

ROLAND BARTHES

*A Lover's
Discourse*

FRAGMENTS

Translated by Richard Howard

 HILL AND WANG

*A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux
New York*

Translation copyright © 1978 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.
Originally published in French as Fragments d'un discours amoureux,
© Éditions du Seuil 1977
All rights reserved
Published in Canada by HarperCollinsCanadaLtd
Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Charles E. Skaggs
First published in the United States in 1978 by
Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux
Twenty-second printing, 2001

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Barthes, Roland.
A lover's discourse.
Translation of Fragments d'un discours amoureux.
1. French language—Terms and phrases.
2. Love—Terminology.
I. Title.
PC2440.B3613 1978 808 78-7794

The Love Letter

lettre / letter

This figure refers to the special dialectic of the love letter, both blank (encoded) and expressive (charged with longing to signify desire).

Werther 1. When Werther (in the Ambassador's employ) writes to Charlotte, his letter follows this outline: 1. What joy to be thinking of you! 2. Here I am in a mundane situation, and without you I feel utterly alone. 3. I have met someone (Fraülein von B . . .) who resembles you and with whom I can speak of you. 4. I keep hoping that we can be reunited. —A single piece of information is varied, in the manner of a musical theme: *I am thinking of you.*

Freud What does "thinking of you" mean? It means: forgetting "you" (without forgetting, life itself is not possible) and frequently waking out of that forgetfulness. Many things, by association, bring you back into my discourse. "Thinking of you" means precisely this metonymy. For, in itself, such thinking is blank: I do not think *you*; I simply make you recur (to the very degree that I forget you). It is this form (this rhythm) which I call "thought": *I have nothing to tell you*, save that it is to you that I tell this nothing:

Goethe Why do I turn once again to writing?
Beloved, you must not ask such a question,
For the truth is, I have nothing to tell you,
All the same, your dear hands will hold this note.

FREUD: To his fiancée: "Oh, that gardener Bünsow! How lucky he is to be able to shelter my beloved" (*Letters*).

GOETHE: Quoted by Freud.

Gide ("Think of Hubert, writes the narrator of *Paludes*, that Book of Nothing, on his engagement calendar, comically enough.)

2. "As you see," writes the Marquise de Merteuil, "when you write someone, it is for that person and not for yourself, so you must be sure not to say what you think, but rather what will please that person." The Marquise is not in love; what she postulates is a *correspondence*, i.e., a tactical enterprise to defend positions, make conquests; this enterprise must reconnoiter the positions (the subgroups) of the adverse group, i.e., must articulate the other's image in various points which the letter will try to touch (in this sense, "correspondence" is precisely the word to use, in its mathematical sense). But for the lover the letter has no tactical value: it is purely *expressive*—at most, flattering (but here flattery is not a matter of self-interest, merely the language of devotion); what I engage in with the other is a *relation*, not a correspondence: the relation brings together two images. You are everywhere, your image is total, Werther writes to Charlotte, in various ways.

3. Like desire, the love letter waits for an answer; it implicitly enjoins the other to reply, for without a reply the other's image changes, becomes *other*. This is what the young Freud explains so authoritatively to his fiancée: "Yet I don't want my letters to keep remaining unanswered, and I shall stop writing you altogether if you don't

GIDE: *Paludes*.

LACLOS: *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

A.C.: Conversation.

FREUD: *Letters*.

write back. Perpetual monologues apropos of a loved being, which are neither corrected nor nourished by that being, lead to erroneous notions concerning mutual relations, and make us strangers to each other when we meet again, so that we find things different from what, without realizing it, we imagined."

(The one who would accept the "injustices" of communication, the one who would continue speaking lightly, tenderly, without being answered, would acquire a great mastery: the mastery of the Mother.)