convey meaning, that is eliminated. So asemic writing is writing that does not attempt to communicate any message other than its own nature as writing.'³⁷ This is to say that asemic writing disrupts, first of all, the process of randomisation that I have highlighted above, and touches on a more directly un-meaning system of signification. According to Schwenger, asemic writing is something other than

nonsense or gobbledygook or whatever may be produced by those emblematic monkeys whaling away at typewriters. In all of those cases we have before our eyes, if not a coherent message, at least a coherent sign system. We can recognize the letters on the page as signs that we are familiar with, even if they are not employed to form known words for communicative purposes. Asemic writing removes even this minimal reassurance.³⁸

This first, negative description resonates with Jorge Luis Borges's 'Library of Babel', in which the titular library contains every possible book of a certain length, meaning also that it contains countless books that are but one character off from the original.³⁹ Asemic writing is something very different, to the extent that it resists interpretation in an absolute fashion. Not simply opposed to but indeed indifferent to meaning or meaninglessness, and to ideas of 'error' altogether, asemic writing remains always foreign, impenetrable to even the most studied reader. As Wayne Stables has written, 'Whatever might be said of the prospect of temporary illiteracy, it can hardly be willed into being.'⁴⁰ If asemic or illegible writing is therefore a kind of new frontier of interpretation, or at least aesthetic response, then its provisional effects are clear: its effect is akin to the surprise that, for Kant, prompts the aesthetic judgment. We are not only quite literally unable to read it, or, furthermore, to interpret or comment upon it. It strikes us, when it does, in an *absolutely* spontaneous way. Of course, this illegibility is always operative on at least two levels. In the context of aesthetic judgment, a temptation or danger of instrumentalising asemic writing comes into view, and therefore must be resisted, with the aforementioned (at least) doubling in mind. The difficulty of reading such writing is a figure for the spontaneity of encountering a beautiful object in the wild, since it gives us the injunction to make sense of something for which we have no previous context.

Furthermore, Barthes himself was concerned with such writing. As Thomas Gould has noted, 'the ambiguous vitality of the doodled line plays a role in Barthes's autobiographical *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, insofar as graphic play bookends the text'.⁴¹ I am more interested here in this 'ambiguous vitality' than the material fact of 'graphic play', as the former phrase can be said to describe what is at issue when we encounter nature and when we think about chance. Barthes's 'autobiographical' text points both outward, to the field of writing itself as illegible, asemic writing, and yet back

inward as always, to his own deeply held preoccupations with writing as such, and more specifically to the desire to write that occupies his late lecture courses. The final pages of the *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* feature two of Barthes's 'doodles', as well as his regular handwriting. The captions of these doodles, respectively, read: 'La graphie pour rien... [Doodling...]' and 'ou le signifiant sans signifié [or the signifier without the signified]'.⁴² These doodles are striking: spiky and full of movement, they do seem to *signify* something, though what it is can never be accessed. Perhaps it is merely the sense of signification itself – or, as in the Kantian beautiful, whose conceptless form affords us pleasure that is none other than the pleasure at the very possibility of discovering a form, perhaps the mere form of a concept in the first place.

It is what comes after these doodles, the final 'gesture', so to speak, that should give us pause. In part, this is because it is not, by definition, illegible: Barthes's handwriting. As handwriting, though, it always risks and is on the verge of illegibility, of indecipherable scrawl. What Barthes writes here can stand alone as a final word, for now, on the end (both ending and purpose) of writing: 'Et après? – Quoi écrire, maintenant? Pourrez-vous encore écrire quelque chose? – On écrit avec son désir, et je n'en finis pas de désirer [And afterward? – What to write now? Can you still write anything? – One writes with one's desire, and I am not through desiring]'.⁴³

Ending with the question of desire, we touch back on Raphaël's problem in *La Peau de chagrin*, as well as the always-relevant issue of interest in the framework of Kant's aesthetic judgment. Barthes is not through desiring, but neither is anybody who encounters the aesthetic object. Perhaps the distinction between art and nature, between readerly and writerly, has to do with our approach to the object in question. This is not to say that we should be necessarily foregrounding our personal desires when reading texts, but instead that we might do well to attend more thoroughly to the nuances of our desires as they are played upon in the very experience of reading, as unanticipatable moments of chance.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. III, p. 122; *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 4. Further references to the *Œuvres complètes* will be given in the form of *OC*, followed by the volume and page numbers.

² Barthes, *OC* III, p. 121; *S/Z*, p. 4.

³ Barthes, *OC* III, p. 122; *S/Z*, pp. 4–5.

⁴ Barbara Johnson, 'The Critical Difference', *Diacritics*, 8.2 (1978), 2–9 (p. 4).

⁵ Johnson, 'The Critical Difference', p. 4. This tendency can also be seen in *Le Plaisir du texte* [*The Pleasure of the Text*], with respect to the text of plaisir [pleasure] and the text of jouissance [bliss]. As emerges throughout that text, these two designations – just like the readerly and the writerly – are more closely linked with ways of reading than they are, objectively, with texts themselves. Barthes writes: 'Ce que je goûte dans un récit, ce n'est donc pas directement son contenu ni même sa structure, mais plutôt les éraflures que j'impose à la belle enveloppe: je cours, je saute, je lève la tête, je replonge. Rien à voir avec la profonde déchirure que le texte de jouissance imprime au langage lui-même, et non à la simple temporalité de sa lecture [what I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface: I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again. Which has nothing to do with the deep laceration the text of bliss inflicts on language itself, and not upon the simple temporality of its reading]'. He also writes that 'Le « plaisir » est donc ici (et sans pouvoir prévenir) tantôt extensif à la jouissance, tantôt il lui est opposé ["pleasure" here (and without our being able to anticipate) sometimes extends to bliss, sometimes is opposed to it]'. Barthes, *OC* IV, pp. 225, 229; *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), pp. 11–12, 19.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by Paul Guyer, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 74.

⁷ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 82.

⁸ Barthes, *OC* IV, p. 253; *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 55.

⁹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 185.

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 186.

¹¹ Robert R. Clewis, *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 104.

¹² For instance, see the following scenario: 'there have been some examples in which, where no such songbird [i.e., a nightingale] was to be found, some jolly landlord has tricked the guests staying with him, to their complete satisfaction, by hiding in a bush a mischievous lad who knew how to imitate this song (with a reed or a pipe in his mouth) just like nature. But as soon as one becomes aware that it is a trick, no one

would long endure listening to this song, previously taken to be so charming; and the same is true with every other songbird. It must be nature, or taken to be nature by us, for us to be able to take such an immediate **interest** in the beautiful, and even more so if we are to be at all able to expect of others that they should take this interest in it.’ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 182.

¹³ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 186.

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 186.

¹⁵ Patrick M. Bray, ‘Balzac and the Chagrin of Theory’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 54.3 (fall 2014), 66–77 (p. 73). See also Fredric Jameson’s claim that ‘the problems begin when your epistemological break begins to displace itself in time according to your own current interests, so that Balzac may stand for unenlightened representationality when you are concerned to bring out everything that is “textual” and modern in Flaubert, but turns into something else when, with Roland Barthes in *S/Z*, you have decided to rewrite Balzac as Philippe Sollers, as sheer text and *écriture*.’ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 18. In response, it could be argued that Sollers – and not only due to his recent passing – is just as much subject to the possibility of rewriting as Balzac. The point here is that, in a way, it is not only a question of old vs. new, and not only a question of making the old new again, but perhaps rather one of recognizing the ability to see something, in that very moment, in a new light, regardless of whether this something is old or new.

¹⁶ O’Meara argues that, with respect to Adorno’s argument about certain texts’ embodiment of the dialectical oscillation between the personal and the social, ‘Barthes tries to achieve this oscillation himself’ in certain of his own texts ‘by furnishing an overtly subjective analysis of moments of experience, phrases, photographs, and behaviors in order to discover what they reveal of universal experience’. Lucy O’Meara, “‘Not a Question but a Wound’: Adorno, Barthes, and Aesthetic Reflection’, *Comparative Literature*, 65.2 (spring 2013), 182–99 (p. 183).

¹⁷ Owen Heathcote, ‘Balzac and Theory, Balzac as Theory’, *Paragraph*, 32.2 (2009), 197–213 (p. 200). With Maurice Blanchot’s idea of the neutral narrative voice in mind, the autonomous and impersonal nature of the text is present even prior to its disarticulation into *lexie*.

¹⁸ ‘Since Balzac is being enlisted to illustrate at least two apparently contradictory views of the benefits of literature, he is shown to be always already self-aware and indeed self-critical about his own literary enterprise. He is always already illustrating not only literary theory but, as a writer with reservations about literature, a kind of counter literary theory but still within the form of literature’. Heathcote, ‘Balzac and Theory, Balzac as Theory’, p. 198.

¹⁹ Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 29; *The Wild Ass’s Skin*, trans. by Herbert J. Hunt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 27.

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- ²⁰ Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*, p. 30; *The Wild Ass's Skin*, pp. 27–28.
- ²¹ Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*, p. 30; *The Wild Ass's Skin*, p. 28.
- ²² Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*, p. 57; *The Wild Ass's Skin*, p. 48.
- ²³ Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*, p. 72; *The Wild Ass's Skin*, p. 59.
- ²⁴ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 49.
- ²⁵ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 49.
- ²⁶ Warren Johnson, 'That Sudden Shrinking Feeling: Exchange in *La Peau de chagrin*', *The French Review*, 70.4 (1997), 543–53 (p. 543).
- ²⁷ Bray, 'Balzac and the Chagrin of Theory', pp. 68–69.
- ²⁸ Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*, pp. 355–56.
- ²⁹ Balzac, *The Wild Ass's Skin*, p. 272.
- ³⁰ Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*, pp. 350–51; *The Wild Ass's Skin*, p. 268.
- ³¹ David F. Bell, *Circumstances: Chance in the Literary Text* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 157.
- ³² Samuel Weber, *Unwrapping Balzac: A Reading of La Peau de chagrin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 12–13.
- ³³ Weber, *Unwrapping Balzac*, p. 13.
- ³⁴ Barthes writes: 'Quant au texte qui a été choisi (pour quelles raisons? Je sais seulement que je désirais depuis assez longtemps faire l'analyse d'un court récit dans son entier et que mon attention fut attirée sur la nouvelle de Balzac par une étude de Jean Reboul; l'auteur disait tenir son propre choix d'une citation de Georges Bataille, ainsi je me trouvais pris dans ce *report*, dont j'allais, par le texte lui-même, entrevoir toute l'étendue), ce texte est *Sarrasine*, de Balzac [The text I have chosen (Why? All I know is that for some time I have wanted to make a complete analysis of a short text and that the Balzac story was brought to my attention by an article by Jean Reboul, who in turn is supposed to have been inspired by Georges Bataille's reference; and thus I was caught up in this "series" whose scope I was to discover by means of the text itself) is Balzac's *Sarrasine*]. A few short pages later, this question emerges again: 'Le hasard (mais est-ce le hasard?) veut que le trois premières lexies (à savoir le titre et la première phrase de la nouvelle) nous livrent déjà les cinq grands codes que vont maintenant rejoindre tous les signifiés du texte [As chance would have it (but what is chance?), the first three lexias—the title and the first sentence of the story—have already provided us with the five major codes under which all the textual signifiers can be grouped]'. Clearly, then, chance is on Barthes's mind in *S/Z*, regarding his choice of a text and even pertaining to his very method. Barthes, *OC III*, pp. 131, 133; *S/Z*, pp. 16, 18–19.
- ³⁵ 'Donc procédure arbitraire de consécution. L'année dernière : l'alphabet. Cette année, renforcement de l'aléatoire: Intitulé → Ordre alphabétique → Numérotation → Tirage du sort : table des nombres au hasard [Thus arbitrary process of sequencing.

Last year: the alphabet. This year, reinforcement of chance: Title → Alphabetical Order → Numbering → Lottery draw: table of random numbers].’ Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre: Notes de cours au Collège de France 1977–1978*, ed. by Thomas Clerc (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 37; *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 12.

³⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 100. Emphasis added.

³⁷ Peter Schwenger, *Asemic: The Art of Writing* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2019), p. 1.

³⁸ Schwenger, *Asemic*, p. 2.

³⁹ See, for instance: ‘There are five shelves for each of the hexagon’s walls; each shelf contains thirty-five books of uniform format; each book is of four hundred and ten pages; each page, of forty lines, each line, of some eighty letters which are black in color’. A few pages later, with reference to certain “treasures” within the library, the text notes that ‘every copy is unique, irreplaceable, but (since the Library is total) there are always several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles: works which differ only in a letter or a comma’. Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 52, 56.

⁴⁰ Wayne Stables, ‘What is the Matter? A Meditation on Illegible Writing’, *New Literary History*, 52.2 (spring 2021), 285–309 (p. 288).

⁴¹ Thomas Gould, ‘Legerdemain/Gaucherie: Doodle Theory with Barthes and Beckett’, *Paragraph*, 45.2 (2022), 233–47 (p. 234).

⁴² Barthes, *OC IV*, pp. 759–60; *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), p. 187.

⁴³ Barthes, *OC IV*, p. 771; *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 188.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryan Counter holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the State University of New York at Buffalo, and teaches composition at Western New England University and Framingham State University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *SubStance*, *Barthes Studies*, *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique*, and *Literature and Event: Twenty-First Century Reformulations* (Routledge). He recently guest edited a special themed edition of the *First To Knock* periodical, on the work of Maurice Blanchot.

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