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Explore the relation between love and writing in the light of two or more texts.

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Richard Barnfield and Roland Barthes have more in common than their initials. We can be sure they both wrote, both loved, and both wrote about love. When considering the relation between love and writing in the light of *Certaine Sonnets* and *A Lover's Discourse* by the two writers respectively, it is important to consider what the texts can tell us about the process of writing – how it relates to love in the heart and mind of the writer, as well as the relation between love and writing shown or suggested *within* the texts.

The two texts are separated by a gulf of almost four hundred years, national borders, the English Channel, and innumerable cultural, personal and formal differences. It is worth mentioning that for Barnfield's motivations and possible theories of writing one must speculate, whereas with Barthes there is a wealth of biographical and theoretical material available. Barthes' theory and biography will be used to unlock and inflect Barnfield's text, particularly in the first section of this essay. Barthes' text, *A Lover's Discourse,* actively avoids summarisation. It is an intimidatingly complete catalogue of all that a lover might say or think. Its intersections with Barnfield's sonnets, indeed any love poetry, are too numerous to document in full, thus only those intersections most pertinent to the question are included. This essay will strive to use the two texts to explore the relation between love and writing in a way that reveals common truths without whitewashing the numerous historical, cultural and formal differences.

It is a complex question, but the analysis begins by considering the possibilities of simple, though apparently contradictory, causal relationships between the two activities of love and writing. The concluding part of this essay shall attempt to synthesize these relationships and consider more abstract formulations of the relation. In an attempt to explain why one might write and why one might love, this essay is guided in its perspective by the personal nature of the two activities. One must however be cautious not to assume too much about the author of a work of fiction, particularly in the early modern period. Paul Hammond states unequivocally that the "'I' of Renaissance love poetry is a persona, a mask or an assumed voice, not the private interior self of the man writing the lines".[1] He does, however, concede that the presence of an "autobiographical element" is possible .[2] The unknowability and invisibility of the author creates a tension within any text, particularly texts of this nature. The names of the authors when used throughout this analysis should be read with the above in mind.

The first relation between love and writing that may spring to mind is a simple positive correlation, namely: *I write because I love,* or *I write because I am loved.* Anyone inspired to write because of their experiences of love would conform to this relation to some extent. In one of the earliest texts explicitly about love, Plato's *Symposium,* the exploration of

[1] Paul Hammond, *Love between Men in English Literature,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 'The Renaissance', pp.25-57, p.27
[2] Ibid.

love begins as speeches in praise of the Greek god *erōs*, love personified.[3] This intersection between praise and love is something *Symposium* shares with Barnfield's *Certaine Sonnets.* Barnfield refers to his love object as his "chiefest good",[4] and uses hyperbolic astrological imagery to praise him and his beauty, such as

> Two stars there are in one firmament,
> (Of some intitled *Ganymedes* sweet face)[5]

Such grandiose description would not be out of place in a religious text.

The combination of love and religion is not uncommon; another early modern figure, born just two years before Barnfield, John Donne, combined love and religious imagery in his poetry, and in later life went on to become a priest. The fact that love poetry often contains religious imagery (and indeed religious texts often contain much to do with love) tells us more than simply about the pervasiveness of religion in early modern England. It indicates the pervasiveness of love, its transferability and similarity with other discourses which might seem quite separate. This shall be considered throughout the analysis. It also demonstrates that love has a lot to do with power relations. Barnfield praises his "silver swan"[6] because he believes that the love object is superior; because the love object has power over Barnfield. It is clear that the motivation for praising a God is, at least partly, that one believes they have the power to affect one's life in a positive way, but why would one praise a love object? The key lies in the lack of fulfilment of the love represented in the sonnets. Though one may write because one loves, it is clear that one also writes because one *cannot* love, because this love is unfulfilled. This is a paradoxical fusion of two states of love, two relations between love and writing. The fact that Barnfield's love object does not reciprocate his (or his persona's) love becomes clearer as the sonnets progress, but is suggested from the very first. He begins by describing the very first act of falling in love as "There came a theefe and stole away my heart".[7] The association of love with the heart is so familiar it is often used as a metonym. Slightly less familiar is the association here of love, and the heart, with property. In *A Lover's Discourse,* Barthes writes that "the heart is constituted into a gift-object".[8] If we accept this statement it makes Barnfield's accusation of the lover's theft of this 'gift-object' easier to understand. This accusation, occurring as it does at the very beginning of the series of sonnets, shows Barnfield attempting to reverse the roles of the pair, to make his passive object a participating, active partner. It is unquestionable that throughout the whole series of sonnets Barnfield is the active partner and his object passive, which thus divides, according to Irigaray: "possessor and possessed, the lover and the beloved".[9] The latter has a direct echo in the sonnets: "He loves to be belov'd, but not to love".[10] Significantly, this passive role is depicted as his choice.

The work of the theorist and philosopher Luce Irigaray does not readily apply to a homosexual relationship, even an imagined one. She writes within a distinctly heterosexual framework: "Man and Woman, faithful to their differences, do not have the same intentionality".[11] It is worth considering how much of her proposition that there must be "a

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[3] Plato, *Symposium,* trans. Robin Waterfield, (Oxford: Oxford University Press,1994)
[4] *Certaine Sonnets,* in *Cynthia. With Certaine Sonnets, and the Legend of Cassandra.:* p.124, Richard Barnfield, *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Klawitter, (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 'Sonnet. III', line 13
[5] Klawitter, p. 123, 'Sonnet. IIII', lines 1-2
[6] Klawitter, p.125, 'Sonnet. VII', line 6
[7] Klawitter, p. 122, 'Sonnet. I', line 2
[8] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*
[9] Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History,* trans. Alison Martin (London: Routledge, 1996), 'I Love To You', pp.109-115, p.111
[10] Klawitter, Sonnet. X, line 14, p.127
[11] Irigaray, p.112

relation of indirection",[12] is a reaction to the historical subjugation of women. Indeed, many would argue that her proposed indirection goes against the very nature of love. Barthes' figures of "Union", the "Dream of total union with the loved being",[13] and of "Sobria Ebrietas: *vouloir-saisir* / will-to-possess"[14] (though of course this figure is about the abandonment of such feelings) seem to directly contradict Irigaray's affirmation that her loved object is "You who are not nor ever will be me or mine".[15] The two theorists agree on the existence of these desires, but Irigaray dismisses and seeks to remove them where Barthes accepts and affirms them. Barthes admits of the dream of union that "everyone says this dream is impossible, and yet it persists".[16] Throughout the discourse of love as Barthes presents it there seems to be a recurring theme of love overcoming, or attempting to overcome, that which is logical, or seemingly so.

The desire to become, and the desire to possess the loved object may be useful to consider in the light of Freud's writings on narcissism and love. He states that if we are what he terms the *"Narcissistic type"*[17], we love:

a) what we ourselves are,
b) what we ourselves were,
c) what we would like to become,
d) a person who was once part of our own self.[18]

Barnfield could be said to conform to either b) or c): he seems to love 'Ganymede' primarily for his youth and beauty. That Barnfield actually shows his love to be narcissistic is interesting as the sonnets strongly imply that the love object is also narcissistic. This is done explicitly, through statements about his passivity such as "He loves to be belov'd, but not to love"[19], and also symbolically. Sonnet XI, a significant sonnet as it involves Barnfield revealing his love, uses the technique of a mirror, an object already closely associated with narcissism and vanity. In this sonnet Barnfield invites the love object to look at a mirror, in which he can expect to see a vision of Barnfield's, as he assumes, female love object. This hypothetical female figure, as the desired object of one of his male equals, would thus be more desirable to him, a viable, appropriate match. Sedgwick, in her study of male homosocial desire, refers to situations in which "the beloved is determined [...] not by the qualities of the beloved, but by the beloved's already being the choice of the person who has been chosen as a rival".[20] Though we cannot be sure that the unsuspecting love object considers Barnfield a 'rival', we can nevertheless assume a possibility of sexual desire, as his curiosity to know the identity of the hypothetical female love object testifies. The subsequent collapse of this expectation, when the love object simply sees an image of himself, projects, for a moment, the possibility of a desirable love object onto himself. This gets remarkably close to the definition of narcissism at the very beginning of Freud's text: a "form of behaviour whereby an individual treats his own body in the same way in which he might treat that of any other sexual object".[21] Finally, narcissism is referenced through its classical

[12] Irigaray, p.109
[13] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* 'Union', pp.226-228, p.226
[14] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* pp.232-234, p.232
[15] Irigaray, p.119
[16] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* p.228
[17] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure and Other Writings,* trans. John Reddick, Introduction by Mark Edmundson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 'On the Introduction of Narcissism', pp.1-30, p.19
[18] Ibid.
[19] Klawitter, p.127
[20] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English literature and male homosocial desire,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 'Chapter One: Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles', pp.21-27, p.21
[21] Freud, p.3

beginnings, by referring to "*Ecchoes* love",[22] Narcissus. There can be no avoiding the clear link drawn between homosexuality and narcissism in Freud's analysis. He says that narcissistic love involves the modelling of "their subsequent love-object not on their mother, but on their own person",[23] and that it "has been particularly clear in the case of people whose libidinal development has been disturbed in some way, such as perverts and homosexuals"[24]. It is unfortunately phrased, and of course assumes that the 'normal', heterosexual, libidinal development is 'natural' and morally superior. Nevertheless his statements certainly have validity in the case of Richard Barnfield.

The first sonnet depicts a trial for the alleged theft of Barnfield's heart in which Barnfield himself is judged to be guilty and thus pronounced:

> Your Doome is this: in teares still to be drowned,
> When his faire forehead with disdain is frowned.[25]

Barnfield's attempt to reverse the roles has failed; the limits of the powers of the poet and the limits of the powers of language in general have been indicated to the reader, and will continue to play a large part in the series. The reference to disdain hints at a lack of reciprocity, but the 'when' in line 14 preserves it as a mere possibility. It also introduces the significant topic of culpability in love, and the use of writing to try and exonerate and explain oneself. The negative imagery continues with Barnfield's portrayal of the qualities of his loved object as being in conflict, personifying and portraying them as opposing armies, fighting for the field. Here we see a clear reference to the loved object as property. The continual use of negative imagery at the very beginning of the sonnets sets the tone for the rest of the series, and conveys a sense of frustration on behalf of the poet.

Sonnet IIII ends with a reference to the absence of his love or "sunne" from his objectifying "sight" and the effect this has. He refers to "dark night",[26] which could be said to be part of his creation of an "ordeal of abandonment".[27] This figure in Barthes' text states that "Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman".[28] If one accepts this then we see in Barnfield somewhat of an '*androgyne':* his active role is that which is traditionally enacted by 'the Man', whereas his staging of abandonment is traditionally enacted by 'the Woman'. The use of such stereotypical roles shows how dominant heterosexuality has been over the centuries in the discourse of love, and how it continues to be. Later on in the figure Barthes poses a somewhat startling question: "Isn't the object *always* absent?"[29] In Plato's *Symposium,* Socrates seems to use logical reasoning to ascertain that only that which is lacking can be desired.[30] But Barthes poses two words, for two senses of absence:"*Pothos,* desire for the absent being, and *Himéros,* the more burning desire for the present being".[31] This indicates that we do not simply desire the presence of the other, but something deeper. I have already mentioned the ideas of 'Union' and 'Will-to-possess'. Another closely related desire is the desire "To understand".[32] The desire to understand the love object is part of the desire to unify and possess. If one is said to understand something, one is able to define it. If one makes this definition fixed, and into a written document, then

[22] Klawitter, 'Sonnet. XII', line 4, p.128
[23] Freud, p.16
[24] Ibid.
[25] Klawitter, 'Sonnet. 1', lines 13-14, p.123
[26] Klawitter, 'Sonnet. IIII', line 14,p.124
[27] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* 'The Absent One: *absence/absence',* pp.13-17,p.13
[28] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,*p.13
[29] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,*p.15
[30] Plato, p.40, 200e
[31] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* p.15
[32] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* p.59

one possesses this definition. Thus to understand is to possess and to control the identity of the loved object, another way of acquiring and exercising power. One might also desire to understand love itself. This is because love is a largely unconscious process, as is much of human thought, as Freud demonstrated. This results in the exclamation "I want to understand (what is happening to me)!"[33] This is an attempt to have full control and power over one's self. It is clear in the cases of both writers that to write, to present their thoughts about love in a visible way has an important function in their attempt to understand love.
The militant field of reference is continued in the sonnets, this time with a sexual dimension, with reference to Achilles' "speare".[34] Such oblique references to sexual activity were necessary in writing of this period, but Barthes' writing often demonstrates his comparative freedom in writing about sex such as in *Incidents* and *Soirées de Paris,* which will be discussed later.

This long process of praise with little or no references to actual action in the sonnets creates a frustration in reading that we could conjecture Barnfield experienced himself. If we conjecture that Barnfield's ultimate purpose in writing these sonnets was to fulfil his love by persuading the object to reciprocate, we might consider why he chose writing as his medium. Why not, for example, speech? Speech, ever since the rhetoric of the ancient Greeks, has been the medium of persuasion. It is more direct, more immediate and arguably a more natural activity for humankind. Derrida writes that "of the two ways of communicating our ideas,' the 'first' came about 'with the help of sounds'".[35] It could be that speech and direct communication of his feelings of a homosexual nature were expressly forbidden in the times in which Barnfield lived. Let us consider early modern attitudes towards the practice of homosexuality. The facts at face value are not encouraging; homosexual acts were punishable by death. Yet literary homosexuality in classical texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was not only accepted but encouraged: this particular text was "read by every schoolboy".[36] The constant classical references in Barnfield's sonnets suddenly become clear. Barnfield is not simply trying to elevate and glorify his love: he is seeking to justify it by constantly associating it with classical figures like '*Ganymede'.* In doing so he not only invokes the power and reputation of such classical texts, but also their temporal distance, creating a sense of safety. This is even explicitly referred to in Barnfield's dedicatory epistle to this volume. Responding to attacks on previous "dislik't"[37] works because of their portrayal of "the love of a Shepheard to a boy",[38] he claims that *"The affectionate Shepheard"*[39] was "nothing else, but an imitation of *Virgill,* in the second Eglogue of *Alexis*".[40] The issue of imitation and repetition is one that comes up time and time again in the relation between love and writing.

The early modern attitude towards homosexuality seems somewhat double-edged: tolerated in some forms and quarters, condemned in another. We can only be sure of its absolute condemnation when it is in its most physical, immediate form in "execrable and horrible sins of forbidden and unlawful fleshliness".[41] The very text from which this rather damning evaluation comes begins by to some extent allowing or approving the practice of Greek homosexuality "*paederastice*".[42] This draws a parallel with the acceptable and

[33] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* p.59
[34] Sonnet V, line 5, page 124, Klawitter.
[35] Jacques Derrida, *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performances,* ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 'Scribble (writing-power)', pp.50-73,p.54
[36] Hammond, 'The Renaissance' pp.25-57, p.26
[37] Klawitter, p.115
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Klawitter, p.116
[41] In Hammond, p.32
[42] Ibid.

unacceptable forms of homosexuality and the idea of Common and Celestial love as put forward in Plato's *Symposium.* A third parallel is available to us; that of Common love, of 'Fleshliness' with speech as opposed to writing. Speech is the transient of the pair, just as is Common love. In 'From Speech to Writing', Barthes states that "what is lost in transcription is quite simply the body".[43] This 'body' present in speech is the 'fleshly', offensive aspect. As it is absent, writing is thus harder to object to. It is also easier to represent 'superior', less physical forms of love, as Barnfield attempts to characterise his.

The relation between love and writing may have another manifestation. Freud pronounces that "to love is to over-estimate the erotic-object".[44] What better example of this over-estimation than Barnfield's *Certaine Sonnets?* The process of writing is not a neutral one. It is not a simple laying out of one's inner thoughts. It actively creates and affects thoughts. Thus, we have the possibility of the exact opposite of the very first correlation discussed: *I love because I write.* The various conflicting ways in which love and writing may relate prove that the two activities or concepts are hopelessly intertwined. This is easy to see in much of Barthes' writing where love, sex and writing considerably overlap. In the figure entitled 'Talking' he says:

> Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, of fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.[45]

Here, love has created the sensation of complete sensuality and physicality of language, to the point where language and the other's body become almost interchangeable. This 'body' can be found throughout his writing, hiding just out of sight. In *The Pleasure of the Text,* he makes heavy use of sexual imagery to explore his thoughts on texts, on his role as a writer and the relationship he has to his reader. It seems that for Barthes sexual desire, often a part of love, has a lot to do with writing. He speculates,

> Does writing in pleasure guarantee [...] my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must "cruise" him) *without knowing where he is.* A site of bliss is then created.[46]

The parenthesised reference to 'cruising' is intriguing, particularly in the light of passages in *Incidents* and *Soirées de Paris,* which seem to autobiographically describe many instances of 'cruising' for casual sexual encounters, often with male prostitutes. He describes a repetitive cycle of these sexual encounters. This links to the repetition encountered within Barnfield's sonnets: each one is a testament to his desire, the attempt to fulfil it, and the ultimate failure of this. Even the form of the sonnet seems to engender something close to repetition: the form is so strongly associated with love, so often used to communicate the same ideas it is almost impossible to say something new, particularly in such a restrictive form. Fittingly, the sonnets end with a confession from Barnfield of his inadequacy as a poet, "everie one cannot be wittie".[47] His lack of fulfilment in writing coincides with his lack of fulfilment in love: "Pardon I crave of them, and of thee, pitty".[48]

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[43] Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980,* trans. Linda Coverdale, (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1985), p.5
[44] Mark Edmundson, 'Introduction', in Freud, p. xiii
[45] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse, p.73*
[46] Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.4
[47] Klawitter, p.132, Sonnet XX, line 13
[48] Ibid, line 14.

In Mark Edmundson's introduction to a collection of Freud's essays, he refers to Freud as "the laureate of unhappy love". A fitting title when one considers the interpretation of his writings that "life [...] frequently circles from romance to disillusionment, then does so again and again".[49] The resemblance of this to the endless repetition the discourse of love within English literature cannot be escaped. In love and writing, and, if Freud is to be believed, in love and life, repetition cannot be escaped. Perhaps the most positive thing we can take from the relation between love and writing is that they are both imaginative, creative processes which we will continue to be driven to participate in, to repeat, in an attempt to improve, to better that which has come before. This can surely be nothing but a message of hope.

[49] Freud, p.vii

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