

A Lover's Discourse: Fragments

Radio play based on the book of the same name by Roland Barthes, with motifs from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

Commissioned by WDR 3

First broadcast: March 19, 2010, 11:05 pm

Producer: Markus Heuger

Featuring: Sebastian Blomberg (lover), Ludwig Trepte (Werther), Hannah Herzprung (Lotte), et al.

Adaptation for radio, director, composer: Andreas Bick

A Lover's Discourse: Fragments by Roland Barthes is one of the most ambitious and intelligent texts on the philosophy of passionate love. Barthes divides various aspects of love into "figures of thought" which he orders alphabetically, creating something akin to a glossary of love. The arbitrary succession of concepts like absence, adorable, affirmation, etc. creates a text with no underlying narrative, hierarchy or development; thanks to the alphabetic ordering, the sequences stand side by side, unconnected and with equal weight. Every scene already contains the whole discourse of love, ready to be pursued and developed by the reader. The lover in Barthes' *Fragments* is simultaneously a player, eroticist, cool analyst and empathetic paramour. He speaks not about love, but *with* love.

Although the "fragments" are written in the first person, Barthes constituted the book's loving being out of material from a wide variety of origins. His most important source was Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, who for Barthes becomes the principle witness and supplier of keywords for passionate love. In this adaptation for radio, the two works – Barthes' *Fragments* and Goethe's *Werther* – are superimposed to create a many-faceted dialog. Here, Lotte and Werther are modern-day adults who move easily between clubs, the internet and urban everyday life. Barthes' lover, on the other hand, comments on the action and reflects on love, but he is not entirely detached, repeatedly turning up as an invisible companion in the places where Lotte and Werther meet and where Werther's unhappy love ultimately leads to suicide.

In his introduction to the *Fragments*, Barthes writes: "*Dis-cursus*—originally the action of running here and there, comings and goings, measures taken, 'plots and plans': the lover, in fact, cannot keep his mind from racing, taking new measures and plotting against himself." In this radio play, the idea of discourse as a movement between various points is taken literally by locating most of the scenes in the everyday life of the city: the actors perform at Berlin's central station, on subway platforms, in underpasses, in gaming rooms, at clubs, on a theatre stage, in bars – passing through these places as they speak. By making the recordings in everyday situations, Barthes' text is given a down to earth quality; random jump cuts in the ambient sound contribute to a feeling of immediacy and urgency.

For both Barthes and Goethe, the lover is someone who stands outside society. He lives in an "unreal" world, in an illusion that becomes his truth, while what other people call

“reality” he experiences as an illusion.¹ This amorous illusion is potentially at odds with the conventions of society and may even take on such a destructive character that it drives the unhappy lover to suicide. Werther is the best literary example of this self-destructive energy: after the novel was published in 1774, to Goethe’s horror, many young men took it as a cue to commit suicide. They killed themselves wearing a yellow waistcoat and a blue jacket – like their model Werther, who dressed this way to slip one last time into the guise in which he first met his beloved Lotte. Since then, when a widely publicized suicide triggers a wave of copycat deaths, this is known as the “Werther Effect”. Roland Barthes responds by asking whether thoughts of suicide are perhaps often a convenient form of self-dissolution: In an extended parallel montage, the piece ends with Werther’s path to death, while Barthes’ lover proposes a different route: that of abandonment, of giving oneself up to the feeling of unhappy love: in the discourse of this love, the lover discovers ecstasy.

¹ “Love is blind: the proverb is false. Love opens its eyes wide, love produces clear-sightedness. [...] What the world takes for ‘objective’, I regard as factitious; and what the world regards as madness, illusion, error, I take for truth.” (Roland Barthes – *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*)