

On Gaily Reading Music

Mitchell Morris

Only reading loves the work, entertains with it a relationship of desire. To read is to desire the work, to want to be the work, to refuse to echo the work using any discourse other than that of the work...

– Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*

“I’ll read you if you wreck my nerves, girl,” my neighbor said.

– Edmund White, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*

I begin with a dissonance, with the rough energy of incongruous speech. The distance between the graceful formulas of a celebrated French critic and the melodramatic threats of a nameless queen in the early sixties is not much farther, it seems, than that between the reserved language of a musicology journal and the dishing of a group of gay men in standing room at the opera. As the tone varies, so does the interpretive style, from judiciousness to camp. And yet I propose that these elements be brought together. Mixing such disparate varieties of

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speech requires a certain willful failure of critical decorum, a decision to regard the grotesque or perverse as valuable for more than their simple capacity to challenge existing canons. The juxtapositions involved in "gaily reading music" violate disciplinary and subcultural boundaries not only for shock value, but also to gesture towards an expanded musicology.

If there is to be a *queerness* in musicology, if the academic discourse on music is to accept and retain the tint of other speech, then we must constantly bring questions of reception and interpretation to the fore. Certainly not all such questions are *queer*; and simply moving the site of musicological interest to the listener might seem at first to leave the musical object intact and majestically removed from its cultural milieu. But only by defining the peculiar nature of *queer* interpretation can we learn to "gaily read music." Some of the most brilliant recent work in gay and lesbian theory clarifies how strongly the intersection of sexual and epistemological desire shapes the construction of homosexualities. How do you *know* yourself (or anyone else) as gay or lesbian when such sexualities are defined as impossible to articulate?¹ To be gay or lesbian is to be strongly shaped by the splendors and miseries of interpretation, and to know that the gap between such sexual sentiments and the representational practices of the dominant culture can be bridged only by what might seem to the uninitiated to be the most fantastic and opportunistic hermeneutic contortions. When becoming *queer* in a non-queer (and hostile) world, this

1. The persistent Western cultural imperative to define homosexual acts as literally unspeakable makes these questions irresistible. (After all, they are preeminently the crimes *inter Christianos non nominandum*, and later constitute the Love that famously Dare Not Speak Its Name.) The crucial text here is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990). Another particularly suggestive discussion is found in D. A. Miller, "Anal Rope," in *Representations* 32 (Fall 1990), pp. 114-133, and *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London, 1991), pp. 119-41.

kind of strenuous reading usually seems like the only possible means of self-defense and self-nurturing.

Reading music: this is what we first learn to do in piano lessons, perhaps, or in choir, or when we join the band or the orchestra. A straightforward phrase for a relatively unambiguous activity; to read music is to translate what is seen into what is heard, to look at the marks on a page and reproduce them as sounds. But we assume that the sounds thus re/un/covers are joined together to communicate some kind of meaning, so to read music is to make sense of it. And, even more abstractly, we sometimes say that we “offer a reading” of a given work; the music is put explicitly into verbal discourse when we speak and write about it.²

Three levels, practically three different activities, and yet we call all of them “reading.” Grouping them under the verb acknowledges these activities’ common positional bond: to read is to place oneself into a relation with an/other, person or thing. (Though the borders between person and thing are easily fuzzed—to which category does an operatic voice or character really belong?)³ And the strength of connection in reading is often more genuinely revelatory and productive than that connection’s positive or negative moment. Harold Bloom claims that as readers we wish to drown in what we read; it is hard to imagine that we can be pulled out of ourselves in this way without such bonds between the reader and the read.

The pleasures of connection seem to be at least a part of what Roland Barthes aims to articulate when he speaks of the

2. In distinguishing between these levels of use in the phrase “reading music,” I don’t mean to suggest that the activity can be divided into distinct *and separate* stages. On the contrary, it seems likely that when a given level of reading is most prominently intended, the other levels are still present, not inactive but merely tacit.

3. For an extraordinary meditation on this question, see Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton, 1991), especially Chapter 1.

act of reading.⁴ There is something strangely pre-linguistic and regressive about this relationship, almost as if the text (whatever it might be) stands in for the maternal body with all its abundant bliss. And for Barthes, the language of the reader always belongs to the prior text, that which was read; "the only commentary which a pure reader could produce, if he were to remain purely a reader, would be a pastiche. . ."⁵ Barthes's reader is not clearly separate from the text, and his/her means of expression remain wholly dependent on what is read. But "to go from reading to criticism [writing] is to change desires, it is no longer to desire the work but to desire one's own language."⁶ The reader in writing goes beyond the structured and limited access to language given by the work and enters into language in general. In other words, language becomes available for shaping and directing beyond the confines of what is read.⁷

The movement Barthes describes here shows a striking affinity to Lacan's account of childhood psychological development. For Lacan, the child's psyche moves through three essential stages: the *Real*, where there is no sense of a unified

4. I focus on Barthes's discussion of reading from *Criticism and Truth*, a relatively early work of literary criticism, because it seems to me to provide the most elegant description of a relationship that occurs in reading music as well. But it may be appropriate here to suggest briefly how Barthes's notions of reading texts might fit in with his work on music. In one late essay, Barthes distinguishes between three types of listening: listening for *indices*, a way of orienting oneself to the environment; listening for *signs*, a fundamentally religious process of decoding an other; and a psychoanalytically-derived deconstructive listening. The types of reading I discuss are ways of listening for *signs*. See Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. and ed. Katrine Pilcher Keuneman, forward by Philip Thody (Minneapolis, 1987), and "Listening," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991), pp. 245-60.

5. Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, pp. 93-4.

6. P. 94.

7. When Barthes comes to speak of Beethoven's music, it is this process that he describes: "to read this Beethoven is to perform, to *operate* his music, to lure it (as it lends itself) into an unknown *praxis*." Barthes, "Musica Practica," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, p. 265.

bodily ego and no clear sense of separation from the mother; the *Imaginary*, which is structured by the mother-child dyad, thus dominated by the maternal body; and the *Symbolic*, marked by the intervention of the Father (not the actual father, but a figure which is the repository for the prohibitions of society as a whole) and the acquisition of language. "Reading" (and certainly listening to) music would be resonant with a perhaps half-remembered state somewhere between the real and the Imaginary, and "Writing" would belong to the Symbolic.⁸

But Barthes's move from reading to writing is not one of single-minded development, for the entry into "one's own language"⁹ reproduces the state that led to the writing of what was read.⁹

[To go from reading to criticism] is to send the work back to the desire to write from which it arose. And so discourse circulates around the book: *reading, writing*: all literature goes from one desire to another.¹⁰

8. Articulating music's places within the Lacanian schema would obviously take much more than the space of one essay, but this brief description may at least point toward how tightly music might be bound up with questions of desire. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977) and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977). Lacan is a notoriously difficult and evasive writer; a good introduction to his thought is Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London, 1990). Lawrence Kramer has employed Lacanian perspectives to good effect in *Music and Poetry: the Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984) and *Music As Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990); Philip Brett also touches on Lacan in "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," (paper read at AMS-Oakland, 1990). For another suggestive conjunction of psychoanalysis and music, see Ellen Handler Spitz, "Ancient Voices of Children: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation," *Current Musicology* 40 (1985), p. 1.

9. It is true that this shift in states occurs between people rather than within a single person in Barthes's account, but I think that here subject positions matter more than their specific incarnations.

10. Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 94.

The reader and the writer are always on the same circuit, just in different (subject) positions, and desire continually mutates and flows.

Underlying the structures of reading and writing described in *Criticism and Truth*, then, are two kinds of desire: in reading, the desire for the language of the work; and in writing, the desire for "one's own language." The *book*, as the object which, being read, moves the reader into writing, is the mediating third term of the relationship:



For Barthes, this general circulation of language or desire, as far as they can actually be separated, obviates any distinction between genres of writing. Both poem and critical essay arise out of the same desire, so in these terms they are the same thing—products of the critic as artist.

Desire can circulate in and around music in the same way, of course, but there is an added twist: whereas in literature the desires of reading and writing are accomplished through the same medium, in music these same desires may be accomplished through the same *or* different media. Reading music is a variable amalgam of musical performance, the acts of listening and the process of writing through that which has been read, but the reader who writes may write in music or in language. The possibilities of this choice push composition and critical essay further apart than poem and critical essay could ever be.

For the functions of composer and critic are most frequently split in the discourse surrounding Western art music. No matter that composers can be critics and vice-versa; the positions are different because their characteristic media do not co-

incide.¹¹ And the gap between sound and speech as they are usually understood overwhelms any corresponding gap we might feel between reading and writing. But the structural differences between reading text and reading music should not obscure their shared impulse to love a beloved object. Music in this sense becomes what Wallace Stevens calls “modes of desire, modes of revealing desire.” Reading thus stands for so many activities that together constitute our relation to music. We read individual works out of love.

To say that reading is like love does not preserve it from discourse in some discreet “personal” mental space, of course. Patterns of reading (and loving) music are firmly intertwined with the discourses that contain and produce them, and these patterns or styles can share structures and affects. Because of this, we can plausibly differentiate existing styles of reading in the academic discourse on music by analyzing the various components of particular styles. This is not to say that a general taxonomy of the ways we read music is desirable or even possible; any classificatory system with pretensions to completeness would be too complicated to be usable, and too easily outmoded by innovative interpretive moves to last for long. But even without overarching systems it is possible to construct exemplary styles of reading music for our critical uses.

As I indicated above, I am interested in adding a *queer* tint to the intertwined concepts of reading music that we habitually use in academic discourse. In (somewhat old-fashioned) gay slang, “reading” carries a connotation that appears to push it beyond the realm of texts. Instead of reading a text, I read a person. This much is suggested by the epigraph from Edmund White: “I’ll read you if you wreck my nerves, girl...” But White never explains the term; to place this gay sense of “reading” into a better context, let me offer a bit of history.

11. Post-Cageian conceptual compositions and Hans Keller’s wordless analysis are interesting at least partially because of their problematic position in the academic discourse on music.

In the dizzying development of gay and lesbian culture since the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, certain older cultural styles and their attendant practices have been suppressed for containing too much internalized homophobia, or as presenting an "unrealistic" image of the lives of homosexual men and women. The practices most readily suppressed might be grouped into a category defined by what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls "the trope of inversion": the homosexual is understood to be placed—"whether biologically or culturally—at the threshold between genders."¹² Such "inverted" practices include drag (and its close associate, camp) among gay men, and butch-femme role-playing among lesbians.¹³ But even though the cultural styles represented by these practices were banished from much of the "mainstream" gay community during the 70s and 80s, they have persisted in queer subcultures isolated from the social and political gains of the 1970s because of race, class, or geography.¹⁴ It is in these "peripheral cultures" that we find the practice of reading to which White refers.

Jennie Livingston's recent documentary *Paris Is Burning* portrays the drag culture of African-American and Latino gays

12. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, pp. 85-90.

13. Though recently, gay men and lesbians have become more interested in reclaiming these cultural styles. Drag has become more acceptable in the major gay centers of the United States, and lesbian publications such as *On Our Backs* have worked to reconcile feminist and butch-femme practices and sensibilities. An especially provocative twist to this project is visible in the title of an article by Lisa Duggan published in the inaugural issue of the lesbian and gay journal *OUT/LOOK: The Anguished Cry of an 80s Fem: "I Want To Be A Drag Queen."* See *OUT/LOOK* 1 (Spring 1988), 62-5. Both my essay and Judith Peraino's "Rip Her To Shreds" in **this journal** are positioned to continue this recuperative work.

14. For instance, most of my own coming out occurred in North Carolina during the early 80s, where gay life was still governed and shaped by that paragon of pre-Stonewall social forces, the closet. The changes in gay culture related to greater gay visibility, political power, and social tolerance had not made much headway there. Perhaps because of this, drag was still a powerful cultural force.

in the Harlem of the late 1980s. During one interview, an older female impersonator named Dorian Corey defines reading as “the real art form of insult.”¹⁵ To read is to put down, to tell off, most typically by finding a flaw of appearance or behavior and magnifying it. Reading is good precisely to the degree that it is unexpected, virtuosic: its purpose is to dazzle both the one being read and those watching the process.

But a “read” is not simply any particularly stylish or well executed insult; it depends on both parties being in essentially the *same subject position*. That is, both the person reading and the person being read must have the sense that their senses of themselves derive from a shared class, race, gender, sexual orientation and so forth. Reading depends in particular on the social category of sexual orientation, of course, but other categories play into the process. Dorian Corey notes, “If it’s happening between the gay world and the straight world, then it’s not really a read...If I’m a black queen and you’re a black queen, that’s not insult, it’s just fact.” To read another person is not fundamentally an alienating maneuver; in Corey’s terms, it actually presupposes a deeper connection. Underlying the hyperbolic animosity is a delight in performance, a self-conscious spectacle that builds solidarity among the gay men involved even as it exercises its wit. And the read itself might hover equivocally between insult and backhand compliment, especially if sexual behavior is mentioned.¹⁶ “A slut,” as one drag queen I know once said, “is someone who’s getting laid more often than you are.”

Reading is thus (as Mikhail Bakhtin would have said) “double-voiced”; it is not sure whether it wants to insult or covertly compliment—perhaps both at once. Reading is “double voiced”; it is aimed at the onlookers as much as at the person being read. These polarities seem to me to define a discursive

15. A variant of the term is the phrase “reading someone’s beads.” See Bruce Rodgers, *Gay Talk: A (Sometimes Outrageous) Dictionary of Gay Slang* (New York, 1972), pp. 29 and 169.

space within which the playfulness of a *queer* musicology would be possible. Such a potentially utopian playfulness is already prefigured in gay culture in the bitchy-friendly comments opera queens make about singers (especially sopranos) and their operas. "Big Joan herself. The Beast From Down Under"; "Marilyn Horne was a truck driver. She was discovered singing the Habanera in a Los Angeles gravel pit."¹⁷ These comments are definitely Not Nice, but all the same they are not insults pure and simple, rather a verbal equivalent to the outrageous semi-parodies acted out by the members of the New York drag queen operatic troupe *La gran scena*.¹⁸

The ambivalence of gay reading is culturally overdetermined: by the old threshold model of gender identity, in

16. The rhetorical strategies by which reading operates are quite close to those of the African-American practice of "signifying." See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 1988). The precise origins of the term "reading" remain obscure. It may be that the word, used in this context, appeared first in the African-American gay community (it is used in this way by Zora Neale Hurston early in the twentieth century), but in any case the tropes used in "signifying" have substantially shaped the practice of reading in the gay community as a whole. And quite frequently, when European-American gay men read one another, they do so in the accents of their African-American peers, in the same way that Edmund White's character follows his threat to read his friend with "a loud wailing 'Oo-eeh!' just as Mahalia Jackson might have done after an all-out gospel hymn." (White, *The Beautiful Room*, p. 46.)

17. I have taken these remarks from Terrence McNally's play "The Lisbon Traviata," in *Out Front: Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Plays*, ed. and intro. Don Shewey (New York, 1988), pp. 355-418. Though they are drawn from fiction, these mini-reads are, in my experience of the discourse of opera queens, of drop-dead accuracy. See my "Reading As An Opera Queen," in *Music and Difference*, ed. Ruth Solie (Berkeley and Los Angeles, forthcoming).

18. The members of *La gran scena* (perhaps most appropriately translated as "The Big Scene") are men who actually sing famous arias in the correct register, but stage them parodically. I don't think that the staging automatically makes the singers "unserious," however; there is a (rather terrifying) skill involved here that isn't reducible to any simple mockery of soprano airs.

which being gay automatically translates as being neither man nor woman, but somehow both; by the very nature of drag, where a man in a woman's dress could signal a hyper-masculine mockery of the idea of femininity or an affinity with the abjection that femininity embodies; by gay people's persistent habit of reversing pronouns for concealment and fun; by the attempt to reclaim the slurs of bigots—"queer," for instance—as terms of respect and affection; by the shifty effect of sentimentality in which admiration and contempt become almost identical.¹⁹ Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick speak of an emotional state they call *Divinity*, defining it as "a mixture of abjection and defiance."²⁰ I want to link this ambivalence, this sense of *Divinity*, into what I will call "the gay carnivalesque."

Mikhail Bakhtin's extensive meditation on Rabelais and the culture of the Middle Ages is concerned to locate a utopian moment within the operations of Medieval society. "Folk carnival humor," as Bakhtin defines it, involves "ritual spectacles," "comic verbal compositions," and "various genres of billingsgate," which are given free rein during festival time.²¹ These joyously obscene acts parody the "official culture" that at other times prohibits their expression, and in the act of parody engender an ideal of polymorphous (not to mention perverse) delirium.

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the estab-

19. As is perhaps evident from this entire passage. See Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, pp. 142-150.

20. Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Divinity: a Dossier*, paper read at Stanford University Conference "Gender At The Crossroads," Spring 1990. The state of *Divinity*, which Moon and Sedgwick argue provides a common emotional bond between gay men and fat women, is named after the drag queen actor Divine, who appeared in most of John Waters's pre-respectable films such as *Female Trouble* and *Pink Flamingos*.

21. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984), pp. 5-10.

lished order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.²²

What Bakhtin calls "official culture" is inverted and exploded to achieve renewal; carnival in these terms aims to reach utopia by means of a dirty joke.²³

For Bakhtin, such dirty jokes have a context much broader and richer than simple defiance, for they situate the body as a productive part of the world as a whole. Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits.

The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.²⁴

The grotesque body featured in the rituals and speech of carnival time is a "hopeful monster," a collection of orifices and projections that interact with the world in consumption and production. Borders are violated by the projections and hollows of the grotesque body, and it is this violation, with all its suggestions of death, sexuality, and birth, which is the source of our ambivalence.²⁵

The carnivalesque, with all its partial objects, its curiously innocent obscenity, its omnipresent concern with abundance, ends up resembling nothing so much as a tenuous mixture of

22. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 10.

23. In keeping with carnival's impulse towards renewal, the dirty joke is meant to elevate as well as degrade, in a manner similar to the epithet "slut" from a drag queen's mouth. See Bakhtin, pp. 21-2 and somewhat more generally, pp. 151-95.

24. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 26.

25. Bakhtin's notions of obscenity and the grotesque body are paralleled (though without the humor) in Georges Bataille's *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco, 1986).

the Real and the Imaginary, but translated from the psyche of the individual to the workings of society as a whole. In Bakhtin's carnival time, everyone is given license to regress, indeed to employ the energies released against "official" culture, i.e. the Symbolic order. But this critique of the Symbolic is not a negation; on the contrary, it serves as a ground-clearing maneuver which allows the Symbolic order to change and grow.

A drag show, from the simplest lip-synching contest to one of the rarefied productions of *La gran scena*, clearly operates to produce a counter-truth to the established orders of compulsory heterosexuality and unambiguous, unalterable gender identity. Official culture, as fashion, the movies, popular music, opera, undergo carnivalization and are reversed to accommodate the desires of those usually outlawed from that culture. And drag queens are themselves grotesque bodies, whose breasts, whether detachable or implanted, may grow; whose penises, usually hidden, may shrink or be removed; whose hair may rise and fall with each change of outfit; whose salacious speech, screaming into the falsetto register, is held to signify the body and its desires. The grotesque body is a form of desire, bought with pain, to be enjoyed despite its costs.

And what drag queens do with their own bodies, voices, and speech, opera queens (or any queens for that matter) may do with the bodies, voices and speech of others. This may be why an opera queen's reading often fixes on the singer's physique as much as her voice: Joan Sutherland's jaw, Montserrat Caballé's girth, Jessye Norman's sheer size. When the bodies of sopranos are piled up for display and discussion no less than the bodies of the gay men who are speaking, when both fan and diva are vulnerable, filled with "abjection and defiance," then there are grotesque bodies in verbal form.

The carnivalization of opera extends much further than the discourse surrounding the genre, as the example of *La gran scena* reveals. And in the process of carnivalization, the ideologies the genre embodies are the actual target of parodic destruction.

(Opera queens, who are so named because their love of opera exceeds the bounds of reason and taste, are not likely to clear away the very art form they depend upon.) Carnavalesque degradations of opera represent attempts to wrest the genre from the control of official culture, to be turned to the purposes of freedom.

An appropriately ambiguous scenario is given in Albert Innaurato's short story "Solidarity," where the past relationship of two characters is described:

[Rose Hips] and Leatherette had met while sharing a sling at The Mineshaft. They had amused each other so much, they had committed the gravest faux pas in that dark dungeon of tough anonymous sex—giggling uncontrollably at their would-be "masters." They had been thrown out and had avenged themselves by shrieking opera arias outside the place for hours until the police came and embarrassed the tough and punitive leather queens inside.²⁶

The two men, excluded from an official culture—in this case the strongly hierarchical and macho ethos of a leather bar—appropriate opera to achieve a carnivalesque revenge which unmask the leather men's pretensions to power by calling in the genuine holders of authority (that is, the real official culture). Instantly, the "masters" lose their phallic status and become "leather queens." In keeping with this spirit of reversal, the police, who have historically been regarded in the gay community as potential if not actual persecutors, take on the role of protector and instrument of redress for the two queens thrown out of the bar. (My analysis follows Innaurato's story closely by scapegoating the leather men. The situation told from their point of view would be quite different and equally true. This may point out how morally neutral the carnivalesque can be.)

Note how the performance is described: "shrieking opera arias." The participle indicates the distortion of the music,

26. Albert Innaurato, "Solidarity," in *Men On Men 2*, ed. and intro. George Stambolian (New York, 1988), p. III.

which then becomes a sign of the bodies of the two queens, grotesque because transgressive. And this expressive distortion finally summons the ambivalent holders of power in the story to bring about the reversal the pair desire.

I want to consider one more (perhaps more musicological) carnivalization of opera in a bit more detail. A gay friend, in a moment of discursive extravagance, once referred to Mozart's *Così fan frutti*, which he translated as "Fags are all like that." He then went on to say that there was some question in his mind as to whether it should be *frutti* or *frutte*. These offhand remarks seem to me to indicate the direction of a critically productive read.

Part of the fun, of course, is the irreverent linguistic distortion of the title. *Tutte* (all women) becomes *frutti* (all fruits), that is all "fags." This swerve is accomplished in a burst of Italian, which is then undermined by its wittily pedestrian translation into English as a homophobic formulation. The follow-up remark plays on the first play yet again, by wondering which gender would be most appropriate.²⁷ The two statements ironically undermine their claims to truth in order to emphasize their susceptibility to play.

The English statement is ironic on another level as well. In the context of one gay man speaking to another about gay men in general, such stereotyping lacks the support given by any real difference in social power between the speaker and those he speaks about ("If I'm a black queen and you're a black queen..."). And an accusation of fickleness or promiscuity, if not clearly meant as a half-compliment, is likely to be read as sour grapes. (We might recall the definition of a "slut.") The

27. In gay slang, this is called *gender-fucking*. Another common example might be the application of the honorific "Miss" to male figures, as in the classic camp remark, "May Miss God strike you dead!" In the context of this paper we might refer to "Miss Beethoven" or "Miss Wagner." I should add that this practice, like the practice of reclaiming epithets such as "fag" only succeed when there is a high degree of cultural solidarity between speaker and listener(s)—you can only use the term if it applies to you as well.

net effect of the stereotypical dismissal, then, is an ironic negation of the terms of enforcement that such a dismissal presupposes; and this negation allows the speaker to appropriate the phrase for *other* purposes, in the best carnivalesque manner.

For that matter, the distortion of the Italian phrase is also a gesture of appropriation. But *Così fan tutte* is more than a dismissal, it is the title of an opera, after all. The translation into English degrades the opera in Bakhtin's sense, and reads it in the gay sense, by reducing it to a species of sexism and (by extension) homophobia. And when it is lowered in this way, it can be turned to uses opposed to official (need I say patriarchal?) culture. This is not to say that the opera actually *does* reduce to nothing more than a patronizing meditation on the frailty of women; and yet a tone of condescension seems to cling to it, requiring some kind of exorcism by laughter. And perhaps after reading the work in this sense, I can return to reading in a more Barthesian sense.

I come back to Barthes's notion of reading as enjoyment, but this time I do not want to stress the complexities of the term as much as the vulnerabilities it implies. If we as readers "want to be the work," our aim is made considerably riskier when the work to be read contains (as what work does not?) elements that do us harm. And so we sing and play the works that we love, we listen to them, we write music about them, we write criticism about them—whatever it might take to read them (in the gay sense), to negotiate the exchanges of power and pain between music and the hearer. As Harold Bloom says of the romance of literature:

Poets influence us because we fall in love with their poems. All love unfortunately changes, if indeed it does not end, and since nothing is got for nothing, we also get hurt when we abandon, or are abandoned by, poems. Criticism is as much a series of metaphors for the acts of loving what we have read as for the acts of reading themselves.²⁸

28. Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York, 1976), p. 103.

A lovers' quarrel or two does not seem to be much of a price to pay for continuing intensities of engagement. The same piece that wrecks our nerves may be all our desire, and the only cure for the pain of what is read is yet more reading.