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Barthes and Orientalism

Diana Knight

THE DOSSIER of photographs which opens Barthes's autobiography contains a photo of Barthes performing in a play put on by the Sorbonne theater group of which he was a founding member. The date is 4 May 1936 (the day of the electoral victory in France of the Popular Front), the play is *The Persians* by Aeschylus, the hooded and masked figure of Barthes represents the Persian King Darius, returned from the grave to lament the victory of the Greeks over his son King Xerxes.¹ Now *The Persians* is Edward Said's earliest example of Orientalism, a Greek representation speaking for and explaining the Orient to the West.² I want to use this chance encounter of Barthes and Said to set up the problem to be explored in what follows: the relationship of Barthes's writing on foreign cultures and their lifestyles to the ethical and political problem of Orientalism as defined by Said.

Said quotes the ironic but apt definition of an Orientalist provided by Flaubert in his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*: "a man who has traveled widely."³ Barthes traveled most famously to Japan and China, and he also held teaching posts in Rumania, Egypt, and Morocco. Coincidentally the two countries dearest to his heart, Morocco and Japan, are both part of the so-called Orient. But is this a coincidence? That such totally distinct parts of the world as Morocco and Japan should be subsumed, by Barthes as by so many others, under the vague geographical label of the Orient is, of course, part of the problem.

Said defines Orientalism as, first, a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the "Orient" and the "Occident" (commonly encountered, he says, from Aeschylus to Karl Marx), and, second, a discourse, a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. The link between the two, according to Said, is that Orientalism was fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the East because it was weaker than the West—the West then elided the Orient's difference with its weakness. In short, as an internally consistent system of knowledge about the East, Orientalism has always operated as an

ideological prop for European and American colonialism. Now one of the Orientalist themes identified by Said in much European writing is the celebration of an easily available sexuality, linked to a metaphorical sexualization of the Orient itself. Clearly, the easy access to prostitution for, say, nineteenth and early twentieth-century travelers of private means is not easily disassociated from other forms of exploitation: the colonial context is obviously crucial.⁴

A further fascinating link between Barthes, utopia, and Orientalism is provided by Charles Fourier's *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* (The New Amorous World), a part fictional, part discursive utopia which had been recently published for the first time when Barthes wrote about Fourier in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*.⁵ Not only was Constantinople to be the capital city of Harmony, Fourier's utopian world order, but a major episode of *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* takes the form of a mock crusade (by a vast army of pious cobblers) to an Orient ironically identified as a vaguely named place (*nom vague*).⁶ It is basically a very humble and philanthropic crusade undertaken by five European empires seeking redemption for past wrongs. That Fourier should provide such a context for an extended fictional episode of his sexual utopia does not necessarily suggest that he was himself indulging in Orientalism. He was, perhaps, already underlining the Orientalist link between colonialism and an alienated sexuality and was both parodying and fantasizing a way beyond this. But when and how will Barthes join him?

Clearly, Barthes's theoretical and more creative writing was stimulated in various ways by his experience of this so-called Orient. Indeed the very essay on Fourier just referred to takes as its starting point an autobiographical episode of eating rancid couscous in Morocco (see *SFL* 77–78). The experience of living in Morocco led to the probably private notations of the now notorious "Incidents," while visits to Japan inspired the publicly fantasized Japan of *Empire of Signs*.⁷ In Morocco, Barthes tells us, homosexuality is readily and unproblematically practiced; in Japan he finds a "happy sexuality": so happy that it spills over into his writing.⁸ Even theoretical concepts such as the all-important *text* are woven around shifting oriental metaphors: a Moroccan *wadi*, a *sook*, and a bar in Tangiers; a Japanese stew or the game of Pachinko. The latter, in particular, is specifically sexualized.⁹ Does Barthes fall back into the exoticism and colonial complicity denounced in *Mythologies*, or is he trying, perhaps, to write along the lines indicated by Said himself: "Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures

and people from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative perspective. But then one would have to rethink the whole complex question of knowledge and power"?¹⁰ In what follows I shall attempt to situate Barthes relative to three interconnected strands of Said's *Orientalism*: colonialism, the West/East binary, and sexuality. I shall look first at the early Barthes as an exemplary demystifier of Orientalist discourse; next I shall turn to what happens when sexuality enters his writing as a theme. Does Barthes himself become an Orientalist exhibit for analysis? Alternatively, is he still grappling with his own perception of a wider problem?

I want to begin with Barthes's essay on Voltaire, "The Last Happy Writer," for a good example of Barthes's own acute awareness of the relationship between Orientalism, travel, and the colonial context. The essay had been first published in 1958, but in reprinting it in his *Critical Essays* in 1964 Barthes added a section on Voltaire's handling of cultural difference. Barthes links the travel writing exemplified by Voltaire's tales with the organization by modern capitalism of its world market from China to South America. The apparent relativization of space in fact draws upon a reservoir of exotic stereotypes (the Egyptian sage, the muslim Arab, the Turk, the Chinaman, the Siamese, the Persian), producing a shallow survey of space rather than an exploration of space, a landlord's tour of the new dwellings in which essential humanity is flourishing from the Seine to the Ganges: "these Oriental countries, which today have so heavy a weight, so pronounced an individual role in world politics, are for Voltaire simply so many empty squares, mobile signs without any content of their own, zero degrees of humanity, deftly appropriated in an act of self-signification." Traveling becomes, paradoxically, an immobilizing operation: "there are of course other manners, other laws, other moralities than ours, and this is what traveling teaches; but this diversity belongs to the human essence and consequently finds its point of equilibrium very rapidly; it is enough to acknowledge it in order to be done with it: let man (Occidental man, that is) multiply himself a little, let the European philosopher be doubled by the Chinese Sage, the ingenuous Huron, and universal man will be created. Self-expansion with a view to self-confirmation, rather than self-transformation—this is what traveling in Voltaire means."¹¹

Barthes sums up here many of the points made in more scattered form in *Mythologies*. For example "The Great Family of Man," an American photography exhibition (503 photos from 68 different countries), in its French press coverage at least, aims to prove that

by scratching the superficial diversity of skins and institutions, one rapidly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature. Barthes ruthlessly exposes the procolonial subtext of this parade of bogus humanism, asking: “but why not ask the parents of Emmet Till, the young black assassinated by the Whites, what *they* think of *The Great Family of Man*?” and “let us also ask the North African workers of the Goutte d’Or district in Paris what they think of *The Great Family of Man*.”¹² In general, I don’t think that Barthes has received the political credit he deserves for the attacks he mounted on *Paris-Match*, which in Barthes’s day employed an openly racist rhetoric in defence of France’s colonial interests. Michael Moriarty, in his recent book on Barthes, apologizes for being about to offer the 297th account of Barthes’s semiological analysis of the famous cover photo of a saluting black soldier.¹³ I am not about to produce the 298th semiological account, but I do think that it is time someone thought to open the cover of that particular 1955 issue of *Paris-Match*. I shall offer just three examples of the contents: first, coverage of King Baudouin visiting his adoring subjects in the Belgian Congo—this includes a photo of a line of black school children with “Vivre le roi!” (long live the king) spelled out in large letters across their chests; second, an article on cannibalism in Papua New Guinea (“only men killed in battle are eaten,” reads one caption); and third, a piece on slavery in the Sudan (“Slave dealers still exist”) which ends as follows: “None of all this is new under the African sun, neither slavery, nor human sacrifices, nor cannibal practices. Nothing, that is, except the French presence. We might do well to dwell on the words of Albert Schweitzer: ‘An enormous debt weighs upon us and our civilisation. We aren’t free to choose whether or not we wish to do good to black men, it is our duty.’”¹⁴ And when Robert Young writes (reasonably enough) that it took Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon to point out that fascism was simply colonialism brought home to Europe,¹⁵ I think one could claim that Barthes, too, was well aware of the connection. His brilliant pinpointing of the rhetorical devices of French myths merges the protofascist Poujadist movement at home with the threat to the colonial empire abroad: “thus Monsieur Poujade’s language shows, once more, that all of petit-bourgeois mythology implies the refusal of otherness, the negation of difference, the euphoria of identity, and the exaltation of the same.”¹⁶

These precise rhetorical strategies are illuminated by Barthes’s exposure of the archetypal, exotic Orientalism of a filmed travelogue, *Lost Continent*, which portrays a vaguely defined ethnographic expedition to some equally vague corner of the Orient: “our explorers

are good fellows, who fill up their leisure time with child-like amusements. . . . Which means that these good people, anthropologists though they are, don't bother much with historical or sociological problems. Penetrating the Orient never means more for them than a little trip on a boat, on an azure sea, in an essentially sunny country. And this same Orient which has today become the political centre of the world we see here all flattened, made smooth and gaudily coloured like an old-fashioned postcard" (M 94). First of all, Barthes identifies the complementary strategies by which the established order deals with anything foreign: either by recourse to exoticism, reducing the other to the status of object, clown, or Punch and Judy show, or through identification (here Buddhism as just a variant of Christianity), defusing the threat of the other as a pure reflection of the West. Two versions, for Barthes, of the complete denial of history which is his greatest charge against French myths of the day, and which he captures by his ironic comment on a procession of unidentified refugees: "eternal essences of refugees, which it is in the *nature* of the Orient to produce" (M 96). The mythology ends with a splendid line: "We therefore see that the 'beautiful images' of *Lost Continent* cannot be innocent: it cannot be innocent to *lose* the continent which has just found itself again at Bandoeng" (M 96).

To appreciate the force of Barthes's denunciation of the motivation of Orientalism, the specific context of the Bandoeng conference is indeed essential, for *Lost Continent* was first shown at the Cannes film festival in May 1955, a month after the conference opened. Some weeks earlier, *Paris-Match* had reported this forthcoming meeting of nonaligned countries in Indonesia (eighteen independent Asian countries, seven African—the United States, England, France, and the Soviet Union excluded) and had voiced its fears of "demands" from French North African and British colonies. Four issues later, it had found the appropriate mode for defusing this threat, captioning its photo-reportage as follows: "From India to the Philippines, exoticism on parade! . . . The Javanese Aix-les-Bains has been transformed into a gigantic, real-life costume museum." It would be hard to find a more convincing example of Barthes's figure of exoticism as a basic rhetorical prop for French procolonial discourse.¹⁷

When Barthes wants to write about his experience of Morocco (a French protectorate until 1956), and to inscribe cultural difference in his own text rather than commenting on other people's attempts to do so, sexuality looms large as a new factor in the Orientalist equation. In the filmed interviews about his life which were made

in 1970 and 1971, partially published at the time in *Tel Quel*, but only shown in full on the television long after Barthes's death, Barthes alludes euphemistically but explicitly to the homosexual lifestyle he had enjoyed during his year in Rumania in 1949 and 1950. All of his talent, he tells us, was put into his life—an allusion to Oscar Wilde's famous claim to have put his talent into his work, but to have reserved his genius for his life. If he wrote little in those years it was because he felt little need to do so.¹⁸ In "Incidents," however (a text written in 1969, but unknown until its posthumous publication in 1987), Barthes tried to combine his life and his writing, and to give homosexuality its due place in the latter. What Barthes produced in "Incidents," though fascinating, was a long way indeed from Fourier's socially and sexually liberated New Amorous World. Moreover, it drew attention in a potentially disturbing fashion to a passage in one of Barthes's essays on Sade, in which Barthes had compared the power structure of the Sadeian castle with that of certain third-world countries in his own day: "Sadeian practices appear to us today to be totally improbable; however, we need only travel in any under-developed country (analogous, all in all, to eighteenth-century France) to understand that they are still operable there: the same social division, the same opportunities for recruitment, the same availability of subjects, the same conditions for seclusion, and, so to speak, the same impunity" (*SFL* 131).

Before facing up to the issues raised by this quotation, I want to digress briefly to consider a photograph included by Barthes in his last book, *Camera Lucida*. It is an 1882 Nadar portrait of Savorgnan de Brazza, who acquired for France that portion of Africa which became known as *le Congo-Brazzaville* or the French Congo, and whose capital is still Brazzaville. Barthes alludes to the placing of the young black sailor's hand on Savorgnan de Brazza's knee as a coded and not very interesting eccentric gesture; his own interest is caught rather by the folded arms of the other sailor. On the other hand, since we learn in the very next sentence that Barthes is attracted to Bob Wilson in the Mapplethorpe photo that follows, I think we may nevertheless take Barthes's comments on the Nadar photograph as an indirect allusion to homosexuality.¹⁹ The portrait of Savorgnan de Brazza is a fine example of Orientalism, for its aesthetic and very staged representation of the sexual availability of the black colonial subject. My first reaction was to read the photo as a perfect emblem of white-black and intergenerational sexual relations, both rendered exploitative (or at least problematic) by the relative positions of the participants in the colonial power structure. As such, and given the many examples of Barthes's sexual relations with young Moroccans recorded in "Incidents," I was intrigued by

Barthes's inclusion of this photo in *Camera Lucida*. *Camera Lucida* contains other photographic allusions to homosexuality, and includes photos of subjects of various ethnicities, but only combines them, as far as I am aware, in this particular case. That Barthes's own grandfather was an "explorer" turned colonial administrator ("his" town was Bingerville in the Ivory Coast that he governed for three years from 1893 to 1896), seemed a further reason for dwelling on the significance for Barthes of the Nadar photo.²⁰

Jonathan Dollimore's recent book *Sexual Dissidence* has made me think twice about this photograph, and more than twice about how to go about reading "Incidents." For in Dollimore's very well chosen words "homosexuals have been amongst those who have literally (rather than metaphorically or theoretically) embraced the cultural and racial difference of the 'other.'"²¹ He discusses the fact that many homosexuals have felt sexually exiled from their home cultures, and have found fulfillment in the realm of the foreign, adding that this should not necessarily be seen as a second best: "over and again in the culture of homosexuality differences of race and class are intensely cathected. That this has also occurred in exploitative, sentimental, and/or racist forms does not diminish its significance; if anything, it increases it. Those who move too hastily to denounce homosexuality across race and class as essentially exploitative, sentimental or racist betray their own homophobic ignorance. This crossing constitutes a complex, difficult history, from which we can learn."²² I should like to register Dollimore's point that the politics of homosexual relations (consensual but possibly exploitative) across ethnic, class, and age boundaries are not straightforward, and that it would be useful to explore their context and the way they are lived rather than to engage too readily in a complacent critique.

Barthes had often visited Morocco and was very taken with it as a country. In the autumn of 1968 he accepted a three-year post at the University of Rabat; in the event he only stayed one year. Working in Morocco on a long-term basis, as he mentions in his 1980 draft for a conference paper on Stendhal's relationship with Italy, was an entirely different matter from the fantasy of living there that had overcome the tourist: "the magic vanished; confronted by administrative and professional problems, I plunged into the thankless world of motivations and decisions. I surrendered Festivity (*la fête*) for Duty."²³ Reading "Incidents," it seems to me that Barthes was above all unhappily caught up in the social situation and political divisions of the country at the time—both as he observed them around him and as he experienced them on account of his own position as a teacher of French language and literature in what had been until recently a French protectorate. In short he found himself

caught up in an exacerbated form of the war of languages that he had probably hoped to leave behind him in France.

I shall digress briefly to explain what I mean by this and to set up the argument that follows. Throughout his writing career, Barthes was extraordinarily attuned to what he called the war of languages. For him this power struggle of competing systems of meaning was entirely imbricated in class division, and alienation in language was the lived form of social alienation. Though one might aspire to an ideal social transparency in the realm of speech, in a divided society language could only equal power and aggression, and the struggle for liberation, unless utopian, could only take place within the context of meaning. This view depended, of course, on Barthes's espousal of a Saussurean view of language as a sign system, whereby all would-be statements about the world must pass through the stage of mental conceptualization, that is through the competing definitions and connotations of the signified. This is the level at which people get caught up in warring systems of meaning, and one half of Barthes accepted the necessity of joining in. The other half, however, longed for a realm beyond this struggle, and hypothesized metaphorical places or spaces which, since they were not yet possible, were advanced with caution and precisely identified as utopias.²⁴ Indeed, from his first formulation of the concept of "writing degree zero" in 1947 (in one of the very early articles subsumed into the book of that name), through to his many discussions of "text" around 1970, Barthes worried about the politics of attempts to liberate language while social relations in general remained alienated.²⁵

In the case of language utopias, then, Barthes stresses the dangers of jumping ahead of history. However, I want to suggest that he ignores the parallel problem entailed in liberating sexuality (here homosexuality) in advance of the liberation of other human relations. This blind spot goes some way, I think, to explaining the ambiguities of Barthes's sexual politics. And it is surely sexual politics which tie Barthes to an Orientalism which he seeks, in other ways, to go beyond.

Barthes does not treat linguistic alienation and sexual alienation as parallel phenomena. Rather, he specifically analyzes the alienation of sexuality as a by-product of the war of meanings that follows from the social alienation of language. This may seem a depressing account of the human situation. Yet it follows from this interlinking of alienations that a linguistic or literary utopia could logically subsume the liberation of sexuality—as long, that is, as it acknowledged its utopian status. I have already referred to the "happy sexuality" that Barthes apparently discovered in Japan, and that

found its natural expression in *Empire of Signs*. Now Barthes normally uses the adjective “happy” precisely in the sense of “free from alienation”—there are occasional “happy myths” in *Mythologies*, for instance—and I am fairly sure that this is what he means with reference to Japan, rather than just a temporary shedding of inhibitions, or a sexuality to his taste. Whether the fact of not speaking Japanese literally conjured away social divisions, or whether it simply blinded Barthes to them, is a point not really worth pursuing. For as far as I know, there is no information in the public domain about what Barthes actually did in Japan, or about how he lived the sexual experiences to which he alludes. The value system of the textual Japan, *Empire of Signs*, is another matter, for this is self-consciously and explicitly presented as a utopia: based on Japan but at the same time not quite Japan.²⁶ I was very interested indeed to discover that although Barthes made his main visit to Japan in 1966, *Empire of Signs* was actually finished in 1968–69 while he was living in Morocco.²⁷ There was no way sexual relations (between Moroccans as well as between Moroccans and French) could escape alienation in a postcolonial Morocco where the French language retained its social and cultural hegemony, and there was no way that the text of “Incidents” could fail to inscribe this alienation. But at the same time Barthes was weaving a fantasized utopian civilization which he called “Japan,” where what had doubtless been an illusory impression of an individual “happy sexuality” was transformed into a general principle of happy liberation for a whole society or textual system.

My sense of an important link between “Incidents” and *Empire of Signs* is backed up by an interview that Barthes gave to the review *Promesse* in 1971. The questions are basically about the theoretical and political implications of *Empire of Signs*, and the interview is more or less framed by allusions to Orientalism. In two important sections, to explain what he was trying to explore through his utopian reading of Japan, Barthes reverts to talking about his experience in Morocco. This is in answer to questions about language and sexuality respectively. Barthes refers to his experience in Morocco to explain that political issues in postcolonial Arab countries actually cathect language and to suggest that linguistics needs some equivalent of Marxism’s *Capital* to theorize the appropriation and ownership of the resource of language. Its main task would be to decide where language stops, or rather—since Barthes already knows what he thinks on this issue—to show that it never stops: “In certain countries still encumbered by the former colonial language (French), there currently prevails the *reactionary* idea that one can separate language from ‘literature,’ that one can teach French (as a foreign language)

and repudiate French literature (as 'bourgeois')" (D 121–22). But for Barthes language has no threshold. At the very most, he claims, one could isolate grammar for canonical teaching, but as soon as one gets to vocabulary and the connotative life of language one is back with the war of meanings, a war of which literature is the extended ideological field. Louis-Jean Calvet, in his recent biography of Barthes, detects a bitterness on Barthes's part here which he relates to hostility on the part of the Barthes's Moroccan students—a hostility partly focused on the inclusion on their syllabuses of supposedly imperialist literature. According to Calvet, colonial French literature and native French lecturers were a misplaced target relative to the internal repression of the regime of King Hassan II. Given the fact that there was a ban on political opposition, and that as a result many intellectuals were either dead or imprisoned, it was easier to attack a symbolic target. But Calvet also reminds us that Rabat was divided into two towns, a European and an indigenous Moroccan one, and that the University was in the European, formerly administrative half. Barthes insisted on teaching French literature despite the student resentment, was offended to be positioned as politically right wing by his students, and presumably failed to appreciate that oppression can be overdetermined.²⁸

When asked, in the *Promesse* interview, about the status and place of sexuality in Japan, Barthes picks up Morocco more or less where he left it with his comments on the politics of language. In the following passage, which I shall quote at some length on account of its importance to Barthes's argument, Morocco seems to be aligned with the meaning regime of the West (and as such opposed to Japan). This is clearly because of its relationship to the French language:

In the Occident sexuality lends itself at best to a somewhat pathetic language of transgression. But to make of sexuality a field of transgression is still to keep it imprisoned in a binary logic (*for/against*), a paradigm, a meaning. To think of sexuality as a dark continent is still to submit it to meaning (*white/black*). The alienation of sexuality is inseparable from the alienation of meaning, to alienation through meaning. What is difficult is not to liberate sexuality according to a more or less libertarian project, but to disengage it from meaning, including transgression as meaning. Take the Arab countries again. Certain rules of "correct" sexuality are readily transgressed there by a relatively unproblematic homosexuality . . . but this transgression remains implacably subject to a regime of strict meaning: homosexuality, a transgressive practice, immediately reproduces within itself (through a sort of defensive plugging of a gap, a panic reflex), the purest paradigm imaginable, that of active/passive, possessor/possessed, *niqueur*/

niqué, tapeur/tapé (these *pieds-noirs* words are opportune here: a good example of the ideological value of language). (D 123)²⁹

By attributing this vocabulary of sexual binaries to the *pieds-noirs* (that is, to the French colonial population), Barthes is presumably suggesting two things: first, that the French language with its obsessive paradigms is to blame for what he sees as restricted and restricting homosexual practices, second, that the French language is to blame for the perception of homosexuality as transgressive in the first place, and, third, by logical extension, that oppressive sexuality should be linked to oppressive colonialism. Any sexual practice that tries to get out of this structure of alternatives by confusing it or simply delaying it (what some Moroccans, Barthes intriguingly tells us, scornfully refer to as “making love”), won’t just be banned—it won’t be understood. So that when he proposes an ideal of sexual “delicacy,” he wants to introduce subtlety at the level of language protocols, rather than lifting the taboos on sex in the name of some mythically spontaneous freedom.

A long extract from this same passage is quoted in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in a fragment which is entitled “Active/Passive” and which adds “virile/non-virile” to the paradigm. It is glossed with a further allusion to Barthes’s experience of Morocco; again socio-economic structures and sexuality are mediated in a negative way by language: “This structure of alternatives marks the language above all of bourgeois or petit-bourgeois adolescents [*garçons*] who, since they are caught up in the sphere of social advancement, need a discourse which is both *sadistic* (anal) and *clear* (buttressed by meaning); they want a pure paradigm of meaning and sex, without leaks, flaws or any spillage towards the margins” (BB 133). And once again, this negative picture goes hand in hand in the text with its utopian alternative: “Nonetheless, once the structure of alternatives is rejected (once the paradigm is blurred) utopia begins; meaning and sex become the object of a free play, at the heart of which the forms (polysemic) and the practices (sensual), liberated from the binary prison, will achieve a state of infinite expansion. Thus may be born a Gongorian text and a happy sexuality” (BB 133).

But what of a happy society? Has Barthes simply conjured away any equivalent of the westernized Moroccans whose discourse and sexual behavior he obviously finds oppressive—without, it seems, dwelling for too long on the causes? Barthes seems to me to have fallen into the problematic area I have already alluded to: proposing a dubious liberation of language and sexuality *in advance* of the

liberation of other social relations. I suggested that he is very aware of this basic dilemma as long as he is discussing linguistic utopias, but that when he wants to liberate sexuality, he is a good deal less cautious. At the end of the *Promesse* interview, Barthes is asked a question that is very specifically about the political implications of his utopian Japan, both at the level of a supposed cultural fetishism (ignoring the basically economic determinations of advanced capitalism), and at the level of what is happening in the real world not so far south of Japan. The questioner suggests bluntly that the confrontation of signs has given way to the confrontation of weapons, that imperialism versus socialism is the major contradiction of our time, and invites Barthes to situate *Empire of Signs* relative to this paradigm. Barthes's response is by now predictable: he wants to say that signs and weapons are one and the same thing, and poor old socialism is relegated by him to the status of a warrior signified: "For my part, the paradigm which I try to take as an example (that's to say, beyond any personally preferred political position) isn't *imperialism/socialism*, but *imperialism/something else*. . . . I must resign myself to the fact that this raising of the slash mark at the moment the paradigm is about to be formed . . . this gaping utopia, is the only place for me at the moment. Imperialism is fullness, on the other side of what is left over, unsigned: a titleless text" (D 127). Was socialism not then Barthes's utopia after all? What could such a statement mean in the context of the postcolonial Morocco which is as good a microcosm as any of Barthes's politically grounded language war?

Barthes's text "Incidents" is in fact a fascinating tapestry of a divided society. Its characters include the "king's cousin" and various repressive policemen, as well as the French school and university teachers of whom Barthes himself (variously portrayed reading Proust and Lacan) is not the least interesting example. There are also all sorts of European and American tourists, and the ubiquitous hippies whose choice of life-style Barthes criticizes (in an article written the same year) as a politically dubious parody of Moroccan poverty and all that it entails—from rags, bare feet, and under-nourishment, to communal housing and dirt.³⁰ The gentle adolescent peasants of whom Barthes seems most to approve, and whom he seems most to desire, are contrasted with aggressive Moroccan students and teachers (both Arab and *pieds-noirs*):

All on the same day:

on the one hand, the *petit-bourgeois* student, who, inanely, to show off in

front of the others, to embarrass the lecturer [*"pour 'coller' le prof"*], challenges me so stupidly, so idiotically, that the only message that comes over at all is the spiteful intention;

on the other hand, the *peuple*, Mustafa, known as Musta: almost shaven head, beautiful almond shaped eyes, an almost Roman face, if it weren't so gentle; he's eighteen years old, comes from Fez, had to give up his studies because he's too poor, came to Rabat to look for work, has found himself a place as a carpenter at the Akkari; he earns three thousand five hundred francs a month. His father doesn't do anything, his mother has a job processing wool. He lives with one of his sisters. He's a person quite devoid of hostility. (I 48)

Barthes's almost obsessive point about the language of Moroccan homosexuality is best illustrated in "Incidents" by two examples. The first is the Marrakesh primary school teacher who, bubbling over with effusiveness, goodwill, and complicity, declares "I'll do anything you want." To which Barthes adds: "And that means *je vous niquerai*, and that's all it means" (I 53–54). The second is a certain "H.," whose friends describe him as "very sensual," which also turns out to mean "H. se fait niquer" (I 42).³¹ Yet Barthes's way of writing about this seems, somewhat ironically, to have been contaminated by the phenomenon he describes, not least through his use of a relatively crude sexual vocabulary, both here and elsewhere. Though he tries to make his more general observations lightly, his fragments are often structured around incongruous reversals: the neurotically angry young boy who sets the colonial scene by screaming "Go home!" (in English) to a European, only to appear seconds later as a well-behaved coffin bearer in a funeral procession; the frequent motif of a stain or spot of dirt on some otherwise immaculate item of clothing (see I 23, 25, 31, 35). Barthes's tissue of cultural confrontations and comparisons—Western versus Moroccan, Moroccan *petit-bourgeois* versus Moroccan peasant—invariably sets up the Western or the westernized *petit-bourgeois* pole as the negative one.³² It could reasonably be claimed that Barthes falls into exactly the *either/or* style of thought which he later criticizes in the *Promesse* interview.

It is almost amusing to think of Barthes actually living in one part of the "Orient" and using it as the negative basis on which to refantasize a better one called Japan—further off still, and where, crucially, they don't speak French.³³ In "Incidents" Barthes seems to be too caught up in the situation he describes to do other than reaffirm his negative perception in his choice of form and language. While it is true, of course, that we have no information on what Barthes might have been trying to achieve at this level, nor on what he thought of the result, my own conclusion is as follows: the text

remains negative precisely because Barthes has made Morocco into the ideological reverse side of a utopian Japan. By this I mean that he has projected elsewhere, and hived off into a separate text, any utopian overturning of Moroccan alienation that he might have undertaken on its behalf.

But could this be done for the Morocco of "Incidents" on Barthes's behalf? I should like, very tentatively, to bring utopia back to Morocco by following the logic of a fragment of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. It is entitled "Plural, difference, conflict," and it interests me above all because it picks up my earlier discussion by linking homosexual difference with ethnic difference. It begins in the utopian atmosphere of *Empire of Signs*: once meaning starts multiplying and dispersing itself, sexuality will escape classification—leaving, for instance, not "homosexuality" but only "homosexualities," whose plural form would so baffle any centered discourse that it would seem almost pointless to mention them (see *BB* 69).³⁴ "Difference" is then introduced in the second paragraph of the fragment as the name for the term which displaces sexual and semantic conflict into plural and sensual text. By the third paragraph, difference is primarily ethnic difference: "According to Freud (*Moses and Monotheism*), a small amount of difference leads to racism. But a great deal of difference leads away from it, irremediably. Equalizing, democratizing, homogenizing, none of these will ever succeed in expelling 'the tiniest difference,' seed of racial intolerance. For that one must pluralize, make more subtle, continuously" (*BB* 69). Now when it comes to making his own view of "Arab" difference a little more subtle, the Barthes of "Incidents" gives the credit to one of his young Moroccan friends:

Farid, whom I met at the *Day and Night* café, got angry with a beggar who first of all asked me for a cigarette, then, when I'd given him one, asked for some money "to buy something to eat." This blueprint for progressive exploitation (though very banal) seemed to make him indignant: "You see how he rewards you for giving in!" But then, saying goodbye to Farid and giving him my whole packet of cigarettes (which he pocketed without a word of thanks), I realized that he was asking for five thousand francs "to buy something to eat." Seeing me burst out laughing, he claimed there was a "difference." (Everyone here, asserts themselves as different. It's because they think of themselves not as a person but as a need.) (*I* 36)

Difference has to take *need* on board, as well as desire. Barthes recognized this elsewhere when he described a letter from his Moroccan friend Jilali (reproduced in *Roland Barthes by Roland*

Barthes) as the most perfect example of utopian discourse to which one could aspire. The letter begins with a celebration of the friendship between Jilali and Barthes, and then continues: "On this occasion, my dear Roland, I shall speak to you of a disturbing subject (as I see it). It is as follows: I have a younger brother, a student in the Third AS, mad about music (the guitar) and in love. But poverty conceals him and keeps him hidden in his dreadful world . . . and I am asking you, dear Roland, to find him a job in your kind country as soon as you can, since he's leading a life full of anxiety and worries. Now you know the situation of young Moroccans and this indeed astounds me and denies me all radiant smiles. And it astounds you, even though there is no xenophobia or misanthropy in your heart" (*BB* 111). For Barthes the triumph of this letter is that without censoring its aesthetic delight in language (as his grim French compatriots, he tells us, would certainly have done in the same situation), it speaks at the same time both truth and desire: "all the desire of Jilali's brother (the guitar, love), all the political truth of Morocco" (*BB* 111). One might also suggest that it speaks the truth of the desire of Jilali and Barthes. How might a white, French intellectual, a purveyor of French culture, free as he may be of all xenophobia, produce a non-Orientalist discourse about Morocco when he is a part of its problem? He can't of course, even if he wants to, which is why letting Jilali speak for his brother and for "the political truth of Morocco" is the "happiest" short-term solution, the least alienating of Barthes's various attempts to inscribe his relationship with Morocco in his writing.³⁵

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NOTES

With the exception of "Incidents," I have referred to published English translations throughout this essay. I have, however, introduced slight modifications into some quotations. Translations from "Incidents" are my own.

1 For the photographs see Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris, 1975), in English as *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, tr. Richard Howard (London, 1977), p. 33; hereafter cited in text as *BB*. Barthes speaks about the performance in the "Archives du XX^e siècle" interviews filmed in 1970 and 1971 and broadcast on French television in 1988 (as part of the "Océaniques" series on FR3). Louis-Jean Calvet comments on the significance of the electoral context in *Roland Barthes* (Paris, 1990), p. 33.

2 See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978; rpt. Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 21, 56.

3 Gustave Flaubert, *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, tr. Robert Baldick, in Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, tr. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 320; quoted by Said, p. 185.

4 For general definitions of Orientalism see the opening section of Said, pp. 1–4; for a discussion of “Oriental sex” (based particularly on the case of Flaubert), see pp. 186–90.

5 See Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Paris, 1971), tr. Richard Miller (New York, 1976), pp. 76–120; hereafter cited in text as *SFL*.

6 See Charles Fourier, *Le Nouveau monde amoureux*, ed. Simone Debout-Oleskiewicz (Paris, 1967), p. 362. See pp. 361–78 for the episode of the cobblers’ crusade.

7 See Roland Barthes, *L’Empire des signes* (Geneva, 1970), in English as *Empire of Signs*, tr. Richard Howard (London, 1983). The text of “Incidents” was written in 1969 and is included in Roland Barthes, *Incidents* (Paris, 1987), pp. 21–61; hereafter cited in text as I. Richard Howard’s translation of *Incidents* (Berkeley, 1993) was published too late for use in this essay.

8 See Roland Barthes, “Digressions,” in *Le grain de la voix: entretiens 1962–1980* (Paris, 1981), in English as *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, tr. Linda Coverdale (London, 1985), p. 123; hereafter cited in text as D; and *BB*, p. 159 (“A happy sexuality found its corresponding discourse quite naturally in the continuous, effusive, jubilant happiness of the writing”).

9 For the *wadi* and the game of pachinko, see Roland Barthes, *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris, 1984), in English as *The Rustle of Language*, tr. Richard Howard (Oxford, 1986), pp. 60, 77, respectively; for the *sook* see Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris, 1973), in English as *The Pleasure of the Text*, tr. Richard Miller (New York, 1975), p. 49; for the Japanese stew see Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 22.

10 Said, p. 24.

11 Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris, 1964), in English as “The Last Happy Writer,” in *Critical Essays*, tr. Richard Howard (Evanston, Ill., 1972), p. 88.

12 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris, 1957), tr. Annette Lavers (London, 1973), pp. 101–2; hereafter cited in text as *M*.

13 See Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 1.

14 *Paris-Match*, 25 June 1955, p. 98.

15 See Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London, 1990), p. 8.

16 Roland Barthes, “A Few Words from Monsieur Poujade,” in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, tr. Richard Howard (New York, 1979), p. 53.

17 See *Paris-Match*, 2 Apr. 1955, p. 27; 30 Apr. 1955, pp. 30–31; 21 May 1955, p. 64. For another example of Barthes’s analysis of racist exoticism in a colonial context, see “Bichon and the Blacks,” in *The Eiffel Tower*, pp. 35–38.

18 See n. 1 above. This allusion to Barthes’s homosexuality was not included in the extracts published as “Réponses,” in *Tel Quel*, 47 (1971), 89–107.

19 See Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris, 1982), in English as *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, tr. Richard Howard (London, 1982), pp. 51–52.

20 On Barthes’s own references to his maternal grandfather, see the captioned photo on p. 12 of *BB* and the entry from the Larousse dictionary that Barthes quotes (but also hides) in the list of illustrations at the end of the book: “Binger (Louis-Gustave), French officer and administrator, born in Strasbourg, died at l’Isle-Adam (1856–1936). He explored the territory from the loop of the Niger to the Gulf of Guinea and the Ivory Coast” (p. 185). Calvet’s biography contains a fascinating section drawing attention to the nature of the grandfather’s career, to the existence of racist overtones in his published accounts of his travels, and to Barthes’s strange claim in the photo caption that his grandfather “had no part in language” (*il ne tenait aucun discours*) (see Calvet, *Roland Barthes*, pp. 13–17, 20–25). Of several works

by Louis-Gustave Binger which can be consulted in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, I found *Esclavage, islamisme et christianisme* (Paris, 1891) the most suitably racist and procolonial candidate for a Barthesian demystification.

21 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford, 1991), p. 332.

22 Dollimore, p. 250.

23 Roland Barthes, "One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves," in *The Rustle of Language*, p. 299.

24 On the relationship between the war of languages and utopia see my "Roland Barthes in Harmony: The Writing of Utopia," *Paragraph*, 11 (1988), 127–42.

25 "Is it possible to liberate speech [*la parole*] before history?" are the last words of Barthes's "Le Degré zéro de l'écriture," *Combat*, 1 Aug. 1947, p. 2.

26 See the opening paragraph of Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 3.

27 See Calvet, *Roland Barthes*, p. 215.

28 See Calvet, pp. 209–14.

29 Since I am unsure of the precise register and connotations of *niqueur/niqué* and *tapeur/tapé*, I have followed the practice of the translator (Richard Howard), and have left this sexual vocabulary in euphemistic French. An active form is followed by a passive in each binary. As far as I can tell from consulting dictionaries, *niquer* is a vulgar term for sexual intercourse which originated in a French North African pidgin. It has a possible connotation of prostitution but is not restricted to homosexuality. While the noun *tapette* can allude perjoratively to a "passive" homosexual (normally a prostitute), *taper* and *se taper* can be used for heterosexual or homosexual intercourse. I have not found any information linking *taper* to the *pied-noir* context as Barthes suggests.

30 Roland Barthes, "Un cas de critique culturelle" [An example of cultural criticism], *Communications*, 14 (1969), 97–99.

31 See, also, pp. 31, 57. For the meaning of *niquer*, see n. 29 above.

32 See, for example, the contrasting examples of the ethos of hitchhiking (I 52), where Barthes compares two impolite European hippies with a gentle, twelve-year-old Moroccan boy (who offers Barthes his unspent bus fare in return for the lift).

33 This is at least different from the case of Flaubert who, having long dreamed of the Orient, began dreaming once he got to the Nile of his house by the river Seine. See Gustave Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Masson (Paris, 1964), II, 553.

34 I personally believe that Barthes achieved this in *Empire of Signs*, to the extent that nobody seemed to notice that homosexualities were indeed circulating happily in the text. See my "Roland Barthes: An Intertextual Figure," in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester, 1990), pp. 99–102.

35 The intersection of Orientalism with "need" also brings me back to my starting point: Barthes performing in *The Persians* in the courtyard of the Sorbonne on the very day of the electoral victory of the Popular Front.