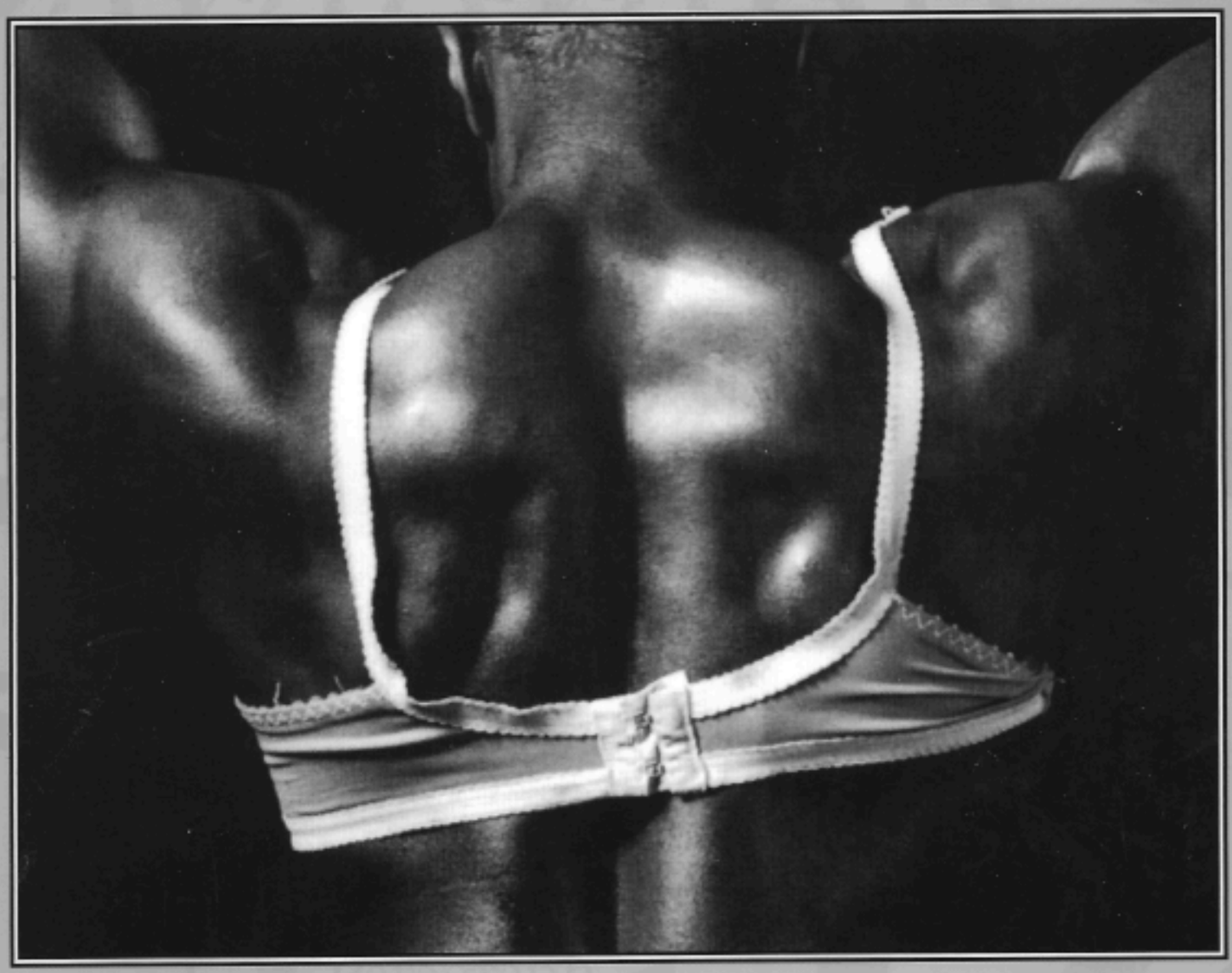
MEN'S BODIES

Edited by Judith Still



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'Support our boys': AIDS, Nationalism and the Male Body

This article will analyse two front covers from the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* (fig. 1). The first cover is from 16 January 1991, on the eve of the war in the Gulf, and the second is from 25 November 1991 announcing the death of Freddie Mercury from an AIDS related illness. What struck me at the time, and is the focus of the following discussion, is the startling symmetry between them. Both consist of the Union Jack as background to a male body at the centre of the image, and both are photographic constructions. I want to argue that the fact of the close publication dates is not a coincidence, but rather points to evidence of a moment of cultural anxiety over the male body and its location at a time of profound uncertainty generated by two events: AIDS and War. Whilst there might appear to be no specific connection between the body of a soldier about to go to war, and the body of a rock star who died from an AIDS related illness, both bodies are linked here through the symbolic figure of the nation. It takes the reductive, simplistic and profoundly contradictory perspective of a media text such as *The Sun* to condense these concerns down to two such images. The assertion of a singular identity attempted in each cover is undone by the rhetorical figuration of the two, very different, male bodies. What emerges is not simply a reversal of an intended meaning but an anxiety about the processes of representing these bodies.

Following the chronology of publication, I want to start with the Gulf War cover. The use of the flag in a context such as this is not in itself unusual. The culmination of a long drawn out 'phoney' war, this is the moment just prior to a rather more physical engagement with the forces of Saddam Hussein's army, with the concomitant risk to individual combatants. Its location is, again, not unusual given *The Sun*'s reputation as one of the most crudely and vociferously nationalistic of daily British newspapers with its manichean incitement to a hatred of the Other.[1] It can be viewed as an attempt to project a symbolic unity at a moment of perceived crisis or threat. The exceptional use of the flag to take up the entire front page of the newspaper, with its plea to 'support our boys and put this flag in your window', can be seen as symptomatic of a distinct uneasiness

rather than the assertion of a confident identity. The attempt to cross from the private realm of reading to the public realm of display on the basis of this appeal, points to an inherent instability with regard to the figure of the nation—what Homi Bhabha calls a 'particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation'.[2] As he writes in the introduction to *Nation and Narration*:

> If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness': the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other; the comfort of social belonging, the hidden injuries of class; the customs of taste, the powers of political affiliation; the sense of the social order, the sensibility of sexuality; the blindness of bureaucracy, the strait insight of institutions; the quality of justice, the common sense of injustice; the *langue* of the law, the *parole* of the people. (2)

The use of the hyper-symbol of the flag is the final attempt to fix the ambiguity of the sign in a moment of transcendence. In this way it is an authoritarian fetishism of the social and political impulse to rationalize the normalizing tendency of the, so-called, 'national interest'.

The montage of the flag and head point to a process of cultural anxiety centred, as the head is centred on the flag, on the absent body of the male soldier. The fragmented form of the representation is indicative of a sense of the loss of the secure identity of the soldier as mythical warrior. In the mythical narrative of nationhood, soldiers have traditionally occupied the symbolic centre of national identity.[3] There is also uncertainty over the question of state borders as what is effected is an ideological extension of the emotional boundaries of the nation beyond the physical boundaries. War is rarely, if ever, actually about a literal threat to the borders of the nation. What such an operation pointed to, therefore, was the tenuous nature of such categories: at the moment when they are asserted as at their most secure they are, in fact, at their most unstable.

War and the military have long been one of the key sites for forging links between hegemonic masculinities and men's bodies. The absence of the actual body of the soldier from the image points to a loss of confidence in the authority of this hegemonic ideal. This can be read through the increasing technologization of war and work where, as Harry Brod has observed, the centrality of the male body as productive or heroic has been drastically diminished and, therefore, undermined

traditional male identities: the disappearing male body.[4] Indeed, one of the distinguishing features of the Gulf War was the significant increase in the involvement of women as combatants in the conflict.[5] As David H.J. Morgan observes, such a cultural shift is destabilizing, where concerns over the presence of women in combat situations are actually far more significant, expressing a: 'concern with the overall symbolic order, the apparent loosening of boundaries between men and women, and the weakening of the links between nation, the military, and gendered identities'.[6]

There are other reasons as to why the construction takes the form it does. Given its nature, photography tends to the particular as opposed to the universal, therefore the cropping of the body is an attempt to overcome this dilemma. The head can function as a metonymic representation, as the body of the soldier is displaced by its absence onto the body of the nation as a whole.[7] It is worth extending this analysis of the rhetorical figuration of the montage. The flag is mobilized by the newspaper as an attempt to present a secure and stable background to the potentially threatened body of the soldier. The flag, as sign, points to an absent or ideal meaning where there is an instantaneous shift from the vehicle of meaning to the unstated meaning. It is the flag that is intended to appeal on the basis of universalistic and generally context-free thought and in this way seeks to reinforce identity over difference, even if the identity is one that is already multiple, as is indeed the case with the Union Jack. The assumption is that the hidden meaning is known and believed even though invisible. The flag is therefore an attempt to impose a monologic order of meaning where dissent is treason.

But the synecdochic presence of the head works to *undermine* such an appeal. The symbolic appeal of the flag is interrupted by the metonymic presence of the white, male body. Because of the contiguous relationship in metonymic representation between image and meaning, the orientation is towards a lateral dissemination that is potentially endless. In this way the relation is far more unpredictable, uncertain and multiple than was intended. What such a construction as this front page points to is less an unproblematic celebration of a triumphant identity, than a confused attempt to fix a differential relationship in a state of transition. The use of a head without a body points to the difficulty of producing an ideal image that uses a photograph in an identificatory mode.

The instability inherent in this attempt can be seen in the image of Freddie Mercury published six months or so earlier. The implications

of repetition are, of course, well recognized as pointing to an anxiety in the analysand.[8] However, one of the significant aspects of this image is the surprising nature of its location in *The Sun*, a publication much criticized for its unrepentant history of AIDS hate and its homophobic perspective.[9]

To see *this* image of Mercury used to announce his death from Broncho-Pneumonia brought on by AIDS was a surprise, given the previous tone of the newspaper as one where AIDS was figured as retribution for promiscuous and immoral behaviour: those with AIDS were both victims *and* guilty. As Simon Watney has pointed out, the general attitude of the press was to stress the deeply 'alien' nature of those directly affected, against the mythic and seemingly stable identity of the general public.[10] Other surveys by the Glasgow University Media Group and health sociologist Kay Wellings pointed to the relentless use of the term 'Gay Plague'.[11] Given this history, what explains the use of this image of Mercury, draped in the national flag, triumphant and seemingly healthy, on the front cover of three million or more copies of *The Sun*? Is it an example of what might be termed a slippage in hegemonic representation, or what Terry Eagleton calls the necessary recognition of the 'other' of ruling ideology, the inscription of the potentially disruptive force of otherness in dominant ideological formations?[12]

The anomaly of using a celebratory image rather than one adopting a condemnatory or shameful tone points to a structural feature of the media: perpetuating conservative attitudes whilst being compelled to recognize popular support for particular individuals. In the first instance the cover could be described as a space of discursive contestation: the discourse of AIDS struggles with the discourse of 'stardom' all of which is framed by reference to a discourse of nation. Such a discursive contest has been described by Mikhail Bakhtin:

> Any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist — or, on the contrary, by the 'light' of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien judgements and accents.[13]

The cover fits an already established practice of the news media by positioning Mercury as fundamentally different, and therefore distant, from the public by virtue of his star status. This particular formulation of the social effect of stardom is the combination of a number of themes. Both Hollywood stars and pop stars are a staple of the tabloid

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the male, heterosexual audience in a way that could be read without irony and in this way posed no threat to their own identity. The realm of pop music allows young men to experiment with the terms of their own emergent identity. Popular music, although a patriarchal institution that has perpetuated many masculinist representations, has also encouraged transgression. It has provided a safe place for homoerotic and feminine fantasies to exist and provided the means for deeply submerged desires to surface. Freddie Mercury's 'stage performance' allowed the audience, briefly, to accept the reality of their own performance of sexual identity and gender roles. As Judith Butler has written of drag, it is a form of imitation and appropriation that has no originary moment other than the staging itself.[16]

In this context, the performance of Mercury on stage and even, at one point, the whole of the band cross-dressing for the video produced to accompany the song 'I Want to Break Free', allowed the audience to indulge in the fleeting fluidity of non-categorical identity, where the performativity of gender can be freely engaged in without fear of being stigmatized. Mercury was always at a safe distance and therefore non-threatening to a young, male, heterosexual audience who could enjoy the thrill of minimally participating in excessive gender performance. Mercury's performance can be extended to include nationalism given his birth overseas and the slippage evident in the fact that the flag with which he has draped himself is actually *upside down.*[17]

The photograph used by the newspaper was taken in 1986 by Denis O'Regan during one of Mercury's world tours. Mercury is standing in a triumphant pose, arms outstretched crucifix-like, but also reminiscent of a football supporter's pose of macho defiance, seen in Europe since the 1970s. The flag surrounds him but it is his hidden genitalia that are literally at the centre of it. At the top the simple epitaph 'Freddie is dead' is mirrored by the two calendar dates '1946' and '1991' at the bottom, which give a monumental feel to the announcement. The simplicity of such motifs works to position the individual as transhistorical, in a universal space of abstract temporality devoid of the attachments of life, sexuality or illness.

The contingencies of life, birth and death, beginning and end, are contrasted to the transcendental existence of the nation as represented by the flag. The flag as symbol seeks to close down on the meanings that would otherwise flood into the discursive space generated by the visual representation. The flag is mobilized to access a totality where the sign is singular in its meaning. The aestheticization of the

figure of Mercury in this image privileges such a closure around the potential instabilities of the contending categories. Thomas Yingling has observed of other examples of figures presented in the media that: 'their entry into AIDS discourses has always bordered on the specular (. . .) making AIDS "real" by circulating images that refer not to the complex interdiscursive challenges of the disease but to other familiar images'.[18]

The choice of a photograph of Mercury unmarked by disease and adopting a pose of 'healthy' masculinity is one informed by a need to try and contain the categories of national and gendered identities. In this sense reading between the two different moments is an ironic manoeuvre, as Yingling writes:

> What allows irony to work, of course, is a traditional notion that texts are stable and expectations clear if reversible; irony sets a limit to the instability of reading by staging closure as a choice between alternatives, each of which is complete. Irony thus provides an epistemological security rather than a radical textual opening. Rather than lead to questions about the grounds of reading, the seeming undecidability of irony becomes the key to a new stability. Thus, in the name of telling us something about AIDS, the media allows us to read AIDS — the most destabilizing social question of the last decade — through a set of stable discourses. (*AIDS*, 21)

AIDS has been figured by a language obsessed with borders: the borders of the body are threatened by invasion as are, by metaphoric transfer, the borders of the nation state. Borders are deeply problematic as they are points of crossing and transgression and therefore have to be policed. Edgar Morin highlights this opposition inherent in the assertion of a border:

> The frontier is both an opening and a closing. It is at the frontier that there takes place the distinction from and liaison with the environment. All frontiers, including the membrane of living beings, including the frontier of nation, are, at the same time as they are barriers, places of communication and exchange. They are places of dissociation and association, of separation and articulation.[19]

The attempt, therefore, to articulate a response to the figure of Freddie Mercury by recourse to the symbol of the flag both asserts and simultaneously undermines an attempt to fix the problematic of representation. Compelled by popular sympathy for Mercury, *The Sun* needs to pull out the flag as the most powerful sign from its repertoire of images precisely because it needs to overcome the discursive chasm created between itself and AIDS.[20] With his death

Mercury's sexuality is no longer ambiguous for the readers of *The Sun*, as AIDS is a 'homosexual' disease. But by shifting the emphasis of the discussion through the use of this image to one prior to this moment an attempt is made to overcome the contradiction. Whilst it would be fair to say that the news coverage in the days following the announcement was typically complex and contradictory, there was a clear attempt to maintain Mercury as ambiguous in his sexuality by reference to him as bisexual and recurring reference to a female friend as the 'love of his life'.

The struggle over the representation of the body of Mercury evident in this picture manifests itself as well in relation to a notion of respectability. George Mosse has accounted for the intrinsic connection between bourgeois morality and the ideology of nationalism.[21] We can see, therefore, that an appeal to nationalism can only be staged with an aestheticized, idealized body that bears no trace of an illness such as AIDS. Mercury as a gay man has to be removed from the newspaper's discourse of homosexuality-as-disease and the flag is the ultimate vehicle for doing so. But the framing of Mercury with the flag is an attempt to *deny* diversity and difference under the weight of the abstraction of nationalism. The location of Mercury at the centre is an acceptance of difference but not on equal terms, rather terms that are defined by the actual segregation of the gay male body. Difference has always been recognized within the dominant discourse of the nation but only in terms of assimilation or demarcation. The visibility of the 'other' is, of course, what allows for the authority of the normative as 'natural'.[22]

In both images, therefore, what is visible is a profound anxiety on how to represent the male body at the two moments of war and AIDS, where the figure of an idealized masculinity is undermined. Yingling points to the repeated coincidence of stories in the print media on AIDS and patriotic coverage of the Gulf War (*AIDS*, 35, n.5). In this context it is the male body which functions as the deconstructive 'hinge' that works to point to the two incompatible readings of the newspaper covers.[23] Margins and centres are what are figured in the two constructions: the centre is the mythical nation, secure and transcendent, a space defined in relation to history (sameness); the borders are where the nation defines itself in relation to others (difference). Mercury is literally at the centre of the symbol of nation, yet as a Gay man associated with AIDS he is figuratively at its borders; the soldier is actually located at the physical borders, on the front-line,

and only figuratively at its centre. In this way the anxieties of both threats to the figure of the masculine body, war and AIDS, become visible in this series of reflections and repetitions.

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NOTES

1 Peter Chippendale and Chris Horrie write of the paper's nationalistic rhetoric: 'Mindless patriotic fervour and flag waving jingoism had always been the trademark of popular newspapers, and *The Sun*, taking over the mantle of chief John Bull tub-thumper from the *Express*, simply reflected changing circulation patterns', *Stick it up your Punter: the Rise and Fall of the Sun* (London, Heinemann, 1990), 110.

2 'Introduction: narrating the nation' in *Nation and Narration* (London and New York, Routledge, 1990), 1.

3 Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994). One example of this would be the film *GI Jane* starring Demi Moore as a female soldier struggling with masculinist culture and political manipulation. This conflict is resolved by her adopting the attitudes of male aggression with the infamous retort to a violent attack by a superior: 'Suck my dick!' Thanks to Jago Morrison for this reference.

4 'Masculinity as Masquerade' in *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, edited by Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner (London and New York, Routledge, 1995), 19.

5 See Christine Forde '"Women warriors": Representations of Women Soldiers in British Daily Newspaper Reports of the Gulf War (January to March 1991)' in *(Hetero)Sexual Politics*, edited by Mary Maynard and June Purvis (London, Taylor and Francis, 1995), 108–22.

6 'Theatre of war: combat, the military, and masculinities' in *Theorizing Masculinities*, edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (London, Sage, 1994), 171.

7 The British artist Gavin Turk has used this image as part of his ongoing subversion of the status of the artist. He replaced the soldier's head with his own in the work *Study for a Window* (1991). Illustration in *Flash Art*, 176 (March/April 1994), 171.

8 Freud, of course, links the phenomena of doubling and repetition to the subject of the 'uncanny'. For Freud the frightening nature of the uncanny is the emergence of the repressed, where the repressed is not something new or alien but the familiar become alienated. See 'The Uncanny' in *Art*

and Literature, The Pelican Freud Library, XIV, edited by Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985), 339–76.

9 Margaret Jay as Director of the National AIDS Trust, considered *The Sun* along with the *Daily Star* as the worst of the tabloids in their coverage of HIV/AIDS. See Raymond Snoddy, *The Good, the Bad and the Unacceptable* (London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1992), 65.

10 *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, second edition, 1989), 84.

11 David Miller and Kevin Williams 'Negotiating HIV/AIDS information: agendas, media strategies and the news' in *Getting the Message: News, Truth and Power,* edited by John Eldridge (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), 126–42; Kay Wellings, 'Perceptions of Risk—Media treatment of AIDS' in *Social Aspects of AIDS,* edited by Peter Aggleton and H. Homas (London, The Falmer Press, 1988), 83–105.

12 *Ideology: An Introduction* (London, Verso, 1991), 45.

13 *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* translated by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981), 276.

14 *Stars* (London, British Film Institute, 1979), 49.

15 Dawson writes of this process of narrative imagining: 'Being subjectively entered-into and "inhabited" through identification, the cultural forms of masculinity enable a sense of one's self as "a man" to be imagined and recognized by others. Since the imagining and recognition of identities is a process shot through with wish-fulfilling fantasies, these cultural forms often figure ideal and desirable masculinities, in which both self and others make investments. Men may wish and strive to become the man they would like to imagine themselves to be. They may also be compelled to identify with particular forms out of their need for recognition of others' (*Soldier Heroes,* 23).

16 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York, Routledge, 1990), viii.

17 Freddie Mercury was born on the island of Zanzibar. There is a 'right way' up to the Union Jack where the thicker of the white diagonals goes in the top left-hand corner.

18 *AIDS and the National Body* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1997), 19.

19 *La Méthode,* 1, *La Nature de la nature* (Paris, Seuil, 1977), quoted in Geoffrey Bennington, 'Postal politics and the institution of the nation' in *Nation and Narration,* edited by Homi Bhabha, 121.

20 Richard Smith wrote of lessons learnt by *The Sun* and other newspapers from previous examples: 'After the Elton John debacle five years ago the tabloids learnt that turning a much loved celeb into a hate figure is never easy, and kicking a man when he's down—even if he's a "poof"—loses sales quicker

that you can say "Hillsborough" ', 'A year in the death of Freddie Mercury' *Gay Times*, January 1993, 61.

21 *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

22 Lee Edelman writes of the tropological shift of sexual desire from metonymy to metaphor where the arbitrary slippages of the former are fixed in the identities of the latter. Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York and London, Routledge, 1994), 3–23.

23 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1979), 12.