

The Illogic of Love and Its Tautological Discourse

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The unique emotional resonance of *love* is certainly a product of more than mere compatibility. One's beloved occupies a special psychological site not merely because she possesses an array of positive characteristics; the lover's passion is powered by an intoxicating desire that resists locating. It is this indescribable remainder that makes writing about one's beloved so fraught with danger. The lover's yearning for his beloved should not be reduced to attraction to her traits or character lest he risk irreparably puncturing his Imaginary relation to the object of his emotion. This is not a warning solely for the less poetic among us; the impossibility of writing – i.e. thinking – the details of one's feeling is a result of a fundamental opposition between the logical function of language and the Imaginary register of love.

According to a structural theory of linguistics, language is able to produce meaning through the play of signs in a field of radical difference. While this highly rational system enables organized thought, it is not suited for describing love, which is motivated by a conception of the beloved as an imagined whole. Any attempt to parse this relation with logical language is not only doomed to fail – for this approach will never be able to capture the depth of feeling that constitutes authentic love – but it also risks destroying the very emotion it aims to depict. Listing reasons for one's love or attractive characteristics of one's beloved irreversibly fragments these objects. Once logical language focuses this intense emotion in thought, the explanation becomes the love itself. This substitution will never satisfy the lover, whose Imaginary relation to his beloved as a whole has been severed.

Although logical language will always devastate when applied to love, there is another register of expression that allows the lover to point to the site of his emotion without risking its destruction. With a careful reading of *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes' enigmatic exploration of love, this essay argues that the illogic of tautology provides an alternative register of language that is suitable for the lover. With a combination of radical affirmation and obtuseness, tautological language allows the lover to identify his situation without fragmenting the Imaginary representation of the object of his affection.

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Language is the result of the play of signs in a field of radical difference, where syntagmatic and paradigmatic logic produce meaning through difference. This highly rational system, explored by the linguists of the high Structuralist period, parses the world into cognizable fragments according to these logical axes. While structural theory conceived of all discourse operating according to this logic, Roland Barthes' analysis in A Lover's Discourse reveals how poorly this language is suited to writing (i.e. thinking) love. The text's claim – that the beloved is an undifferentiated *whole* situated in the "Image-Repertoire" – creates a fundamental tension between the operation of conventional thought/language, functioning through this differential logic, and the continuity of the lover's Imaginary. In this paper, I contend that Barthes' text supports using a radically different language when speaking of love. In this alternate register, which uses an illogical blend of tautology and radical affirmation, it is an *obtuse* language that signifies a discursive site, the object, and refrains from engaging in qualitative description of the beloved or the relationship. Indeed, I argue that reverting to conventional, logical discursive strategies does irreparable harm to the relationship between the lover and his object.

Love must be understood as more nuanced than lust; it is not the sum of sexual attraction and compatibility. Regardless of all of the attention a lover piles onto his object, he will be quickly frustrated when trying to tell a friend *why* he loves. Barthes argues that one loves another not as the sum of accountable characteristics, but instead as a *Whole*: “By a singular logic, the amorous subject perceives the other as a Whole... and, at the same time, this Whole seems to him to involve a remainder, which he cannot express. It is the other *as a whole* who produces in him an aesthetic vision: he praises the other for being perfect, he glorifies himself for having chosen this perfect other he imagines that the other wants to be loved, as he himself would want to be loved, not for one or another of his qualities, but for *everything*” (*A Lover’s Discourse*, 19). This identification of both the lover and his beloved as fully constituted, unitary beings accounts for the unique character of the emotional bond. The consolidation of the subject into the coherent image that is one’s Imaginary is here project onto the beloved. Throughout the text, Barthes refers to the beloved as the “object,” emphasizing this unified whole that the lover perceives. (This tautological structure should be kept in mind, for this pattern will turn out to be a key component of the amorous discourse.) While other emotions may be directed to particular characteristics, love seems to be characterized by this consolidation of the beloved’s Image.

This operation can be aligned with the psychoanalytic register of the Imaginary. (In the English edition, Barthes’ *l’Imaginaire* is translated as “Image-Repertoire.” Here, the terms will be used interchangeably). Barthes argues that the “Image-Repertoire is *precisely* defined by its coalescence (its adhesiveness), or again: its power of association: nothing in the image can be forgotten; an exhausting memory forbids *voluntarily*

escaping love; in short, forbids inhabiting it discreetly, reasonably” (A Lover’s Discourse, 51). Thus, the unbroken image creates a commanding force of emotion; everything about the beloved sticks in the mind with incredible power. Love, Barthes argues, requires a radical, all-or-nothing enterprise: “One must either submit or cut loose: accommodation is impossible” (A Lover’s Discourse, 51). This characterization reveals why a different register of language must be employed when speaking of the Image-Repertoire. The shifting, substitutable, language of the logical domain cannot possibly represent the power of this relation, for its continuous nature eludes normal signifying processes rooted in fragmentation and difference.

Indeed, a lover might be hard-pressed to describe why he loves whom he does. A description of even a few characteristics will likely consist more of stuttering and platitudes than the deep, poetic feelings we might expect from him according to the standards of the romantic. Any writing immediately seems insufficient. His speech would fail to capture the essence that is the object of his love. This frustration begins as soon as the discourse commences: “the writing would take the wind out of his sails, would render him null and void – futile; a gradual dilapidation would occur, in which the other’s image, too, would be gradually involved (to write *on* something is to outmode it), a disgust whose conclusion could only be: *what’s the use?*” (A Lover’s Discourse, 98). Indeed, the text would not just annoy, but destroy as well. The dull, logical language intended to represent the beloved changes what it touches. To write (or speak) the amorous discourse is to think the love according to those terms. The aura of the Imaginary fades as the writing fragments its referent; the text consumes the whole and produces a chain of adjectives that can never do more than disappoint.

This frustration with this language is apparent on the structural level. Much earlier in his career, Barthes described how the two Structuralist axes of language – the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic – divide up the world and make it cognizable. This is the process of thought itself. Along the paradigmatic axis, one can play with the endless substitution of signs related through their signifiers and signifieds. While maintaining similar meaning, this play allows for the infinite combinations of signs. Jakobson identified this process with metaphor. (Jakobson and Barthes align the syntagmatic with causality and metonymy, but this axis is less important for this discussion.) The differences between signs and their combination along the horizontal, syntagmatic axis create meaning and make language expressive.

However, Barthes indicates that this process is responsible for dulling the aura of the beloved: “What obstructs amorous writing is the illusion of expressivity: as a writer or assuming myself to be one, I continue to fool myself as to the *effects* of language: I do not know that the word ‘suffering’ expresses no suffering and that, consequently, to use it is not only to annoy, to irritate” (*A Lover’s Discourse*, 98). Though substitution along the paradigmatic axis can create the “illusion of expressivity” when a discourse works on a concrete referent, writing about suffering cannot be compared to an object in the world. The abstract, undifferentiated, visceral concept of “suffering” eludes this signification practice. Frustration occurs when the speaker realizes that his language does not *do justice* to the pain he is trying to describe. Caught in an infinite field of signs, the speaker is perpetually unsatisfied with the representation of suffering. The signs fail to carry sufficient power. Similarly, attempting to capture the power of love in language subject

to infinite substitution is futile. Whatever words one chooses, they will always seem stale compared to amorous feeling that engulfs the lover.

The problem is clear: Love is no ordinary referent: “What I want to know (love) is the very substance I employ in order to speak (the lover’s discourse). Reflection is certainly permitted, but since this reflection is immediately absorbed in the mulling over of images, it never turns into reflexivity” (A Lover’s Discourse, 59). The collapse of love into the language used to describe it prevents a distinct, logical approach from explaining one’s emotion. The Imaginary plane prevents detached analysis of the situation, for it lacks the divisions necessary to sustain difference, i.e. meaning. Without generative difference, the paradigmatic (logic) cannot function; signs are uprooted. Again, we see Barthes arguing that love must be “excluded from logic (which supposes languages exterior to each other), [he] cannot claim *to think properly*” (A Lover’s Discourse, 59). This rejection of logic and reason is coupled to an abandonment of paradigmatic play, for its substitution and fragmentation undergird rational thinking.

Perhaps the sections of A Lover’s Discourse that were most resonant for me are also the most compelling rejections of logic. Throughout the text, as Barthes constructs his own amorous discourse, we see the familiar scenes of a lover nearly going mad as a victim of endless “logical” interpretation. For the lover, every brush up against the beloved’s leg under the table, every happy greeting becomes a *sign* of something greater. “The incident is trivial,” Barthes writes, recounting a run-in with his unspeaking love object, X, “but it will attract to it whatever language I possess. I immediately transform it into an important event, *devised* by something, which resembles fate.... For me the incident is a sign, not an index: the element of a system not the efflorescence of a

causality” (A Lover’s Discourse, 69-70). With nothing to grasp – to properly think – in the undifferentiated field of the Imaginary, the lover’s mind struggles to systematize any encounter with the Image. Thought – i.e. language operating along the syntagmatic axis – takes up this occurrence and inserts it into the logical form of causality, which produces meaning for this real event.

Barthes’ mulling over these logical loops reverberates for me; with logic frustrated at every attempt to speak or think of the amorous relation, the mind responds with uncoordinated grasps at wisps of (inter)action. The context of the incident fades from mind as one pursues this illusory communication. The lesson quickly learned by the lover: logic cannot be trusted. What appears to be meaningful is mere accident – a crowded lunch table causes a brief contact between two knees – but immediately insinuates itself into the amorous discourse. Syllogisms begin, the perceived implications grow rapidly. One wishes for an interruption as this morsel of (demented) logic dominates an otherwise unsatisfactorily abstract field. The lesson: avoid inference, be wary of interpretation.

The fragmented structure of A Lover’s Discourse is also instructive. For a major study of discourse, Barthes (unsurprisingly) picked an unlikely topic. The amorous discourse is more of a frustration of communication than a successful deployment of signification. With the text to be studied so nebulous, the production of a rigorous critical metalanguage is particularly challenging. In constructing his writing on/of love, Barthes eschews a disinterested, classically philosophical *analysis* of amorous discourse and instead *writes* the amorous discourse itself. He announces this in the book’s second sentence: The text “rests on the single action of a primary language (no metalanguage).”

(A Lover's Discourse, 3). Throughout the text, he weaves together a series of episodes that (could) come from the mind of a desperate lover with relevant commentary. Barthes calls this approach a structural portrait "which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*" (A Lover's Discourse, 3). This methodology reflects the difficulty identified above; that is, Barthes' inability to do theoretical work on the continuous plane of the Imaginary forces him to engage with love on its own ground by writing a lover's discourse. Thus, the structure of the text itself betrays how unfeasible it is to gain traction with the emotion.

In place of the paradigmatic regime founded in reason and play, the lover must resort to a different register of language that can forge an amorous discourse without sacrificing the characteristic whole. Structurally, however, the Imaginary resists linguistic (cognitive) fragmentation. Barthes argues that "what writing demands... is to sacrifice *a little* of his Image-repertoire, and to assure thereby, through his language, the assumption of a little reality" (A Lover's Discourse, 98). This is the fundamental opposition. Writing requires a change, represented by this sacrifice. The task of writing an amorous discourse, then, becomes the identification of this other register. To evaluate the success of this discourse, we can examine how well it preserves the Image-Repertoire's intrinsic wholeness.

For Barthes, the concept of the adorable resides in this alternate domain: "*Adorable* means: this is my desire, insofar as it is unique: 'That's it! That's it exactly (which I love)!' Yet the more I experience the specialty of my desire, the less I can give it a name" (A Lover's Discourse, 19). In adorable, Barthes has found a sign that does no more than designate a site of affection. To call an other adorable signifies nothing but

one's love; it points to someone and declares nothing beyond a formal relation. The vagueness of the word prevents the closing down that normally happens as one discourses on love because it stops short of accounting features of the amour. (To be clear, this argument does not assert some *presence* in "adorable" or any other terms. The meaning of "adorable" comes from its differential relation with other signs. However, this difference does not cut through the field of love with specifications of causes or types. This enables the speaker to preserve his image of the beloved as a whole.)

This function of the adorable – to point out the site of the speaker's desire – parallels Barthes' characterization of the beloved. For him, the loved other is not a person, but a site; the beloved can be defined as the target of the amorous discourse. Recall the quotation (above) from the first page of A Lover's Discourse: Barthes identifies the amorous discourse that takes place in the text as a lover speaking "with himself" (A Lover's Discourse, 3). From the perspective of the discourse, the other "does not speak" (A Lover's Discourse, 3). Instead, the other "whom I love and who fascinates me is *atopos*.... [T]he other is, precisely, Unique, the singular Image which has miraculously come to correspond to the specialty of my desire" (A Lover's Discourse, 34). The other, then, should be understood in relation to amorous discourse as a site to be occupied or referenced by language and not a person in the world. The *adorable* identifies this site without assigning it anything beyond an anonymous remainder. To call an other *adorable* refrains from characterization.

The difficulty of speaking on the Imaginary emerges during attempts to explain the love, to give reasons for its existence, or to characterize the love itself. The exhaustion of language can be quenched by its "trace," adorable. Barthes argues that

“adorable is the futile vestige of... the fatigue of language itself. From word to word, I struggle to put ‘into other words’ the ipseity of my Image, to express improperly the propriety of my desire: a journey at whose end my final philosophy can only be to recognize – and to practice – tautology. *The adorable is what is adorable*” (A Lover’s Discourse, 19). In this tautology, we begin to see a solution to the dilemma of the amorous discourse. Trying to signify the Imaginary will ultimately be dissatisfying, for the signs are structurally prohibited from representing the wholeness that provides the inherent comfort of the consolidated image. In this scene – the lover trying to put the Image “into other words” – one can recognize why Barthes writes at one point that the lover can only really talk to his rival. The lover might feel that his rival, whose own love is directed toward the same other, is able to think this Image without asking for any explanation. Between the two, a trace, an acknowledgement, is sufficient to speak of their shared beloved. This is the source of the lover’s paradoxical fellowship with his rival.

Embracing tautology short-circuits this assured collapse and leaves the discourse with a mysterious lure. Because logical thought has already been implicated as a problematic strategy to deploy with the concept of love, a linguistics that rejects logic will be a more successful tool for amorous discourse. Discussing the adorable, Barthes extols the value of tautology: “Having attained the end of language, where it can merely repeat *its last word* like a scratched record, I intoxicate myself upon its affirmation: is not tautology that preposterous state in which are to be found, all values being confounded, the glorious end of the logical operation, the obscenity of stupidity, and the explosion of the Nietzschean *yes?*” (A Lover’s Discourse, 20). The palpable excitement connoted in Nietzsche’s text perhaps best approaches the level of passion necessary to talk of love.

An emphatic affirmation refrains from engaging in an endless search for words, which might explain one's own desire, in favor of a dramatic mark. Thus, tautology, forgoing logic, sacrifices as little of the delicate whole to fragmentation (necessary for the sake of cognizability) as possible while preserving the meaning necessary for communication.

Moreover, if Barthes is successful in his argument that the subject always loves with thought as to how he would want to be loved, tautological thinking is a more valuable asset than rigid reason. With the adorable, Barthes argues that “what thereby closes off the lover's language is the very thing which has instituted it: fascination. For to describe fascination can never, in the *last analysis*, exceed this utterance: ‘I am fascinated’” (A Lover's Discourse, 20). Again, this language designates the site of the other and acknowledges a remainder, which fascinates. Indeed, this is not much of an “*analysis*,” since it comes full circle without making any logical progress. There isn't very much to learn from someone saying another is “adorable.” By beginning and ending with a charming abstraction, the lover is able to at least preserve the deeply rooted feeling of wholeness that gives the Image-Repertoire its emotional force.

Returning momentarily to the structure of A Lover's Discourse, one can identify this strategy of tautology in Barthes text. Instead of writing an analytic account of the process of love, assigning certain feelings to certain “states”, the Barthesian texts points the reader to the site of love. By speaking the same language as its object of study, the text reinforces the notion that scientific (i.e. logical) thinking cannot penetrate the lover's mind in the way some other philosophical traditions have attempted. Instead, the book's fragments bring the reader to the site of love in an organic manner. This theoretical

practice recreates the madness of love for the reader and justifies an irrational approach to the topic.

Ultimately, Barthes' adorable is most useful because it demonstrates a mode of language that can effectively engage in a discourse on love. In his text, Barthes tells the reader that "my language will always fumble, stammer in order to express [love], but I can never produce anything but a blank word, an empty vocable," (A Lover's Discourse, 20) which is forced to stand in for the alternative: a fragmented list of justifications for the attraction.

While using an illogical register of language may minimize the damage to one's love, the operation of writing cannot occur without some dulling. Even sacrificing a little of the Imaginary, as Barthes suggests, "all I might produce, at best, is a writing of the Image-repertoire; and for that I... would have to let myself be subjugated by my language, submit to the injustices (the insults) it will not fail to inflict upon the double Image of the lover and his other" (A Lover's Discourse, 98). Thus, the damage exacted on the Imaginary is not even particularly productive. The writing will always fail to reach the deepest levels of sentimentalism, which popular culture has constructed as the expectations for the proper experience of love.

The stakes when engaging in amorous discourse are stark: to dissolve the *whole* other into attractive fragments destroys the entire image. This disruption of the Imaginary's continuity might be said, in fact, to destroy the other as such, for "the other is not a text, the other is an image, single and coalescent; if the voice is lost, it is the entire image which vanishes.... Like a kind of melancholy mirage, the other withdraws into infinity and I wear myself out trying to get there" (A Lover's Discourse, 112). The

damage done by fragmenting the image of the other is irreversible. Once the whole is fractured by logical discourse, no language will be able to reconcile the now-disparate pieces (since the structure of language is based on a system of difference).

Still, the penalty for fragmenting the other remains vague. In an alternative to the whole Image, the other can be transformed into a character. Barthes describes the effort to keep his beloved whole:

X had many “character traits” by which it was not difficult to classify him... but I had had, two or three times, occasion to read in his eyes an expression of such an *innocence*... that I persisted... in setting him... aside from himself, outside of his character. At that moment, I was exonerating him from all criticism or commentary. As innocence, *atopia* resists description, definition, language... classification of names (of Faults). Being Atopic, the other makes language indecisive: one cannot speak *of* the other, *about* the other; every attribute is false, painful, erroneous, awkward: the other is *unqualifiable*. (A Lover’s Discourse, 35)

Now, the alternative to the continuity of the Image is clear. Dissecting the image creates a group of characteristics that come to stand for the object. Instead of the whole as the object of adoration, the lover foolish enough to *explain* his affections is left with a fetishized body. These adjectival fragments are insufficient to withstand the full force of genuine love and create a situation of choice for the lover: each characteristic becomes a referendum on the other and the relationship. In the place of amour, the lover must make do with lust. The other is reduced to a collection of these peculiarities.

Immediately upon fragmenting, the beloved loses his aura of perfection identified earlier as a foundation for the love. As a whole, the Image of the other was able to assimilate any disagreeable characteristics of the person and continue to project perfection. However, after the lover has explained his feelings with a list of (attractive) characteristics, he can no longer “exonerat[e] him from all criticism or commentary.” In

this case, negative characteristics stand out against the idealization of the Imaginary and deaden the lover's passion. Even the feelings elicited by the qualities that might be called positive can seem drab when compared with the love directed toward the Image-Repertoire. The subject is no longer enraptured with a site but instead idolizes a person. The nebulous amour of the Imaginary gives way to a rigid accumulation of desires. To preserve the (loved) other, the subject must resist the temptation to name, to categorize, or to define.

This project – resisting judgment of the beloved – is ultimately a linguistic one. Barthes identifies adjectives as the problematic form, and advocates that the lover avoid their use completely. One loves another “not according to his (accountable) qualities, but according to his existence... not what he is, but *that he is*. The language in which the amorous subject then protests (against all the nimble languages of the world) is an *obtuse* language: every judgment is suspended, the terror of meaning is abolished” (A Lover's Discourse, 222). Together with the previous analysis, this strategy further elucidates the distinction between languages fit and unfit for amorous discourse: to maintain the extraordinary features of love, one must avoid description. Instead, the lover can speak of the existential character of the relation, refusing to pin affection to qualities. This model describes long-term love particularly well; though qualities may change – physical beauty fades, a sense of humor grow stale, ambition flags – a love for the other's existence may continue to resonate. Finally, this valorization of existence reinforces Barthes' previous instruction to embrace the affirmation of the Nietzschean *yes!*

The tautology *adorable* is certainly an example of Barthes' *obtuse* language, but there is an even more noteworthy instance: *I-love-you*. The pronouncement that has such

traditional significance in any relationship crumbles when confronted with logical analysis: “I could not decompose the expression without laughing. Then there would be ‘me’ on one side, ‘you’ on the other, and in between a joint of *reasonable* (i.e. lexical) affection. Anyone can feel how much such a composition, though conforming to linguistic theory, would disfigure what is *flung out* in a single impulse” (A Lover’s Discourse, 147). Indeed, diagramming the statement produces nonsense; that is, the announcement, which convention imbues with such emotional baggage, loses its meaning when subjected to any reasonable analysis. For *I-love-you* to retain any useful meaning whatsoever, the language must be interpreted as *obtuse*, on the second register of language along with the tautological *adorable*.

Barthes goes further, however, in establishing *I-love-you* as different from the logic of the paradigmatic realm. He writes that the phrase has no depth of meaning or definition, “it is the metaphor of nothing *else*” (A Lover’s Discourse, 148). Here, metaphor can be read as a direct reference to the paradigmatic (for, again, Barthes was a reader of Jakobson), indicating that *I-love-you* exists on a separate plane from conventional discourse. Thus, *I-love-you* is exempt from the play of infinite substitution, for nothing else contains the same relational message. Indeed, this may account for the phrase’s peculiarity in the romantic lexicon. Any metaphoric substitution can only make one’s thought less personal, less powerful than the amour it replaces.

I-love-you is best said on its own. It does not call for any elaboration, no “...because of...” is necessary. *I-love-you* “suppresses explanation, adjustments, degrees, scruples. In a way... to say *I-Love-you* is to proceed as if there were no theater of speech, and this word is always *true*” (A Lover’s Discourse, 148). This rejection of qualification

further justifies the inclusion of *I-love-you* in the illogical register. Just as no one can dispute that the other is *adorable*, there is no question of the validity of an *I-love-you*. The phrase establishes a relation between the lover (speaker) and the beloved (unspeaking “you”); it recognizes a “situation.”

Between the *adorable* and the all-important *I-love-you*, we can see the *obtuse* register of language necessary for amorous discourse. The mental efforts to describe and classify betray the Imaginary *whole* that gives love its unique emotional force. Rejecting these operations of logical thought in favor of a tautological, emphatically affirmative register of language, which is removed from the influence of paradigmatic substitution, can help preserve the other as a whole. Failure to embrace this illogical approach can only lead to an irreversible fragmentation of the other and a frustrated discourse. This destruction of the Image corresponds to a depressed love, a collection of fetishes for the beloved contingent characteristics.

But love is not alone in requiring this *obtuse* approach. In S/Z, Barthes claims that “Beauty (unlike ugliness) cannot really be explained: in each part of the body it stands out, repeats itself, but it does not describe itself.... It can only say: *I am what I am*”(S/Z, 33). Again, logical discourse reaches its limit: Metaphor (paradigmatic association) can only reference other codes for “beauty,” without getting any closer to an essence of this image. Attempts to deploy rational language to explain beauty “can do no more than assert the perfection of each detail and refer ‘the remainder’ to the code underlying all beauty: Art” (S/Z, 33). We have seen this result before; logic fragments the field so that it no longer fits the concept of Beauty. Instead, Barthes encourages his readers to embrace radical affirmation (the Nietzschean *yes!*) and tautology. Without probing a discourse on

beauty any more, this much is clear: the scope of logic is limited but it is not alone. While the deployment of rationality in discourse can dissect some topics, there are some discourses that must avoid reason at all costs.

Works Cited

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