

# Reading for Symptoms: Althusser, Bachelard, Barthes, Foucault

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## Summary

This paper argues that a mode of reading which has much in common with that which Althusser, in *Reading Capital*, calls "symptomatic", has proven to be one of the most productive but neglected textual procedures of our times. By way of a discussion of the reading practices of Althusser, Barthes, Bachelard and Foucault, it is argued here that these practices are connected, not only as regards parallel concerns and themes, but more important still concerning the figure of discontinuity which underpins all symptomatic readings. This discontinuity, the paper suggests, is not only of the conceptual or philosophical variety, but extends to the concepts of history in Foucault's archaeologies to that of the subject in Bachelard, and to representation itself in the work of both Althusser and Barthes.

## Opsomming

In hierdie referaat word redeneer dat 'n wyse van lees wat baie gemeen het met dit waarna Althusser in *Reading Capital* verwys as "simptomaties", onbetwisbaar as een van die produktiefste, maar tegelyk ook mees verwaarloosde tekstuele prosedures van ons tyd is. Aan die hand van 'n bespreking van die leespraktyke van Althusser, Barthes, Bachelard en Foucault, word hier beweer dat dié praktyke verband met mekaar hou, nie net vir sover dit parallele belange en temas betref nie, maar belangriker nog, rakende die diskontinuiteit wat al die simptomatiese lesings onderlê. Hierdie diskontinuiteit is, volgens die referaat, nie net van konseptuele of filosofiese aard nie, maar betrek ook die konsepte van die geskiedenis in Foucault se argeologieë, tot dié van die onderwerp in Bachelard, en tot representasie as sodanig in die werk van sowel Althusser as Barthes.

In the opening sections of *Reading Capital* (1968), Louis Althusser describes ours as an age which demands "discovery and training in the 'simplest' acts of existence: including seeing, listening, speaking and reading ...." (Althusser 1979: 15). To Freud he gives the special capacity for both "listening and keeping silent", but to Marx goes the real honour of having asked, and in a significantly novel way, "what it is to read" (1979: 15). Althusser even goes so far as to suggest that it is his critique of the religious myth of reading which lies behind Marx's "founding [of] a theory of history and [of] a philosophy of the historical distinction between

ideology and science" (1979: 17).

If this seems a great deal to derive from a new kind of reading, Althusser is not alone in this, nor has this view of the unexpected significance of ways of reading proved short-lived. In fact, one of the most noticeable features of postmodern thought is just how many of its basic assumptions and preoccupations can be explicated in terms of its most characteristic reading practice - deconstruction. Such is the significance of deconstruction that its fundamental principles are often used to justify the necessity for the famed "critique of western metaphysics" itself, while its findings support this critique's equally celebrated impossibility.

If deconstruction is the most controversial, and certainly the best known of contemporary reading protocols, Althusser's own, or symptomatic reading, appears to have been relatively neglected, on the theoretical level at least. However, it will be argued here, that in practice a mode of reading which has much in common with that which Althusser calls symptomatic, has proven to be one of the most productive textual procedures of our times. The claims made for symptomatic reading may appear to be more local and specific than those of deconstruction, but the particular readings made under its auspices have been widely influential.

For example, *Reading Capital* (1968) itself is not only the most renowned commentary on a major text by Marx, but is, in its own right, a major document of historical materialism. Similarly, much of what is characteristic of the epistemology of Gaston Bachelard, a key figure in European philosophy of science (as his importance to Foucault makes clear), grows from a distinctive reading practice. Likewise, a great deal that is central to Foucault - to *The Order of Things* (1970) in particular - is a product of his own symptomatic readings. Finally *S/Z* (1975), Roland Barthes's reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, is certainly one of the most important texts of aesthetic modernism, due as much to its novel method as to the far-reaching implications of its findings.

If these ways of reading do in fact have something in common, and this common ingredient does indeed relate them to reading of the symptomatic kind, then it would be a mistake to continue neglecting what could, in the long-term, turn out to be a reading practice of much greater significance and consequence than deconstruction itself.

## 1

In its broadest sense Althusser's (1979: 32) notion of a symptomatic reading as it appears in *Reading Capital*, suggests that it is a progressive and

systematic activity - one which not only hopes to disinter and make visible aspects of the text which would otherwise have existed only "allusively or practically", but also to reveal, by doing so, what is in effect another text beneath the original one (p. 28).

As background to his discussion on reading in general and to his conception of symptomatic reading in particular, Althusser stresses that no reading is ever innocent. He admits that he is, therefore, obliged to characterize his own particular brand of lack of innocence, which he does by affirming his commitment to what is supposedly the most innocent, only because it is the most formally self-conscious of all intellectual habitats - philosophy. Philosophy he defines further as an activity primarily concerned with a problematic and its relation to its objects, which explains why Althusser's own readings are focally concerned with this problematic/object relation. More important, Althusser's symptomatic readings (and the readings he most admires) are also concerned with the forms and logic of the possible relations between these two ingredients - that is with the relationship between a problematic and its objects.

If the first general feature of symptomatic reading amounts to an orientation to content of a certain kind, then symptomatic reading's second important characteristic is the methodological concomitant of this orientation.

Although Althusser's, like all reading practices, is in search of another text, the "other" he uncovers is a very different text from those of either traditional hermeneutics or deconstruction. Where hermeneutists or deconstructionists read synchronically, Althusser, as might be expected, reads in series. For him a symptomatic reading is always a rereading, one based upon a past reading from which it must finally differ.

Althusser's preliminary exposition - his move towards a reading of the distinctively symptomatic kind - must, therefore, begin with a reading of the usual kind, one which is, crucially, not wrong but limited. Althusser points out that Marx begins with what Adam Smith, as the father of political economy, could neither see nor understand. Marx himself reveals the gaps and oversights in Smith, especially Smith's basic oversight which Althusser characterizes as concerning a confusion of constant and variable capital.

But this, Althusser (1979: 19) argues, is not all, or better still, not enough. This understanding of what it is that Marx does when he reads Smith, would reduce an important intellectual break to no more than an alternative position, and Marx himself to little more than "Smith minus the myopia". What distinguishes Marx's preliminary, critical reading of Smith (which has much in common with many of a more traditional kind - even those of unusual perspicacity) from the properly symptomatic variety which

is Marx's special contribution, turns on the difference between identifying the oversights or limitations of a classic text and a critical perspective of a more radical and distinctive kind.

Althusser (1979: 21) explicitly characterizes this second kind of reading as something of a different order - one which allows a central problem to be solved by posing it in the proper form for the first time. What makes a solution of this more substantial order possible is, according to Althusser, the fact that a mixture of sightings and oversights is not all that can be made visible in Smith's text. It is a matter of moving from the level of visible, discernible limitations to the level of what it is that does the limiting. And the crucial question, then, is that concerned with the combination of what can and what cannot be seen.

In the place of oversights and slips, Althusser argues, we now have an understanding of the *relationship* between the visible and the invisible in the text - or, more accurately, the question of "the identity of non-vision and vision in vision ...." (1979: 21). The relationship between the visible and what Althusser calls the obscure field of the invisible, is now thought of as the necessary effect of the structure of the visible itself (1979: 20). It is, surprisingly, in the visible that that which is forbidden, is to be found. The invisible is understood as the product of inner darkness or exclusion, not of outer limits. The traditional idea of the original reading as one which gains insight into things outside or below the text is replaced by an emphasis on what is invisibly located within it. Althusser's "depth" is ironically in the surface; in this case, the surface of a key sentence or proposition.

More specifically, what is central to Marx's rereading of political economy, Althusser argues, is its answer to the absent question "what is the value of labour?" - which yields the formula "the value of labour is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the reproduction of labour".

What Marx does, then, is to interrogate the silence he perceives to be in the classical texts' own words - to place, in effect, an empty bracket "( )" after the use of the term labour on either side of the equation - a procedure which causes the two uses of the term to clash so that it emerges that the second "labour" actually means "labourer". The result is a different intermediary equation which reads: "The value of labour is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the reproduction of the labourer." And, crucially, this equation, because it no longer has the same content, can in fact, no longer be made.

Smith's elision exposed an alternative form to the resolution of the problem of the value of labour, which ironically enough, in turn, led to an alternative problematic. Where there was a problematic concerned with the value of labour, one concerned with the value of labour-power emerged. In

other words, the final equation now reads "the value of labour-power is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the reproduction of labour-power". And this is the move which allows the final question "what is the value of labour-power?" to emerge (1979: 23).

As promised, the result of this analysis is not a resolution of the initial problem but a complete change in its terms. What Marx's symptomatic reading effected then was no less than a "transformation of the object" (1979: 24). Marx, in reading the illegible in Smith, that which has the paradoxical status of providing an answer not corresponding to any question actually posed, makes a novel object possible - one that is, what is more, definitive of his (Marx's) own project.

This example of a symptomatic reading by Marx is followed by one in which Althusser himself enters the series and reads Marx much as Marx had done Smith. Both these symptomatic readings share a common orientation towards that focal material in the text which can generate an answer to an absent question. In this case the question equivalent to "what is the value of labour-power?" is one of crucial importance to contemporary thought as a whole: "What is the nature of the effectivity of structure on its elements?" (1979: 29-32).

What Marx does, Althusser (1979: 65) argues, is to consider contemporary society (and every other) both historically, or rather as a historical result, and synchronically - that is as a given society - simultaneously. The resulting society, and this society in particular, is according to Marx, a result of changes in modes of production. What Marx studies in *Capital* then is the mechanism which makes the result of history's production exist as a society. In other words, Marx, once more on the basis of an absent question, arrives at a new object - "the society-effect" peculiar to the capitalist mode of production.

This insight, in turn, makes it possible to conceive of a new series of effects which themselves become new objects. For example, Althusser (1979: 62) argues that to read Marx properly is to distinguish his from those "positive" histories of knowledge to which we are accustomed by recognising that his is a history-cum-theory of the *knowledge-effect*. Furthermore this knowledge-effect, because it misleadingly emerges as a single, generic entity, must be split into two components - an ideological effect and a scientific effect.

After Marx, it is no longer a matter of the ancient, unitary question of the truth, but of a new question which concerns the separate ingredients which go to make up the *truth-effect*.

When Althusser himself reads the Hegelianism out of *Capital*, he wishes the reader to see Marx engaged in "the real drama" of an encounter with his

Hegelian concepts as they struggle against something which is nameless - with the symptomatic location of a definitive philosophical omission.

Identifying this omission allows Marx to raise a new question - one which turns out to concern the possible relations between the logical and historical orders; of that between objects as they are constituted in knowledge and the real objects of history. This new question is, according to Althusser, the result of maintaining a merciless distinction between the real world as defined by different practices and specific mechanisms, and the idea of the real world in terms of which it is appropriated.

At this point in the argument something very interesting happens. Althusser begins to merge, one might even say confuse, two orders of insight - an insight which (to some degree) all symptomatic readers share: The notion of an ideological effect or the effect of truth, coupled with the belief that effects of this kind stem from the nature of representation or language itself - in particular from the fact that form and content may be both distinguished and, more important still, confused.

Althusser begins with a concern as to what it is on the surface of an event in language (or a specific writing practice), which confers on knowledge the property of being true. But he ends up focusing on the form of representation itself. Both symptomatic readings - Marx reading Smith and Althusser reading Marx - are based upon opening up an apparent identity on the level of signifiers to reveal different signifieds - namely two objects appearing where it had seemed that there was only one. As Althusser argues, even the notion of object itself must be considered symptomatically, so that "the *concept* of object must be produced to deliver it from the fraudulent unity of the *word* object" (1979: 40).

Althusser's symptomatic readings are thus critiques in two senses: firstly, they reveal particular instances or examples of symptomatic material in a particular text and secondly, as critiques of hypostasis, they reveal that representation itself (at least in its modern form) ironically provides the preconditions for what is most deceptive in modern knowledge.

Interestingly enough, Althusser's symptomatic reading is, therefore, possible and necessary for the same reason that Freud's psychoanalysis is. Ideological effects and the psychoanalytic symptom - as the disguised satisfaction of the wish - are both the result of the overdetermined relation of signifier to signified, of the fact that the same percept or thing can stand for more than one concept or, in other words, have more than one meaning.

## 2

Between Gaston Bachelard - the first candidate I suggest as having a place in Althusser's class of symptomatic readers - and Althusser himself, there are clear thematic and methodological connections, which could finally be seen as those which relate them to the critiques of Freud and Marx respectively. Bachelard and Althusser both believe that it is possible to read for symptoms, whether these symptoms are considered to be productive of knowledge or against its true interests. More specifically, both are concerned with questions of knowledge and their relation to questions of writing or representation. However, where Althusser seeks those configurations of which the knowledge-effect itself is a symptom, Bachelard is looking for those symptoms which regularly threaten to undermine knowledge. In this Bachelard is probably a more ambitious, a more fully symptomatic reader than Althusser.

In Bachelard's case reading symptomatically is not only a matter of perspective or content, for, while his readings clearly display the presence of psychoanalysis as content (in the form of an explicit concern with unconscious processes), psychoanalysis also provides him with the fundamental epistemological elements and assumptions which underpin his symptomatic and syndromic claims.

By contrast, even in his two most characteristic symptomatic readings, Althusser's historical materialism is not present to this extent. It is not, of course, that the key concepts of Marx's critique, such as ideology, hypostasis, commodity fetishism and mystification do not hover in the wings of Althusser's analyses. They clearly do. It is rather that in Bachelard's thought a distinctive version of Freud's second topography occupies centre stage, making it possible to uncover not just specific symptoms but also the entire syndrome which is at work in their organization. This is probably why there is some doubt as to whether Althusser would have read anything but *Capital* in quite the way he did, but little doubt as to how Bachelard would treat earth, air or water. In other words, in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1964), Bachelard goes so far as to suggest a reading protocol which is able to predict the subject-matter likely to lure symptoms, as well as their syndromic characteristics. Bachelard, it appears, believes that not only are the unconscious and its predilections eternal, but also some of its behaviour.

If Bachelard's psychoanalytic affiliations are quite apparent and in ways which will be detailed at a later stage, it is perhaps best to begin with an account of the epistemological concepts which inform his reading and play an important part in establishing its symptomatic character.

Fundamental to Bachelard's project is his conviction that there are no

viable accounts of rationality except those derived from an examination of the historical developments of scientific reason. What this means in practice is that Bachelard, like Marx and Althusser, reads as part of a philosophical project. As an enquiry into rationality and its limits, his project is, like Althusser's, concerned with the relationship between the logical and historical orders. However, Bachelard's focus is upon a third term, the psychological, which he considers to set the major limit upon that relation.

Bachelard's philosophy of science may be positive (in the sense that it supports the now unfashionable idea of scientific progress), but it is not naively positivist because he emphasizes that progress is always at the mercy of that which continually threatens to impede it. More important still, certainly to his status as a symptomatic reader, is that the impediment-to-progress relation is not conceived of as a simple or continuous one, but as something precariously poised between productive breaks and persistent obstacles. For Bachelard the progress of scientific knowledge is predicated upon two breaks or discontinuities. Firstly, there is the necessary break from (even contradiction of) commonsense and commonsense experience. And, secondly, there is the now more familiar assertion that knowledge itself is always broken by the rise and fall of different, often contradictory, paradigms. Because Bachelard has a strong sense that making the breaks upon which the history of the sciences is based, is a strenuous task, he is probably best known for what these breaks suggest - the existence of barriers, or what he calls epistemological obstacles. Bachelard characterizes these epistemological obstacles in a number of ways, all of which make their presence felt in the extraordinary range of texts providing the material for his (psycho)analyses.

Firstly, epistemological obstacles are residues left over from traditional ways of thinking or commonsense. The commonsense mind is a breeding ground for obstacles of this kind because of its reliance on images which should have heuristic value, images which must eventually be eliminated from scientific thought. Secondly, obstacles may take the form of the persistent influence of successful scientific work which has outlived its value, and the allied influence of traditional philosophical thought which canonizes as truth those principles or findings which another historical period or position must overcome (Guting 1989: 9).

What aligns this position to psychoanalysis, is the fact that the attitudes (in the broad sense) which act as obstacles to knowledge are seldom consciously formulated by those whom they constrain. They must preferably be understood as operating at the level of implicit assumptions and of cognitive and perceptual habits. In other words, Bachelard seeks the dangers to the scientific "ego" - the potential sites for symptom formation - which his

"psychoanalysis of reason" (Guting 1989: 17) can, and must, bring to awareness.

The *Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1964: 60) is thus an account of what Bachelard himself calls the unconscious of the scientific mind, an approach legitimately described as a psychoanalysis because, like that in the Freudian clinic, it is a procedure used to reveal (in this case the scientist's), unavowable motives.

In a way reminiscent of so many of Freud's opening passages, Bachelard begins by unpicking the common, or commonsense, view which, in this case, he characterizes as that which believes that speaking of the object amounts to being objective. Scientific objectivity is only possible, he insists, once one has disassociated oneself from the immediate object, if one has "refused to yield to the seduction of the initial choice" (1964: 1). If much that is sacrosanct in commonsense - intuitions, language, perceptions - must be understood as epistemological obstacles, then everything must be called into question. Sensations and ordinary terminology (however constant), even etymology, are all suspect, for words which "were made for singing and chanting" rarely make contact with thought. Far from marvelling at the natural object, "objective thought" must, crucially, treat it ironically (1964: 2).

The texts Bachelard focuses on and reads symptomatically, are early writings on fire which he uses to reveal how and why fire cannot be "a straightforward reality for science" (1964: 2). His basic assumption is that fire is particularly problematical for scientific knowledge because of the slightly hypnotized condition in which one watches it, a state which makes fire especially conducive to psychoanalytic investigation. Fire draws reverie, or that desiring, affective state which spontaneously evokes all those ways of experiencing the object which are "in opposition to scientific knowledge" (1964: 46).

In fact, Bachelard uses the figure of reverie (which is close to Freud's day-dream) as a type of all-encompassing trope, to characterize those conditions in which the easy continuity between thought and dream finally twists and defeats thought and renders it dreamlike. He argues that it is reverie, and all states aligned to it, which must be eliminated in modern science education, for if thought is to be scientific, it must be wrested from that way of perceiving typified in reverie, in which the unconscious is most vividly, if unsuspectedly, present. While science may be founded (in the sense of motivated or driven) by reverie, it "takes a good many experiments to dispel the dream" (1964: 22).

Bachelard's overall project, reinforced in the chapter dealing with psychoanalysis and prehistory, makes it clear that he is not only concerned with prehistoric man but with "primitiveness" of another kind - with how a new piece of scientific knowledge is perceived first in our culture, or by the ignorant. Consequently, there is always the need to "seek out systematically the component elements of the libido in all primitive activities" (1964: 30).

In all the texts on fire which he reads, be they fiction or non-fiction, evidence of symptoms appears in the form of an enhanced sense of contradiction and affectivity which the writing itself displays.

Much as in *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud suggests that a number of regular symbols are, albeit for a variety of contingent reasons, deployed for purposes of disguise, so Bachelard appears to believe that these tell-tale textual qualities stem from a set of unconscious, semi-structured fields of desire which inevitably infiltrate man's perception of fire. He gives these the analytically-inflected term of "complexes".

In a way once more reminiscent of Freud, Bachelard conceives of these complexes in a form which spontaneously relates them to particular agencies of the second topography and opens them up to analytic attention because mechanisms of distortion or disguise make interpretation necessary. What is more, these mechanisms can, to some extent, be identified in advance.

The result is that Bachelard, too, works in accordance with markers or indicators for the symptomatic. Where Freud would look for repetition, for signs of compulsion or a gap in the narrative, Bachelard seeks evidence in the texts for that distinctive affect-laden, ambivalent atmosphere and its metaphoric concomitants.

The functioning of what Bachelard calls the *Empedocles*, in contrast to the *Novalis* complex, is a case in point. In characterizing the Empedocles complex, he draws attention to the way in which fire, certainly that contained in a fireplace, magnifies and concentrates man's sense of change, how the sparks that fly from the flames urge him forward to meet his destiny, his death. Watching the fire, the fascinated individual hears the call of the funeral pyre.

However, by contrast, in the thrall of the *Novalis* complex, the figure of Eros emerges in opposition to that of the Thanatos of Empedocles. Fire as a lure to the death drive succumbs to its erotic force. Love is also a fire to be transmitted and fire is that which "concentrates the tendency to inscribe human love at the heart of things" (1964: 46). Romanticism rediscovers those themes of fire with special sexual value, because Novalis lives with consciousness of inner heat. The *Novalis* complex thus synthesizes all that is erotic in fire (1964: 40).

In a related way, when considering questions of the origin of fire,

Bachelard raises the problem of how the knowledge that fire may be produced by friction or rubbing, arose. Here he makes the crucial point that observation alone will not suggest how fire is produced. Addressing himself to what is always a key question in early scientific history, Bachelard insists that in order to explain the origin of fire we have to free ourselves from what he calls an "intransigent utilitarianism" (1964: 27). Instead of observation or the recourse to commonsense, the knowledge that fire can be produced by rubbing has its origins in sexual experience, in rhythmic and seductive movements. This explains why it is that the two pieces of wood were often thought to be necessarily of a different nature.

If the libido and death drive are to be found in Novalis and Empedocles complexes respectively, then in the psychoanalysis of fire there is a place for Oedipus too.

In the chapter entitled "Fire and Respect", Bachelard introduces the Prometheus complex, the complex which implicates the impulses which led to the theft of fire from the gods. If fire is the object of a general prohibition, then the first thing learnt about fire is not to touch it. Gaining personal knowledge of fire becomes "the problem of clever disobedience" (1964: 11).

"We propose to place then together under the name of the Prometheus complex all those tendencies which impel us to *know* as much as our fathers, more than our fathers, as much as our teachers, more than our teachers." We can, therefore, compare, but must not confuse, the Prometheus complex with the Oedipus complex of classical psychoanalysis. "The Prometheus complex is the Oedipus complex of the life of the intellect (1964: 12)."

The double values of fire, once more, attract the Prometheus complex. Just as fire shines in paradise and burns in hell, so it provides pleasure to the good child at a safe distance, but burns and punishes the child who plays too close. In the final sections of the *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Bachelard returns to this basic premise - that the psychological problem of fire is the result of those properties which predispose it to be charged with contradictions. Its destructive power is such that every struggle against fire is one against its demonic character. Impure fires rage in the fever of the blood and the fire of sulphur chars the tongue with darkness and soot. But fire is also a symbol of purity - it deodorizes and prevents putrefaction. It separates substances and destroys impurities so that the ordeal of fire produces that which is pure and homogeneous from the diverse and disordered. The purity of fire seems to culminate in its status as that which at its own extreme limit, seems to be pure spirit alone (1964: 104-105).

Such details - those which give *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* its very dis-

tinctive flavour - also raise questions as to the extent to which this text has general implications of the kind needed here. Bachelard's own position is that it does. And it is true that his claims clearly extend beyond identifying those symptoms shown to be operative in an analysis of fire in particular. His basic assumption is that the discursive registers themselves (those of the aesthetic, commonsense and knowledge) give evidence of a divided psychic apparatus and that for this reason the conflictual relations they reflect are typical of inter-agency conflict.

The need for symptomatic reading is thus grounded in a metapsychological premise not unlike that which underpins Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* - that the unconscious appears everywhere, even in the most unexpected, apparently rational, of places. And for Bachelard the fact that symptomatic readings are possible at all, stems from what is known (once more on the basis of psychoanalysis) about why, and how the unconscious will appear.

Bachelard's point is, therefore, not merely that a psychoanalysis of fire in particular can be undertaken, but that the objectivity of all knowledge is predicated upon, in fact, demands analyses of this variety.

### 3

If Gaston Bachelard sees the signs of a divided psychic apparatus even in scientific writing, Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (1975), a reading of Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*, is concerned with a division of a somewhat similar kind manifest in literary realism. What is more, like Althusser and Bachelard, Barthes too sees this division as implicating the representational apparatus itself. There may be differences in how they treat and value these divisions, but all three symptomatic readers considered so far, view these divisions as explaining why it is necessary to read symptomatically at all.

In fact, the extent of the common ground occupied by all three becomes increasingly apparent when they are compared at the level of content and concerns in addition to method. Barthes, like Althusser, examines language for tell-tale effects - and where Althusser is concerned with knowledge as an effect, Barthes's attention is directed at the realism in just these terms. What is more, for both Althusser and Barthes, the ingredients which make these effects possible, are also those very ingredients which threaten to exceed them.

Barthes and Althusser both draw attention to the ways in which language may be distorted, but while Althusser sees signification itself as providing a site for confusion (because that which is identical at the level of signifier

may disguise differences in the signified), Barthes argues that there is an Ideal principle inherent in all language which is always vulnerable to opportunist exploitation.

Furthermore, similarities between Althusser and Barthes extend to include those between Barthes and Bachelard. Like Bachelard, who is concerned with the negative role which the complexes play in the production of objective writing, Barthes wishes to expose the restraints on Ideal language which the language of realism in particular, effects. However, whereas Barthes's ultimate aim is to show that the real creativity of which Ideal language is capable requires that it be liberated from the repression which the realist principle demands, Bachelard endorses repression in the interests of objectivity.

In this Barthes and Bachelard share not only the diagnostic impulse characteristic of symptomatic reading, but are also alike in making syndromic claims based on those general ideas which the notion of a syndrome incorporates. They also share, by way of their respective codes and complexes, methods which are made up of similar ingredients.

If the similarities between them are both conceptual and methodological, the major differences between *S/Z* and *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* are those which implicate the level of analysis in each case. Bachelard's could be described as a metapsychological work, in that he examines the unconscious in texts concerned with fire at the topographic level, while *S/Z*, which is also concerned with the psychodynamics of writing, concentrates on a single text and can thus be described as a case history, an illustrative example of a particular syndrome.

An account of this diagnosis reveals that Barthes is a symptomatic reader of unusual talent, and that *S/Z*'s most notable achievement is, perhaps, not the generalized reassessment of realism for which it is renowned, but the careful demonstration of how the realist effect is achieved.

The procedure Barthes uses, which he calls starring the text, involves breaking the entire novella into a number of fragments or *lexia*, which vary in length from a word or phrase to an extended passage. Each analysis is conducted in terms of five codes (or major symptoms) of realism which, he argues, together constrain the generativity of language in its Ideal form so as to produce a particular example of realist writing.

Each of these *lexia*, which resemble the small observations of the doctor's gaze, is subject to minute connotative analysis. The overall effect of this detailed account is to emphasize that the apparent naturalness and stylistic freedom of realism is not produced by means of a spontaneous deployment of denotation, but by a finally limited number of connotative operations. In functioning in accordance with what Barthes calls the "law of the signified",

realism confers upon language a kind of composite innocence made up of the illusions of spontaneity, truth and referentiality. It is for this reason that he describes realism not as natural but rather as a strategy for naturalization. In Barthes's hands realism is no longer seen as the most spontaneous expression of writing, but as a kind of atrophy - one in which the healthy body of language is constrained to a limited set of symptomatic movements.

Realist language, in adopting its characteristic air of innocence and neutrality, reinforces the impression that it exists only in the interests of the world and hides its own crucial contribution. In this, Barthes reveals, each of the five codes operate somewhat differently, but all do so in terms of a common commitment to the signified. For Barthes denotation is itself an effect - it is merely the last of the connotations. This effect, like Althusser's knowledge effect, is located in the text itself. But because of the nature of the realist demand, the realist text has a dependent relation to the outside - to the historical and social phenomena which are both anterior and ulterior to it.

The idealism of Barthes's position on Ideal language suggests that language itself, as a signifying potential, is infinitely resourceful, could do anything it chooses without the constraints which must follow upon the need to be realist. Barthes argues that it is only in its realist guise that writing must orientate itself to a specific, prejudicial exteriority.

Symptomatic reading is necessary because although language itself is free, (almost) everywhere it is in chains.

#### 4

If each of the readers discussed so far provides an important contribution to the practice of symptomatic reading it is, in my view, the work of Michel Foucault, primarily in *The Order of Things* (Foucault 1970), which spontaneously co-ordinates and outlines the ways in which reading of this kind can be thought of as a distinctive endeavour.

Two kinds of symptomatic reading allied, but not identical to, those of Althusser, Bachelard and Barthes, are integral to *The Order of Things*.

The first variety, those exemplified by Foucault's readings of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Sade's *Justine* and *Juliette*, are of texts which are themselves symptomatic - chosen for this very reason. The second, best represented by the renowned account of Velasquez's *Las Meninas* which opens *The Order of Things*, is the symptomatic reading of an "ordinary" or representative text in which the work is read retrospectively to reveal features which are symptomatic only with hindsight.

In both cases a historical perspective is constitutive of Foucault's readings. In the first, the vicissitudes of history are revealed to be present internally, that is, simultaneously apparent within the texts themselves. In the second, historical transformations are what makes it possible to see the text as a symptom at all.

The texts which call for symptomatic readings of the first kind, all exist at the intersections between the particular configurations of knowledge which Foucault calls epistemes. What is symptomatic then manifests itself in a double register of signs - those of both the Renaissance and the Classical in the case of *Don Quixote* and of the Classical and the Modern in the case of Sade's *Justine* and *Juliette. Las Meninas*, on the other hand, is read (or rather reread) in the light of an age, the Modern, which problematizes representation in a way that makes its previously unproblematic status clear.

Foucault's symptomatic readings may have a common form, but like those of Althusser, Bachelard and Barthes, they are necessarily specific to a historical location. Because *Don Quixote* straddles the Renaissance and Classical ages, it displays features of two particular epistemic organizations - one based on what Foucault calls resemblance as well as one based on what he describes as identity and difference.

In marking the boundary or end of the Renaissance, the interplay between signs and resemblances to be found in *Don Quixote* seems to anticipate the voice of the thought to come, that of the new episteme with its preoccupation with the table of identities and differences. The Don himself is described as the "pilgrim of similitude", a man "alienated in analogy", "disordered player of the same and the Other". That of Don Quixote is thus the negative of the Renaissance world. For Cervantes's writing has ceased to be "the prose of the world" rendering similitudes deceptive so that the Don reads books in the mode of defence - to prove that they are "telling the truth". He reads to ensure that books are still in the language of the world and to shore up the crumbling divide between words and things which the Classic world inaugurates (1970: 49). What Don Quixote desires is a sign, a sign as it were in signs themselves, of what the Renaissance believed - that "the signs of language really are in conformity with things" (1970: 47). His journey is itself a quest for such similitudes, one driven by an attempt to transform all of reality into a regime of signs. Yet, what the Don cannot know, is that the language of Cervantes, now has new Classical powers. The writing itself has produced the narrative; a book exemplifying itself it is no longer merely a book-of-the-world and the Don himself has, likewise, acquired his own reality, one he owes to language alone:

Don Quixote's truth is not the relation of words to the world but in that slender and constant relation woven between themselves by verbal signs.

(Foucault 1970: 48)

What language has acquired, and for this reason Foucault (1970: 49) calls *Don Quixote* the first work of modern literature, is new representational powers, powers which break it from its "old kinship with things" and precipitate it into that state of lonely sovereignty from which it can reappear, with representational powers still operative, only as literature or as madness.

The ending of the Renaissance episteme (and the new conception of representation it inaugurates) makes possible two relations to language: a new linguistic positivity (the normative position) and two characteristic sets of symptomatic language use in the same place. What Foucault's reading of *Don Quixote* does in addition, is to explain both why it is that they are symptomatic, and why it is that they should, thereafter, always have to occupy common ground. In other words, his symptomatic reading has also outlined a permanently symptomatic field in which literature and the discourse of madness are near neighbours.

If, for Foucault, a position at the intersection between two epistememes is a precarious one, then that which Sade's *Justine* and *Juliette* occupy on the threshold of modern culture must resemble that occupied by *Don Quixote* poised between the Renaissance and Classicism. Where in *Don Quixote* Foucault was concerned with the differences between resemblance and identity and difference, his account of Sade's texts contrasts the age of desire with that of sexuality. In the place of the "ironic triumph of representation over resemblance" in *Don Quixote*, in Sade we have "the violence of desire battering at the limits of representation" (1970: 210).

What is distinctive about the Sadean figure of the libertine is that he occupies a symptomatic position as one who, although yielding to desire, must illumine its "slightest movement with a lucid and deliberately elucidated representation" (1970: 209). In Sade, profligacy itself is subjected to the order of classical representation, so that what *Justine* and *Juliette* display is a "meticulous balance between the conjunction of bodies and the concatenation of reasons" (1970: 210) which no modern text could, or would, envisage.

Space is of such significance in the Classical period that desire is of less importance in itself than it is when manifest in a tableau of representations. It is for this reason that *Juliette*'s life reveals "throughout its desire, violence, savagery and death the glittering table of representation" (1970: 210). Vital to the text's status as symptomatic, however, is the fact that this

previously solid table is (now) so thin, so transparent that it finally emerges as "just as lacking in reason as Don Quixote's journey" (1970: 210). *Juliette*, Foucault writes, closes the classical age upon itself, just as *Don Quixote* had opened it. For, after Sade, desire and sexuality will extend "below the level of representation" to what he calls an immense expanse of shade which the modern age is only now attempting to recover (1970: 211).

Velasquez's great canvas *Las Meninas*, which Foucault reads in his second symptomatic mode, differs from those texts located at epistemic intersection because it occupies a position at the core of classical episteme and reveals, in this position, what is essential to the age of representation.

Much as Althusser reads in Marx an answer to an absent question, Foucault's analysis turns on what is absent in *Las Meninas*. It is not so much a matter of what is in the painting, but of what is necessarily left out - that is, the absence of any representation of representation itself.

Foucault's analysis concentrates upon the double status of the mirror. It is the mirror which restores, as if by magic, what is lacking in every gaze. But, and this is what makes the reading a symptomatic one, "this generosity of the mirror is feigned; it is hiding as much and even more than is revealed" (1970: 15). Foucault points out that the artist and the visitor ought to appear in the mirror yet cannot do so because they are in the left and the right of picture and the king is in the mirror only because he does not belong in the picture. Thus the absence of the king may be one on the level of artifice, but it also hides the profound invisibility of the person seeing, so that despite all "mirrors, reflections, portraits and the like", *Las Meninas* spontaneously represents what it cannot really know - that is, the elision of the subject at the heart of Classical representation which alone makes it possible for representation to appear in its pure form. In *Las Meninas* representation may undertake to represent itself in all its elements, but in the midst of all this there is what Foucault calls the "essential void" - the necessary disappearance of the subject (1970: 16).

A symptomatic reading similar in many respects to that of *Las Meninas* (and one once more reminiscent of Althusser's interest in the consequences of what is absent) is to be found in Foucault's essay concerned with the question of Hölderlin's madness entitled *The Father's No* (1977).

In addressing itself to the origin of relation between madness and art, the essay takes the form of a reading of Laplanche's analysis of the *Hölderlin Jahrbuch*. In order to account, via Laplanche's text, for the preconditions for a psychology of the artist, Foucault reads Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* as symptomatic of that point at the end of Renaissance when artists were first named and thus acquired a relation to their work predicated upon a

relation to themselves. In the eyes of Foucault, the artist is the first "subjective inflection of the hero" and the move away from epic unity which Vasari commemorates is that responsible for a division which lies, albeit often hidden, at the heart of every work in our culture - for that dissolution into the madness that accompanied it from the beginning (1977: 86).

As Althusser reads Marx reading Smith, Foucault reads Laplanche reading Hölderlin in such a way as to show what it is that accounts for Hölderlin's symptomatic position, a reading which (in the light of Lacan) relates the absence of a father to the wider configuration of the death of God and the unhinging of language which God's demise inaugurates. What the *oeuvre* of the fatherless Hölderlin enacts with particular vividness, is the link between the work and the absence of a work - between the flight of the gods and the loss of language represented by madness.

In this way Foucault, too, brings one symptomatic reading to bear upon another. Like that of *Don Quixote* in *The Order of Things* (1970) his symptomatic reading of Laplanche on the *Hölderlin Jahrbuch* casts further light upon the unexpected, but undoubted, connections between art and madness which have continued to haunt western culture since the end of the Renaissance.

## 5

Choosing to focus this account of symptomatic reading on French thinkers of a similar period has, of course, contributed to the relative ease with which it has been possible to establish some common ground between them. Extending this ground beyond the local, and suggesting that symptomatic reading is a distinctive practice which should prove equally productive in other places (and in the hands of less talented practitioners), is a less easy task. Parallels of concern and theme, such as Althusser's knowledge and Barthes's realist effect, and the five codes and the seven complexes, are clear. But they are not enough. Affiliations of a more substantial order are obviously needed.

The most important of these, in my view, is the figure of discontinuity which underpins all symptomatic readings. This discontinuity is not only of the conceptual or philosophical variety which follows upon Kant's critique, but extends to the concepts of history, agency and representation making those of Marx and Freud equally apparent.

Althusser, as the first example, seeks discontinuity at every turn. He reads in, but explicitly against the grain of, the written series - against the apparent continuity of representational apparatus, dividing language from

itself, signifier from signified and truth from truth effects. Like Foucault in the archaeologies, he demonstrates that the relationship between history and thought and that between the logical and historical orders, is productive of new objects and new effects. However, once more like Foucault, he also demonstrates that both unrecognized novelty and misleading continuity are the prices paid for the distortions which the over-determined relation of percepts (sounds, shapes) to concepts (meaning) makes possible.

Bachelard, affirming his Freudian affiliations, locates discontinuity in the psychic apparatus itself. His psychoanalysis of fire demonstrates that it is not possible to rely on the body (the field of drive), to provide the ground upon which knowledge can be based and, more strongly, that the two fields (that is, knowledge or culture and nature) are opposed. The cultural field is not continuous with the field of nature, and this discontinuity is not spontaneously effected, easily maintained, or permanently resolved. In other words, for Bachelard knowledge is opposed to experience and is never immune to configurations of unconscious origin which infiltrate the epistemological field and even those writings which represent it best.

Barthes, too, fractures representation, but from within. On the one hand there is his Ideal, fully connotative form of representation, and on the other there are those delimited registers, such as realism, which operate in the interests of the world as denotation. Barthes's language, the signifiatory itself, comes in at least two forms - an Ideal, free and fully productive capacity glimpsed at in *Writing*, and at least one strategic deployment of it, a true or realist mode, the *Readerly* - which is the product of a set of constraints operating upon this Ideal potential.

Finally, what is definitive of Foucault's explicitly symptomatic readings is the division of history they are predicated upon - the radical discontinuity of the historical field (and thus of the historical knowledge), which the epistemes themselves represent. For Foucault knowledge and representation must therefore have distinct but conjunct histories, histories which may be methodologically but not ontologically separated.

Foucault's archaeologies, as non-positive histories, are themselves concerned with demonstrating the essential discontinuities underlying those apparent continuities which traditional histories of ideas assume. These discontinuities, he explains, are the products of the reorganization of those constituents which exist on the level of the underlying epistemological formation. The elements repositioned as a result of these reorganizations (epistemic shifts or alternative discursive formations), do not cease to have efficacy but, because they now no longer function positively, are crucially confined to having effects of a symptomatic kind.

Moreover, for Foucault, signs or any other units of representational

systems, have both internal and external histories - they manifest both internal changes and changing sets of relations to the world and its constituent components. In other words, Foucault's discontinuities extend to include the place of possible relations between signifiers, signifieds and referents. The findings of a specific archaeology, or genealogy for that matter, are essential to Foucault's argument, but archaeologies have this essential premise in common - one which in some way informs all symptomatic readings.

Discontinuity which extends to representational systems and thus to knowledge itself, makes symptomatic readings necessary, but the question of what makes them possible, let alone credible, remains.

This question cannot, in my view, be usefully answered in general terms. If the account given here holds water, then a commitment to discontinuity - the premises of the critiques - unites symptomatic readers. But it is also clear that a discontinuity of a particular kind is not in itself a qualifying criterion. Althusser, Bachelard, Barthes and Foucault are not all equally committed to the view that the means by which the historical, linguistic and psychic divisions are achieved are regular or systematic, nor are the effects which disguise these divisions thought of as equally constant.

Bachelard would appear to make the most general claims because, in looking for signs of the same complexes in texts which span centuries, he seems to embrace the traditional psychoanalytic conception of the psychic apparatus as constant - at least on the level of form. It is not clear, on the other hand, whether Althusser's is a generally applicable theory of ideology or exactly how far back (or forward, for that matter) in history he would expect to be able to identify the symptomatic effects it produces.

Barthes's analysis of *Sarrasine* is very specific indeed, but the five codes might, and probably should in Barthes's mind, apply to any other realist text - even if the successful production of a particular realist effect itself is understood to be historically and culturally specific.

Finally, Foucault's work which is once more the most significant - is perhaps so just because it is the most difficult to consider in general terms. Much of the notoriety of the concept of an episteme, upon which the majority of his symptomatic readings rest, stems from the question of its generality. The very idea of an episteme as an underlying configuration comprising a limited number of ingredients which unites all knowledge, and in changing itself, also accounts for their dissolution, cannot but be controversial.

Yet, and this casts a somewhat different complexion on the problem of generality in Foucault, it is difficult to imagine results more unexpected and specific than those which Foucault's symptomatic readings yield. That it is

of epistemological origin that Renaissance artists should be the first subjects of psychological enquiry and the perverse repetitions of sexual pleasures and pain, is not generally accepted.

If reading for symptoms can prove this illuminating then, in my view, it is indeed time that deconstruction stepped aside with good grace.

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