ROLAND BARTHES

MICHAEL MORIARTY

Roland Barthes

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Roland Barthes

Michael Moriarty

Polity Press

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First published 1991 by Polity Press
in association with Basil Blackwell

Reprinted 2004, 2007

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge, CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN: 978-0-7456-0455-8
ISBN: 978-0-7456-0456-5 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in Ehrhardt on 10/12pt.
by Hope Services (Abingdon) Ltd.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Marston Book Services Limited, Oxford

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Au séminaire, aux amis

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Preface

Any book is a collective production, since it depends on other books: but this is particularly true of the present work, for it derives from a reading of Barthes undertaken with a reading group that met in Cambridge in 1984. This book is dedicated in the first place to the members of that group (Andrew Bowie, Andrew Brown, Françoise Close, Liz Guild, Gillian Jondorf, Paddy O'Donovan, Heather Pratt, Morag Shiach, Julia Swindells), and secondly to the friends, including many of the above, who have contributed to its making. I am grateful to Andrew Benjamin, Jaš Elsner, Ann Jefferson,and Paddy O'Donovan for enabling me to test ideas from it at conferences or seminars in Warwick, Swansea, and Cambridge, and to those who took part in those sessions. This work has greatly profited from a reading of Andrew Brown's and from his reading of mine. I want to thank Paddy O'Donovan and Morag Shiach for taking time off from their own work to read this. I have also been fortunate in being able to draw on the Barthesian and related expertise and insights of Peter France, Ann Jefferson, Annette Lavers, Diana Knight, Tim Mathews, Chris Prendergast, and Adam Strevens. Morag has been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement.

I am grateful to Gonville and Caius College for the generous assistance it has given to this research, and to the editors of *Paragraph* and Oxford University Press for permitting me to use material that has already appeared in that journal.

A Note on References

Many of Barthes's articles have been collected in book form, both during his lifetime and after: references are to these collections rather than to the original publications. References to works by Barthes are given wherever possible in the text, in the following form: abbreviated (French) title, page number in the French edition listed in the Bibliography/page number in the corresponding English translation. (References also to Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* are also given in both French and English editions, in that order.) Thus *EC*, 61/49 refers to a passage on page 61 of the volume *Essais critiques*, which may be found on page 49 of the English translation, entitled *Critical Essays*. The list of abbreviations gives both French and English titles, thus:

SM *Système de la mode/The Fashion System*

Full publication details of French and English volumes appear in the Bibliography.

The contents of the volume *L'Aventure sémiologique* and the English translation *The Semiotic Challenge* do not fully coincide. The latter omits 'Elements of Semiology', which is published separately with the translation of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. Where the corresponding English translation of a reference to *L'Aventure sémiologique* is found in *The Semiotic Challenge*, the reference is given as: *AS*, 130/57. Where the corresponding English version is found in 'Elements of Semiology', the reference is given as *AS*, 24/*ESem*, 86.

If one reference only is given, this is to the French text, and generally means that either an English translation does not exist or I have been unable to locate one. However, a point made on the basis of the French text may occasionally not be evident from the published English version; where this

occurs, I have sometimes omitted the English reference, to avoid confusing the user of the English text and to minimize pedantic notes explaining the discrepancy. Though I have given references to the published translations, I have on occasion offered my own translation instead.

Short quotations from the French are followed by the English translation in parentheses.

Throughout this text, when referring to Barthes's discussion of general categories such as 'the reader' or 'the writer', I have tended to use the masculine forms 'he' I 'his' etc., not because I do not prefer non-sexist forms, but so as not to give the impression that the non-sexist linguistic usage is Barthes's. When speaking in my own person, I have sought to use non-sexist forms.

Abbreviations

AS *L'Aventure sémiologique/The Semiotic Challenge*
BL *Le Bruissement de la langue/The Rustle of Language*
CC *La Chambre claire/Camera Lucida*
CV *Critique et vérite/Criticism and Truth*
DZE *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture/Writing Degree Zero*
EC *Essais critiques/Critical Essays*
ES *L'Empire des signes/Empire of Signs*
ESem 'Elements of Semiology'
FDA *Fragments d'un discours amoureux/A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*
GV *Le Grain de la voix/The Grain of the Voice*
IMT *Image, Music, Text*
L *Leçon*/'Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France'
MI *Michelet/Michelet*
MY *Mythologies/Mythologies*
NEC *Nouveaux essais critiques/New Critical Essays*
OO *L'Obvie et l'obtus/The Responsibility of Forms*
PRB *Prétexte Roland Barthes*
PT *Le Plaisir du texte/The Pleasure of the Text*
R 'Réponses'
RB *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes/Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*
SE *Sollers Ecrivain/Sollers Writer*
SFL *Sade, Fourier, Loyola/Sade, Fourier, Loyola*
SM *Système de la mode/The Fashion System*
SR *Sur Racine/On Racine*
TE *La Tour Eiffel*/'The Eiffel Tower'

Introduction

This is an introduction to the work of Roland Barthes (1915–80). It presupposes no prior knowledge of his work.

One of Barthes's most able exegetes, Philippe Roger, notes how everyone who writes on him (himself included) tends to begin with oratorical precautions and gestures of self-justification.[1] There are only too many reasons for this, which will appear in the course of this introduction.

Hjelmslev, the great Danish linguist, tells the story of an author who complained to his publisher that his book on French grammar had appeared with the blurb 'French grammar made simple'. 'I wasn't aiming to make French grammar simple', he said. I 'was aiming to make it clear.' To make Barthes simple would be simple-minded. He is a difficult, ambiguous writer, partly because of his immense range of interests, which makes him hard to place, partly because of the complexity of the issues on which his thought operates, partly because his thinking is constantly renewing itself and shifting its ground, partly because his style can be initially (and for some people definitively) off-putting. But I have tried to make his work clear to a non-expert readership, by, for instance, defining and illustrating technical terms, putting arguments in a context, occasionally referring to other writers or theorists to amplify a point. This does not necessarily mean that the end-result will be easy reading.

Inevitably, though, this book will be read not only by those new to Barthes. Some will read it for professional reasons: of those many will know Barthes quite as well as I do, will be familiar with points made here either from their own reading of Barthes or from existing critical works. The 297th discussion of Barthes's discussion of the photograph of the Black soldier is not an alluring prospect.

However, any introductory book must be able to stand on its own,

alongside the primary texts. It can't delegate its basic argument to other works, however admirable, nor can it omit important aspects of Barthes's activity simply because they are familiar to existing readers of his texts. Frequent references are, however, included to other writings on Barthes which deal more fully with points raised here, or with aspects of his work that are not here considered.

A more telling potential objection from veteran Barthes readers: to the whole enterprise of 'making Barthes clear'. Is that any more, really, than making him simple? It means reducing him to a set of ideas: but to read Barthes as expressing a set of ideas is *not reading him.* This objection is discussed below.

INTRODUCING *BARTHES*

One knock-down argument (a favourite of the anti-Barthesians) to deal with straight away: 'Barthes proclaimed the death of the author: what are you doing writing a book about him?'

On one level, this is simply a crude debating point. Barthes's essay on the death of the author is one of his easiest pieces to misread. It has to be read as itself a piece of writing, which is an invitation to a new practice of reading. It asserts the reader's freedom to do more than simply absorb a meaning prepackaged by the author, to participate himself or herself in the process of producing meaning from the text. To make that space for the reader, it has to dislodge the notion of an authoritative reading against which other readings could be judged for deviance. One of the most powerful modes, in our culture, of endowing a reading with authority is to explain it by reference to the author's life, beliefs, experiences, values: everything, in short, that falls within the sphere of the biographer. Since to infer the facts of the author's life from the work and then the meaning of the work from the life is plainly circular, the critic's interpretation needs to be backed up with evidence from outside the text: from the correspondence, from the historical record. It is this whole approach to literature that Barthes is attacking; but he was not of course the first to do so. To take but one example, Proust had insisted that the self that creates the work of art is quite other than the self of daily life. It is fascinating to read Proust's life; but it cannot tell us how to interpret the *Recherche du temps perdu.* It is not just biographical criticism to which Barthes objects, however: society and history, say, can similarly be appealed to, so as to authorize one interpretation, exclude others. Essentially, the concern of 'La Mort de l'auteur' is to combat the attempt to set *a priori* limits on interpretation: what is at stake is not just authorship, but authority.

In any case, the place of the author in our culture is for the moment

immovable. However one contests structures of authorship, one is inserted into them. Besides, the eclipse of the author in Barthes's work is merely temporary. As long as the figure of the author is not a figure of authority, it is a welcome component of the experience of reading (*SFL*, 13–14/8–9).

Yet the objection I have just mentioned can be more than trivial. It can invite one to ask the necessary question: what does it mean to write about Barthes? Firstly, 'La Mort de l'auteur' implies that no interpretation can claim authority. Perhaps, as Barthes says, critical writing is always assertive (*CV*, 78/92): one cannot write without laying claim to authority. The reader of this text will know, however, that it is an interpretation, which is both enabled and constrained by various factors, some external to the author, some internal. Other interpretations, both detailed readings of particular passages and general accounts of Barthes as a whole, are there in the critical literature, of which a selection appears in the Bibliography. (I have not thought it fruitful here to show at every turn where I disagree with other critics: such quarrels are understandably of little interest to any but the specialist.) Secondly, the language of interpretation in a work of synthesis like this tends to be pseudo-psychological, describing mental processes attributed to the author: 'Barthes wants to show that . . . '; 'Barthes's main concern is with . . .'. This is a problematic figure of speech, because it seems to imply a privileged access to Barthes's mind. True, we have interviews in which Barthes does indeed set out what he had in mind in writing a certain work or making a certain statement. But they cannot be used to accredit or discredit interpretation. When an interpretation happens to clash with a statement by the author, it may still have hit on some aspect of the author's work that he or she has not fully realized, or wishes to disavow. In truth, the mode of presentation one should use would be something like 'This text can be read as making the claim that . . . '. But this mode of exposition would be tedious. All the reader has to bear in mind is that when statements are made here about Barthes's attitudes, priorities and values, 'Barthes' is a kind of theoretical fiction, a device of exposition.

But expositions deal in categories: how to categorize Barthes? Critic, theorist, writer? I shall discuss each of these labels in turn.

Barthes's range as a critic is immense, from antiquity (Tacitus) to the immediately contemporary (the gay writer Renaud Camus), via French classicism (Racine, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère), the nineteenth century (Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert), early modernism (Proust, who has a special significance for him (*PT*, 59/36)), and the *nouveau roman* of the 1950s. He wrote on theatre, the novel, not very much on poetry after his early years, a good deal on non-literary genres. His first book-length study of an author was on the historian Michelet, and in a single volume he combined the utopian writer Fourier and the Jesuit spiritual writer Loyola with the marquis

de Sade. He wrote also on art and music (much more important to him than their absence from this study would suggest).

At the same time, he wrote as a critic very much on his own terms. Not an academic teacher of literature, he was constrained by no canon, and his characteristic format was the article. The only book-length studies are on Michelet and Racine, the latter work provoking immense hostility; there is also a collection of pieces on the contemporary author Philippe Sollers. He wrote almost exclusively on French literature, Brecht being the principal exception. He avows a lack of interest in general in literature other than French (*RB*, 119/115): he speaks of Tolstoy with emotion (*PRB*, 367; *BL*, 322/286–7), of Dickens, once neutrally (*PT*, 20/10), once pejoratively (*RB*, 119/115). He refers twice to an image from Shakespeare:

> When the light of sense
> Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
> The invisible world.
>
> (*ES*, 111/83: *NEC*, 175)

The image impressed him more than the name of the author: the lines are in fact by Wordsworth (*Prelude*, VI, 600–2).

The choice of critical texts discussed here does not reflect Barthes's own preferences: *Michelet* was one of his favourites among his works, and the pleasure he invested in writing *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* is clear from the writing itself.[2] The work on Racine, he frankly admits, was more in the nature of a chore (*R*, 97). However, for better or worse, his name is linked with Racine, and *Sur Racine*, rightly or wrongly, is for many people the yardstick by which Barthes as critic will be judged. Hence its inclusion here, and the relative lack of attention to these other studies, closer to Barthes himself but dealing with texts for the most part unfamiliar in the English-speaking world.

Traditionally, the (canonical literary) text is itself the yardstick of the critic's merit. The great critic is one who deepens our experience of the great text. Quite apart from the question of the general value of such judgements (who is this 'we', and how are canons arrived at?), Barthes's greatness as a critic lies elsewhere: one might suggest, in that he shows, and does not merely proclaim, a steady refusal to separate literature from ethics and politics in the broadest sense – for he sees literature always in connection with responsibility, pleasure, desire – and an equally steady insistence that these connexions are via form and language, not via the representation of a content.

Barthes is certainly one of the most important literary theorists of the twentieth century. Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic theories: to all of these his work offers both stimulus and challenge. The status of the author

in literary theory, the concept of realism, the reading process, questions of classification and periodization, the relationship of literature to other forms of representation: all of these issues are touched on and transformed in his work. But the label '*literary* theorist' as applied to Barthes is reductive, and not only because his activity as a theorist of semiology goes beyond literature, into popular journalism, advertisements, and photographs. In his first book, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Barthes applied the concept of writing both to novelistic styles and to styles of critical or political discourse. His theoretical activity is never isolated from the question: what does it mean to write, and how does this question apply to the person who writes about literature?

Throughout his career, there was always reason to call Barthes a writer. His own discussions of the status of critical and theoretical writing will feature at various points in this text. In later years, he interrogated with increasing urgency his own desire to write a novel, or rather placed his writing in relation to the project of writing a novel.[3] That he produced in his lifetime nothing resembling a novel in the ordinary sense should not be regarded as a sign of failure: for his late writings offer perhaps everything the reader might desire from a novel.

In 1987, the Editions du Seuil brought out a volume entitled *Incidents*, containing among other pieces Barthes's most 'literary' text, a journal, or short story in journal form, entitled 'Soirées de Paris' ('Evenings in Paris'). An extremely powerful effect of anguish is created by the brusque staccato style and by the concentration of the journal form. The narrator is clearly Barthes, but to adapt his own expression, a 'paper Barthes', not to be altogether confounded with the 'real' Barthes (just as MOI in Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* is and is not Diderot). The narrative of his evenings functions as a set of variations on a thematic kernel that conjoins love, friendship, bereavement, and frustration. The text is structured by a set of oppositions: between Paris and his late mother's house in south-western France; within Paris, between Barthes's home territory (Saint-Germain-des-Prés, especially the Café de Flore) and the other alien quarters of Paris to which his evenings take him; as regards the characters, between his friends (some of them well-known literary figures) and the gigolos with whom he engages in inconsequential conversation and fixes the odd abortive rendezvous (despite the prevailing tone of gloom, the juxtapositions are sometimes humorous, between the man of letters trying to read Pascal or his paper in the café and these characters from an apparently quite different world trying to tell him about their problems).[4] At the end of the diary/story the narrator realizes the impossibility for him of combining his affections and his sexuality through a relationship with a younger man.

Even in his critical and theoretical writings of the years before he adopted a consciously more 'subjective' presentation, there is always an energy of

language going beyond the energy invested in the argument. In *Critique et vérité* he urges that this kind of energy, what he also calls the 'literary faculty', should not be conceived as inspiration but as a set of rules accumulated independently of the author, a logic of empty forms that enable speaking and writing *(CV,* 58–9/75). This does not mean writing is a passive process: Barthes insists that the essence of literature is in technique *(EC,* 140/135). What it means is that the technical activity is not applied to raw thought, experience, ideas: it means working with the systems, linguistic and rhetorical, that are operative in every linguistic utterance, conditioning our choice of terms and the way we combine them; this is all the more true when the aim of writing is to counter the usual effects of the system. The system cannot be overthrown: it must be turned against itself. In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Barthes investigates the linguistic and rhetorical structures that his own discourse exploits and that often complicate the apparent unfolding of an argument.[5]

Barthes's work is indeed subtended by a great network of metaphors, often connecting texts apparently remote in time and theme.[6] They are used in fluid fashion: thus Barthes discovers affinities between the technical linguistic concept of neutralization and his own ethical and semiological category of the neutral/neuter (*RB*, 127–8/132–3). On a smaller scale, his texts are tied together by insistent repeated motifs, some in the nature of literary or cultural allusions, some more in the nature of metaphors – the distinction is often blurred – liable to return in unsuspected contexts and with unpredictable values, bearing the trace of an obsessive imaginative investment. I list merely a few: the mask, sometimes pointed to by the wearer; the Argo, the ship of which every part is gradually replaced, so that only the name and the form remain; the simulacrum and its near neighbour the figurine; the numen, the wordless gesture of the god that indicates a human destiny.[7] The classical origin of so many of these images is sometimes a source of humour, through juxtaposition; but it also suggests a kind of excess of significance over what is expressible that figures a presence, at the limit of one's field of vision, of something one can only call the sacred.

INTRODUCING BARTHES

I mentioned an objection to this enterprise that runs as follows: to 'introduce' Barthes means to present his ideas; but Barthes is more than a set of ideas; thus to introduce Barthes is to reduce him. Or, in other words: to read Barthes for the ideas is not to read Barthes.

'Barthes', however, means more than one thing. It is the name of a man born in Cherbourg in 1915 who died in Paris in 1980. This book is not about

Barthes in that sense. It is also, by extension, the name of a set of texts written by that man. To 'read Barthes' in this sense means to come to terms with a writer, in the sense explored above. It means suspending the desire to summarize him, to extract the ideas like a kernel from the husk. It involves bracketing out the question whether this or that statement is true, and asking rather how we can read it, what it does to us or for us, what pleasure we can derive from it.

But 'Barthes' also means something else: a set of theoretical positions and procedures more or less detachable from his texts as a whole. When someone reads a book about Barthes, they frequently want to know about something called 'structuralism', and this is not unreasonable. Barthes's ideas have, beyond doubt, proved 'useful': they have, historically, contributed to the development of new kinds of cultural theory, new concrete analyses.[8] Even in more traditional fields of knowledge the stimulating effect of his writing has been profound: to take one perhaps unexpected example, recent studies of the seventeenth-century French moralist La Bruyère acknowledge the seminal influence of Barthes's brief essay, which has forced critics to treat La Bruyère as a writer and not simply as a chronicler of the vice and folly of his times.[9] On a larger scale, the major debates of literary theory, about representation, authorship, the relations of text and history, have been decisively marked by Barthes's interventions. It is quite true that Barthes himself abandoned cultural analysis, that he was sceptical of the whole notion of debate. It is not clear why that should preclude others' making use of his work for these purposes.

The vocabulary of the last two paragraphs is of course already loaded. The very use of words like 'position', 'debate', 'useful . . . ideas' presupposes a certain view of literary and cultural theory: that ideas are developed and applied, yielding analyses; that these analyses, or the ideas behind them, are exchanged with others (as commodities or blows are exchanged). And one might instead argue that theory is, properly considered, nothing other than a practice of reading attentive to what goes on beneath the apparent unfolding of a set of ideas. And that to 'use Barthes's ideas' for theoretical purposes is thus . . . untheoretical.

That is of course itself a position in a debate (or maybe I have just treacherously formulated it that way). However, one can attempt a partial resolution of these antinomies, as follows:

1. Barthes began his career as a writer under the auspices of Gide, the apostle of openness, ambiguity, subtlety (stereotype: Gide as Proteus), as against the crustacean rigidity of systems. 'Incoherence', writes Barthes/Gide, 'is preferable to the order that distorts.'[10]
2. At a certain period, roughly speaking from the late forties to the

late sixties, Barthes's writing is circumscribed by various systems, in two ways. Firstly, in that he initially aligns his writing with existing systems (Marxism, existentialism). Secondly, in that, at a later date, he actively devotes himself to the construction of new theoretical systems: semiology and narrative analysis.

3. Even then, it may be, his commitment to these systems is tactical or ambiguous. One can read hesitations or ironies into even those of his texts that appear to espouse a system most enthusiastically. After all, to accept the truth of an idea is not necessarily to commit oneself to it body and soul: it can be a way of turning one's back on it. Not to struggle with a powerful doctrine leaves one's hands free to do something else. And a new system can be desirable for what it destroys in the existing order, rather than for what it claims to offer of itself.

4. I have put this in psychological terms. It could be restated from a textual viewpoint. In a conference on Barthes, the novelist Robbe-Grillet, choosing his example deliberately to complicate the idea of a historical shift from clarity to ambiguity, commitment to withdrawal, argues that between the first and the second sentences of Barthes's first book, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, the logical connection apparently affirmed by the text does not exist: there is simply a metaphorical slippage (*PRB*, 256). Barthes accepts this reading, goes one better: the unfolding of an argument is only ever the display of a string of metaphors (*PRB*, 259). Does he mean this in general or only of his own texts? He says *on*, using the impersonal pronoun, which usually has implications of generality. However, especially in literary French, *on* can certainly be a synonym for *je* (an ambiguity Barthes himself draws attention to (*EC*, 16/xviii)). Even in this oral exchange, interpretative uncertainty is therefore rife, as much as in the textual example under discussion.

5. If this is so, how does the would-be expositor proceed? And can we take 'ideas' from Barthes's work to apply them in other contexts? To adapt another suggestion of Barthes's (*PRB*, 22), we have to make a series of evaluations of differences of textual intensity. There are always metaphorical slippages, successions of images or stylistic effects masquerading as logical arguments. One has to decide whether the intensity of this process is such as radically to jeopardize the attempt to paraphrase the argumentative content. In the case of the opening of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, we could observe that language is referred to as a 'body of prescriptions and habits' that does not 'nourish' the speech of the writer: language then, a body withholding food, is a bad mother, and this connects and contrasts with the image in *Le Plaisir du texte* of the mother-tongue as the mother's body, with which the writer plays

(*PT*, 60–1/37). A network of metaphor thus appears, and meaning emerges from the difference between the two manifestations of the image. None the less, this does not preclude the attempt, for certain purposes, to reconstruct a coherent argument from the passage, capable of application in other contexts. However, in the case of Barthes's reply to Robbe-Grillet on the metaphorical process, the ambiguity of *on* means that the status of his claim (self-description or epistemological thesis) is undecidable, and its undecidability is part of a general refusal to make those kinds of distinction.

6. For beyond a certain point Barthes starts increasingly visibly to work on the terms he uses in such a way that they are difficult to apply outside the particular writing project they feature in. Outside Barthes's own texts, they cease to function, suddenly going out of shape like the clocks in a picture by Dali.[11] A work like *S/Z* (1970) is transitional here. There is an analysis of the problem of realism, and a procedure of reading through a grid of codes that could be adopted or adapted by other critics or theorists. But it would be difficult to make the distinction between *scriptible* and *lisible* work outside the particular context of *S/Z*.[12]

7. Barthes's work on his language takes various forms. He writes increasingly in fragments, making it difficult to summarize an overall 'position'; he uses distinctions in a loose and inconsistent way; he contrives the possibility of reading his writing as fiction; he dwells on particularities as a counter to the generalities of theory. The would-be expositor of Barthes can enumerate these procedures, or some of them, but cannot say 'what they mean'. He or she can only point to some of their possible effects. But only in reading Barthes can these effects be encountered.

8. There is, however, a further justification for expounding Barthes at least partly in terms of ideas and arguments. It is a question of image, of Barthes's image. In theory, one should doubtless study ideas independently of whatever image one has of their holder. In practice, the conflict of ideas frequently takes place as a conflict of images. Barthes himself recommends not fighting for one image against another but distancing oneself from that conflict (*BL*, 395/356). This is probably a sound option for the individual, *vis-à-vis* his or her own image. But to write a book about Barthes is (perhaps more than would be the case with Foucault or Deleuze or Irigaray) inevitably to produce or to accredit an image. This imposes a certain responsibility on the writer.

Why is Barthes different in this way? It is a question, firstly, of an apparently aberrant relationship between subject-matter and style. To read

any of the other thinkers I have mentioned requires a very considerable investment of intellectual energy and a certain philosophical culture. One might throw them aside for that reason, as unreadable, but that would not be their fault. One might reject their arguments on intellectual grounds but could only do so after engaging with them patiently and carefully. Any aversion one felt to them would have had to be sublimated by the intellectual effort, would therefore be unlikely to be expressed in crude terms of aversion: if it were, the polemical investment would be too obvious for the good of the critic's image. Their difficulty is commensurate with the general view of their subject-matter. Barthes's appeal, but also from this point of view his misfortune, is that he talks much of the time about what 'we' feel 'we' all know. Had he confined his interest to Sade or Michelet or the farther reaches of semiological theory, he would have been harmless, and unharmed. But he also talks about the familiar – Racine or Balzac – in an unfamiliar language and thus appears (to some) obscure, pretentious, perverse. On the other hand, because of the familiarity of some of the subject-matter, and because, after all, Barthes's style is more accessible than some, he gives a superficial impression of being easier to grasp – by the collar, if you feel like it (he is skilful, though, at escaping from such clutches). Then again, Barthes's writing is politically and ethically committed, and yet his political positions highly nuanced and complex. He drifted away from the broadly left-wing line of his early work, but drifted, didn't spectacularly renounce: since he was never a member of the Communist Party (which in fact he consistently opposed), he never had a Party card to tear up, and thus denied society the satisfaction of the ritual gesture made by so many post-war French intellectuals. The move away from the Left has caused disappointment and even resentment in that quarter, yet he can certainly not be claimed by the Right as one of their own. And he rejects the label 'liberal' in its ordinary sense (*GV*, 256/272). His refusal on the one hand to keep clear of ethics and politics (like most critics and literary theorists) and on the other to identify consistently with a collective position exposes him exceptionally to ideological aggression on the level of the image.

Now there is one particular image that I think does need to be combated (even though he for tactical reasons at a particular period did something to encourage it), and that is the view of Barthes as a dilettante, or worse a charlatan, snatching a few slogans and buzz-words from bodies of theory that are radically defective in the first place, and using them to give his own writing a spurious intellectual credibility; a man capable of saying the most outrageously irresponsible things on the basis of a superficial reading of texts, whose paradoxes are admired only by dedicated followers of fashion who have unfortunately failed to realize that they are out of fashion anyway.

One cannot argue away an already existing image, for it has nothing to do

with truth and everything to do with ideological investments: people believe it because it meets a social need (a parallel between Barthes and Rousseau as hate-figures could be developed). On the other hand, argument can do something to combat prejudice, that is to say, can limit the spread of an image. Not all objections to Barthes are, of course, the effect of prejudice. There are perfectly good objections to certain of his positions (assuming it is valid to consider him in that way), and some of them are mentioned here. And a full investigation of all the philosophical, literary, and linguistic issues that bear on the evaluation of Barthes as a theorist would be impossible within the compass of this book. What is attempted here is to make Barthes's project, and the changes that took place in it, intelligible in rational terms, while not reducing it to a pure exercise of thought.

I have tried then to keep a balance between two approaches to Barthes: on the one hand, to summarize and expound the conceptual and argumentative content of those parts of his work that deal in concepts and arguments; on the other, to indicate the ways in which reading Barthes can mean more than simply absorbing a set of theories or positions which are to be set up against other theories or positions as if in some kind of theoretical tournament. Clearly, the position from which I carry out this exercise is determined in a multiplicity of ways: ideological, institutional, geographical, biographical, and so forth. The possibility, however, of an all-encompassing and neutral overview of Barthes is chimerical. In any case, one cannot simply read off someone's attitude to Barthes from his or her theoretical or ideological convictions. His writing has a force of its own that transforms evaluation. In some people's case, it simply accentuates the hostility to his theoretical positions. For others, it means that the writing becomes a value in its own right, irrespective of whether one happens to agree or not with what he is saying.

To present Barthes's work is to tell a story about him. There are various narrative patterns into which it can fall. Barthes rejects two obvious models: (1) that his later work is a repudiation of his earlier (*GV*, 84/85), (2) that it represents a goal towards which he has always been evolving, which imparts meaning retrospectively to his work as a whole (*GV*, 193/204). The totality a life's work can achieve takes the form not of a steady growth but of a succession of moments, of which each may appear as breaking with the one before; but nothing is ever lost definitively (*GV*, 67/66). I have loosely conformed to the sequence of 'Phases' set out by Barthes in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*: the very schematism and self-irony of his presentation should warn against taking this approach too literally.[13] At the same time, one has to do justice to the presence of powerful continuities in his work (often crystallized around the images and allusions mentioned above). There are two images that I think are quite inappropriate. One is evolution: Barthes

starting out with a few wrong ideas (about politics, mostly), but gradually getting rid of them on a progress towards truth, or art or what have you. The other is the U-turn: Barthes realizing he has been following the wrong route all these years, and coming back to a warm liberal humanism.

A final label one could attach to Barthes: that of a visionary. His work is founded not on a theory but on a vision of language. Sometimes he talks as if all theory was indeed founded on a vision; elsewhere he terms his own vision of language a disease.[14] Beneath all his apparent oscillations, this vision of language is more or less constant. Language in use is never transparent: one cannot see through it to the thoughts or the self behind it (to see through someone's language is to hear another meaning in their words). It is not an envelope that serves to transport a message from sender to receiver and is then discarded. It is a substance in its own right. It has qualities – thickness/thinness, compactness/diffuseness – like a fluid, yet it is a fluid too subtle for ordinary perception, like the air we breathe. Like the air it exerts an invisible pressure on us. To use language is to exercise pressure or power. This is nothing to do with a subjective desire on the part of the speaker. Barthes is not thinking of Hitler, the demagogue swaying multitudes by his oratory. He is thinking of what inevitably happens when we use a language. Firstly, any particular language divides up the world in ways we cannot see beyond: it has power over us in that way. But that is not the point Barthes begins with, though he espouses it later. His early emphasis is not on the language as an abstract system but on the selection and exclusion involved whenever we speak or write it. By our accent (class and/or regional), vocabulary, grammar, syntax, we position ourselves willy-nilly in relation to our interlocutor and to third parties. Social division is inscribed in our use of language in the different ways we speak or write what is supposedly a single tongue. Then again, Barthes tends to see bodies of ideas from a linguistic viewpoint, not as sets of propositions to be tested for truth by external procedures of verification or falsification or by an internal analysis of the premises of an argument and the steps by which one proposition is derived from another. He sees them in their linguistic manifestation, as discourses that create their effects of truth by the linguistic or rhetorical means by which propositions are coupled together; effects that work not only on the hearers but on the users of the language, deaf to their language as such.[15] Even supposing there were an objective truth to which discourses might refer, they persuade not by so referring but by their internal force, the tightness of their inner connections (linguistic or rhetorical, not logical). Argument, then, is not a reasoned exchange of views between individuals, but a contest of rival languages each purporting to name the world correctly, and seeking to impose its own particular nomenclature.

In his analysis of culture as a world of language – a logosphere – Barthes is

particularly interested in 'metalanguage': the use of language about language. Grammar, for instance, is a metalanguage, a set of terms used to analyse a language or languages. And Barthes, firstly, sees a positive virtue in the construction of new metalanguages so as to exhibit how other languages (object-languages) work. In particular, an analytical metalanguage applied to the various conflicting sub-languages that make up our logosphere can help us get above the smoke of battle and see how the warring languages operate.

But things are not quite so simple. When I analyse an English sentence in English, the substance of my grammatical metalanguage is provided by the object-language itself. Likewise, to analyse the culture one inhabits, one inevitably draws on concepts and categories from the culture itself. And this, more problematically than in the case of grammar, sets limits to the analysis of which I may be unaware and cannot be fully aware. Then again, metalanguage is not simply the instrument of the analyst's lucidity applied to the world of blind practice. The metalinguistic function is part of that world's normal operations, and indeed part of the war of languages. Take the banal example of someone mimicking another person's speech to ridicule what he or she is saying. As with the grammarian, the aim is to divert attention from the content of the utterance to the medium of expression. Not for the sake of enlightenment, though, but for an aggressive purpose. More precisely, what is aggressive is not the mimicry as such (people mimic also in order to ingratiate themselves) but the juxtaposition, implicit or explicit, of the quoted speech with the speaker's usual pattern of utterance, presented as a norm. Like the grammarian's terminology, the mocker's habitual usage serves as the yardstick by which another utterance is assessed as a linguistic production, not in terms of the content the utterance conveys (but in this case to devalue that content). It thus functions as a metalanguage.

There are plain literary counterparts to this. When a novel written in the dominant form of British or American English attempts to reproduce the patterns of working-class or Black or Jewish speech, the narratorial language functions as a metalanguage, to which the other varieties of the language quoted stand in the relation of object-languages. Again, the effect may (though it need not be) to ridicule those varieties of the language and by extension their users. Through its use of metalanguage, the novel can thus build into itself relations of power. The metalanguage of the critic (terms, here, like 'narratorial' and 'dominant') can of course aim to expose this project; and in general we readily distinguish the analyst who seeks to promote understanding from the mocker who wishes to vent aggression. But. the potentially aggressive use of metalanguage casts suspicion on the metalinguistic function in general. To label is in some sense to subject. There being no language outside the war of languages, to analyse that war is not to stand free of it but to prolong it. 'On ne sort pas des arbres par des