



## Barthes, Roland

Roland Barthes (1915-80) and [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) died within one month of each other, Barthes in March and Sartre in April 1980, and though they represent two different and conflicting generations of French intellectuals, their wide-ranging influence can be compared and, indeed, shown to overlap. Both Barthes and Sartre have fascinated wide audiences while constantly shifting in the theories they invented and propounded, and both have been "writers" in everything they published, even when they pretended to be producing pure theory. But whereas the philosopher Sartre's reputation, despite his obvious flaws, seems beyond dispute, Barthes, with his flippant dandyism, urbane skepticism, and epicurean sensibility, has run the risk of limiting his contribution to literary theory to that of a gifted dilettante writing in the tradition of Michel de Montaigne and André Gide; such is the picture offered to the American public by, for instance, [Susan Sontag](#), who pictures a virtuoso of the essay, one who should not be taken too seriously as a theoretician of literary studies. On the contrary, a retrospective overview would tend to stress, along with his finesse and versatility, the impressive depth and systematic consistency of a huge critical work that, to a great extent, has molded our contemporary understanding of textuality.

Whereas Sartre's entire *oeuvre* has been identified with the label "existentialism," Barthes was eager to promote his French brand of [Structuralism](#) for only a few years before he rejected most of its methodological assumptions. Such a label proves extremely misleading in Barthes's case because of its technical slant and its persistent blindness to diachrony. The first way to approach the logic of textuality at work in Barthes's writings is to get a clear idea of the various trends he found himself engaged in, and several periods can be distinguished. His numerous essays and books, written over 25 years from the 1950s to the 1970s (some published posthumously in the 1980s), have taught a whole generation "how to read" (to quote [Ezra Pound](#)) and have accompanied that generation through increasingly rapid changes in theory. Besides, even though he retained a set of favorite concepts, Barthes's own swiftness of mind rendered these concepts mobile and capable of important shifts in meaning; for example, the term "writing" underwent momentous modifications from *Writing Degree Zero* (1953, trans., 1967) to the last essays. Indeed, despite the sometimes willful variations, a systematic concern with "writing" has remained Barthes's most distinguished contribution to literary studies.

Of the four phases in Barthes's critical career that may be roughly sketched, the first corresponds to a meditation on History, always written with a capital *H*. This meditation takes a double form: an almost psychoanalytical analysis (in the Bachelardian mode) of the work of Jules Michelet, the great poet of history (*Michelet*, 1954, trans., 1987), which considerably anticipates a later concern for the body of language and the body of the author; and a systematic study of the concepts of language, style, and writing in *Writing Degree Zero*. As Barthes recalled his beginnings in his "Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France" (1978, trans., 1982), he started his career by combining the influences of Sartre, Bertolt Brecht, and [Ferdinand de Saussure](#) (*Barthes Reader* 471). In a way, *Writing Degree Zero* is a kind of answer to Sartre's *What Is Literature?* since it opposes to a Marxist analysis of committed literature the notion "writing." In Barthes's delineation, three instances are brought into play- language, the general code of signs never to be directly modified by literature; style, relevant to each writer as a kind of idiolect, determined by his or her private history, closer to his or her body than to the history of forms; and writing, which transcends individual styles and appears as both the locus of freedom, since different writers can opt for different writings, and the locus of social determinism, since a writing can be "bourgeois" or "revolutionary." Barthes here clears the ground for his subsequent research, which would be a history of writing, a history of literary language that is never reduced to the history of language or to the history of styles but instead explores the historicity of the signs of literature. The modern period, initiated by [Gustave Flaubert](#) and Stéphane Mallarmé, has announced the end of classical writing; thereafter, literature has turned into a problematic of pure language. Hence, the concept of "writing degree zero," exemplified by writers such as Albert Camus or the novelists of the *nouveau roman*: an attempt to create a neutral literary style deprived of all traditional markers that heralds an encounter with language as such, while stressing the gap between language and the world.

Such a gap is not to be dialectically overcome, as in Sartre's analysis of content, for Barthes is primarily interested in literary form: literature is not communication, as phenomenology would have it, but language. Literature is a form-making activity, not just one particular case of social communication. This remains one of the fundamental tenets of Barthesian theory. It is from this standpoint that he engages in a systematic criticism of the illusions pertaining to the naturalization of form. When form is taken for content, History is reduced to Nature, production reverts to ideological consumption, and myth covers all facts with an illusory transparent gauze. This denial of History corresponds to the world of myth. Barthes's well-known "readings" of contemporary myths still follow in the path of Sartrean anger at the self-deluding tactics of contemporary ideology, but with a Brechtian edge: as in Brecht's epic theater, the critical outlook must create a distance from which the audience can judge and understand instead of passively identifying with people or events. Barthes's positing of such an active function for the reader immediately met with a fierce resistance from the academics. His provocative and at times offhand thematic treatment of Racine in *Racine* (1963, trans., 1964) sparked off a controversy with Raymond Picard that eventually turned into a replay of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Quarrel between the

Ancients and the Moderns (see also *Criticism and Truth*, 1966, trans., 1987). By the end of the 1960s it was clear that the Moderns had won the day and had completely redefined the map of contemporary literary studies in France, even if the academics remained somewhat skeptical.

The originality of Barthes's approach is more clearly apparent in the second phase of his career, in which the main object of inquiry is the mythology of everyday life in the context of a general analysis of codes. This originality lies in the linking of Brecht's distancing with the linguistic analysis of [Russian Formalism](#) and of [Roman Jakobson](#), for if the gap between signifier and referent has a critical function--that of questioning evidences that are taken for granted and of destroying the habitual link we tend to establish between Nature and Culture--this gap is constitutive of poetic language as such. Literary language is intransitive; it functions in a realm of its own, independent of any reference to reality. Denotation is merely the lure whereby language attempts to hide the interplay of connotations that constitutes its codes.

Denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than *last* of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and to close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature. (*S/Z* [trans.] 9)

This is a later summary of the whole drift of this period, characterized by multitudinous attempts to apply [Semiotics](#) to various fields (theater, advertisements, photography, film, fashion, media at large).

The second phase thus deploys a linguistic strategy in order to engage with the universe of signification, and in this second moment Barthes indeed appears as the founder of French semiology, even though he often deferentially quotes [Claude Lévi-Strauss](#) or Saussure. The first text to find immediate acclaim was *Mythologies* (1957, trans., 1972 and 1979), a witty exploration of contemporary idols and clichés in which Barthes's rigor and subtlety found their proper object, followed by a short theoretical introduction to semiology. Myth is defined as a "semiological system" in the fashion of Saussure, who had heralded the birth of semiology as the general science of signs. Myth is made up of the three Saussurean components--signifier, signified, and sign--but it is a secondary system in which what is a sign in the first system becomes a signifier. Hence, the scheme, later to be exploited for the analysis of fashion (115):

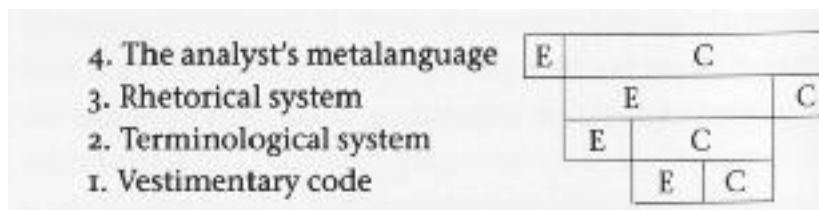


Language becomes the object of a metalanguage that connotation keeps

redoubling. The arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign receives a purely cultural motivation in the mythological system. The polemic edge and the theoretical foundation attack the same distortion of faked motivation: Barthes finds himself "sickened" by the recourse to a "false nature" of language that condones all sorts of ideological exploitations: "This nausea is like the one I feel before the arts which refuse to choose between *physis* and *antiphysis*, using the first as an ideal and the second as an economy. Ethically, it is quite low to wish to play on these two levels at once" (126 n. 7). The bogey to destroy is always the irrepressible ghost of a naturalization of signs. In this battle, a scientific outlook never precludes the ethical position, and indeed it is no surprise to witness an increasing "ethical" preoccupation in Barthes's writings, even if the values he praises are not those of conventional morality.

Myth is the direct inversion of poetry: myth transforms a meaning into form, whereas poetry is a regressive semiological system that aims at reaching the meaning of things themselves. In such a general view, the former analysis of *Writing Degree Zero* had been only "a mythology of literary language" that "defined writing as the signifier of literary myth" (*Mythologies* [trans.] 134), and "the subversion of writing was the radical act by which a number of writers have attempted to reject Literature as a mythical system" (135). This remained Barthes's basic motive when he approached the experimental writing of Philippe Sollers in *Writer Sollers* (1979, trans., 1987). Yet for a time Barthes also seemed to believe in the possibility of a science valid for all possible narratives, and he displayed his skill at adroit synthesis in "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966, trans. in *Image-Music-Text*, 1977), where he manages to combine the approaches of Algirdas Julien Greimas, Claude Bremond, Vladimir Propp, Jakobson, and Russian Formalism by distinguishing between the level of functions (such as "request," "aid," and "punishment" in the logic of the plot), the level of actions (characters are "actants" in a literary praxis that questions the status of subjectivity), and the level of narration (or discourse, implying a narrator and an addressee).

An even more systematic treatment of semiology is provided in the two essays *Elements of Semiology* (1964, trans., 1967) and *The Fashion System* (1967, trans., 1983): fashion, for instance, is treated not in the sociological mode one could have expected but instead as "written fashion," and the corpus is limited to the chronicles of a couple of women's magazines. Louis Hjelmslev, André Martinet, and N. S. Troubetzkoy relay Saussure and Sartre to produce a vertiginous nesting of signifying systems (in which *E* stands for "plane of the expression" and *C*, "plane of the content") (*Fashion* 293):



Nevertheless, the conclusion of the brilliant if rather heuristic analysis opens out onto a reiterated assertion of death: the eternal present of fashion rhetorics supposes a repression of its own futility, therefore of its death-haunted mutability,

whereas "the semiologist is a man who expresses his future death in the very terms in which he has named and understood the world" (294).

Barthes's decision to focus on written or described fashion may correspond to a reversal of priorities. Whereas Saussure believed that linguistics was only a part of a wider science of signs (semiology), Barthes tends to think that semiology is only a part of the science of linguistics- human language is not merely a model, a pattern of meaning, but its real foundation. If everything is always caught up in the nets of a discourse already spoken by other subjects, it is only another step to [Jacques Lacan's](#) formula that "there is no metalanguage." This emphasis on a discourse already spoken may describe the move to a third phase in Barthes's career, a phase in which a scientific language is not abandoned but remultiplied, pluralized, in order to reach beyond the object (such as text or myth or fashion) to the activity that produces it as such (textuality as textualization).

This third phase corresponds to the primacy of the notion of text over that of signifying system. The influence of the avant-garde represented by the *Tel Quel* movement becomes more conspicuous, and Barthes abandons semiology as a rigid scientific discourse in order to promote a new science, that of the production of signs. The key publication of this period is probably *S/Z* (1970, trans., 1974), an exhaustive reading of Balzac's story "Sarrasine." This virtuoso analysis of one short "classical" text shows the story's endless riches, thereby managing to undo a strict opposition between classicism and modernity. The essay stresses plurality and combines all possible semiological approaches, finally reading like a musical score and creating a work of art of its own kind. Its insights also owe a lot to [Julia Kristeva's](#) influential collection of essays *Séméiotiké* (1969). Central to an approach to the story is the notion of textuality understood as a weaving of codes: "*text, fabric, braid: the same thing*" (*S/Z* [trans.] 160). In this braiding of textures, Barthes distinguishes five codes--corresponding to sequences of actions or behavioral patterns (proairetic codes), to the disclosure of the truth (hermeneutic codes), to descriptions of significant features (semic codes), to quotations from scientific or cultural models (cultural codes), and to the symbolic architecture of language (symbolic codes).

The text is defined as the productive progression through codes: "The five codes create a kind of network, a *topos* through which the entire text passes (or rather, in passing, becomes a text)" (20). In an earlier essay, "The Death of the Author" (1968, trans. in *Image-Music-Text*, 1977), which took its cue from an ambiguous sentence in "Sarrasine," textuality is defined as an interplay of codes that negates any origin: "Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (*Image* 142). And the essay tantalizingly concludes with the reader's new active role: "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148).

When Barthes visited Japan, he himself became that ideal reader facing a writing that covers the world in order to cover up for the absence of the Author. Japan is the happy utopia of a country in which everything is sign. But signs do not refer; they

only exhibit their fictive, indeed fabricated, nature. What underpins the Japanese semiology is therefore the void at the center expressed by the haiku or Zen Buddhism. The whiteness or blankness of the satori is a mystical equivalent of what Barthes is looking for in systems of signs. Writing exposes the emptiness of speech and merely points to the world. Japan is the necessary healing (and disturbing) experience of a culture that has done away with any naturalization of signs. *Empire of Signs* (1970, trans., 1982) shows the influence of [Jacques Derrida](#)'s powerful meditation on writing as the ruin of presence and of origin; a gloss to a reproduction of a beautiful calligraphy merely enumerates "Rain, Seed, Dissemination. Weaving, Tissue, Text. Writing" (*L'Empire* 14; not in *Empire*).

Japan also opens up a space of erotic enjoyment of signs; it is, in fact, in his study of Japan that the very important motif "pleasure" first appears in Barthes's texts. The "erotic grace" of hypercodified attitudes in Japanese plays, for instance, calls for its European equivalent, and Barthes finds it in the Marquis de Sade's seemingly boring descriptions of sexual orgies and perversions, in Ignatius Loyola's mental exercises teaching the soul to approach God, or again in Charles Fourier's ritualized catalogs of passions. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971, trans., 1976) continues the semiological approach to textuality but resolutely centers around three deviant writers who are all "logothetic" because they stand out as "founders of languages," precisely because they intrepidly systematize a strategy of excess, an excess that becomes identical with writing as such (*Sade* [trans.] 3). The introduction to the work coins for the first time the expression "the pleasure of the Text" and states that "the text is an object of pleasure" (7). This linkage is taken up in the slim, elegant collection of maxims and aphorisms entitled *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973, trans., 1975), which closes off this third phase of Barthes's *oeuvre*. Instead of asking, What do we know about texts? Barthes now asks only, How do we enjoy texts?

Barthes rewrites a distinction elaborated earlier in *S/Z* between "writerly" (*scriptible*) and "readerly" (*lisible*) texts (*S/Z* 10, trans. 4), or between texts that merely obey a logic of passive consumption and texts that stimulate the reader's active participation, as an opposition between textual *plaisir* and textual *jouissance*. *Jouissance* calls up a violent, climactic bliss closer to loss, death, fragmentation, and the disruptive rapture experienced when transgressing limits, whereas *plaisir* simply hints at an easygoing enjoyment, more stable in its reenactment of cultural codes. Lacan's terminology proves helpful in a strategy that aims not so much at discrediting pleasure in favor of a higher, sublimated type of enjoyment as at creating a critical vocabulary capable of concretely describing the effect of words on bodies and, conversely, of bodies on words. The modern text *de jouissance* may often be boring, tedious, and repetitive, yet it concentrates energy and strikes the innermost core of the reading/writing subject; thus, we are not left with a purely subjective process, for "this body of bliss [*jouissance*] is also *my historical subject*" (*Pleasure* 62), even if this subject belongs to an empty space of History.

The wish to connect the most particular and the most historical from the point of view of a body at work through language was bound to take into account

Barthes's own subjectivity as a whole, and this is why he accepted the commission, from the series that published his *Michelet*, of a double signature in the writing of one of the most stimulating works of autobiographical criticism ever written, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975, trans., 1977). Not only could Barthes not resist the challenge of his publisher but he was irresistibly driven to a piece of writing that would do justice to all his changes, moves, and coinings, while constituting a sort of ideogram of the self, a self that would be more than just the old personality. The book opens with a tantalizing disclaimer in the position of an epigraph: "It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel."

The last phase of Barthes's literary career, which he himself called the period of his "moralities," is perhaps the most haunting, for nowhere does he come closer to becoming a novelist in his own right. But whereas another gifted semiotician, [Umberto Eco](#), was able to write two best-selling novels, Barthes's fiction, which would have been strongly autobiographical and basically Proustian, as several remarks of *Roland Barthes* and *Camera Lucida* (1980, trans., 1981) show, has to remain unwritten--another token that only silence approaches the disappearance of the Author and the blank space of living enunciation. The couple "enunciation/enounced" is indeed one of the last conceptual doublets that Barthes set to work, and he did it with the utmost consistency.

In this last period, however, no pretense of scientificity hinders the direct encounter with cultural and literary signs, which are organically related to the body of their "scriptor." The closest Barthes comes to writing pure fiction is in *A Lover's Discourse* (1977, trans., 1978), which opts for a "dramatic" method of presentation by varying the voices and blending quotations, personal remarks, and subtle generalizations. (Indeed the text has often been performed on stage as a theatrical play for voices.) The fictive character who enounces all the utterances is an archetypal lover--at times Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Werther, at times Barthes himself--who comments on the ineluctable solitude of love.

The increasingly sentimental drift of these last works is counterbalanced by the sweeping and majestic summary of Barthes's beliefs about theory in the "Inaugural Lecture" (1978), the discourse pronounced when he was elected to the Collège de France, the crowning of his academic career. Enunciation is alluded to as the exposure of the subject's absence to himself or herself, semiotics become a [Deconstruction](#) of linguistics, and the main adversary is the power of language seen as a totalitarian structure: language, according to one daring formula, is always fascistic (*Barthes Reader* 461). Literature condenses all the forces of resistance to such a reactionary power, thanks to its hedonistic capacity for transforming knowledge into play, pleasure, and enjoyment. Barthes sees himself as Hans Castorp in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and finally claims his hope of achieving a possible wisdom, a *sapientia* linking knowledge and taste, in short, a whole *art de vivre*.

*Camera Lucida*, Barthes's last book before the many posthumous collections of essays, is a very moving autobiographical disclosure of his love for his mother under the guise of a study of photography that recants all previous semiological approaches. Whereas in many former essays Barthes had stressed the artificial nature of

such a medium and its ideological power, he now identifies photography as pure reference; it immediately bespeaks a past presence, and its ultimate signifier is the death and absence of the loved mother. Photography is akin to a haiku poem and forces one to stare directly at reality. The last conceptual couple invented by Barthes opposes *studium*, scientific approach, ultimately boring and missing the main point, and *punctum*, the point or small detail that catches the eye of the beholder (*Camera* 26-27); this dualism justifies an apparently subjective selection of photographs all chosen and lovingly described because of some minor but revealing element that varies from picture to picture. This Zen-like meditation on the illusions of Appearance and the triumph of Death is a fitting testament to Barthes as a Writer of an almost magical power of analysis and utterance.

*Jean-Michel Rabaté*

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## Notes and Bibliography

See also [French Theory and Criticism: 5. 1945-1968](#) and [6. 1968 and After](#), [Russian Formalism](#), [Jean-Paul Sartre](#), [Ferdinand de Saussure](#), [Semiotics](#), and [Structuralism](#).

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*Topics Index Cross-references for this Guide entry:*

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