

# Roland Barthes

(Or the Professional Pleasures of the Text)

Martin McQuillan

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(Or the Professional Pleasures of Writing)

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First published 2011 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978–0–333–91457–1      hardback  
ISBN 978–0–333–91458–8      paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

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

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

# General Editor's Preface

Transitions: *transition* –, n. of action. 1. A passing or passage from one condition, action or (rarely) place, to another. 2. Passage in thought, speech, or writing, from one subject to another. 3. a. The passing from one note to another. b. The passing from one key to another, modulation. 4. The passage from an earlier to a later stage of development of formation ... change from an earlier style to a later; a style of intermediate or mixed character ... the historical passage of language from one well-defined stage to another.

The aim of *Transitions* is to explore passages, movements and the development of significant voices in critical thought, as these voices determine and are mediated by acts of literary and cultural interpretation. This series also seeks to examine the possibilities for reading, analysis and other critical engagements which the very idea of transition – such as the transition effected by the reception of a thinker's *oeuvre* and the heritage entailed – makes possible. The writers in this series unfold the movements and modulation of critical thinking over the last generation, from the first emergences of what is now recognized as literary theory. They examine as well how the transitional nature of theoretical and critical thinking is still very much in operation, guaranteed by the hybridity and heterogeneity of the field of literary studies. The authors in the series share the common understanding that, now more than ever, critical thought is both in a state of transition and can best be defined by developing for the student reader an understanding of this protean quality. As this *tranche* of the series, dealing with particular critical voices, addresses, it is of great significance, if not urgency, that the texts of particular figures be reconsidered anew.

This series desires, then, to enable the reader to transform her/his own reading and writing transactions by comprehending past developments as well as the internal transitions worked through by particular literary and cultural critics, analysts, and philosophers. Each book in the series offers a guide to the poetics and politics of such thinkers,

as well as interpretative paradigms, schools, bodies of thought, historical and cultural periods, and the genealogy of particular concepts, while transforming these, if not into tools or methodologies, then into conduits for directing and channelling thought. As well as transforming the critical past by interpreting it from the perspective of the present day, each study enacts transitional readings of critical voices and well-known literary texts, which are themselves conceivable as having been transitional and influential at the moments of their first appearance. The readings offered in these books seek, through close critical reading and theoretical engagement to demonstrate certain possibilities in critical thinking to the student reader.

It is hoped that the student will find this series liberating because rigid methodologies are not being put into place. As all the dictionary definitions of the idea of transition above suggest, what is important is the action, the passage: of thought, of analysis, of critical response, such as are to be found, for example, in the texts of critics whose work has irrevocably transformed the critical landscape. Rather than seeking to help you locate yourself in relation to any particular school or discipline, this series aims to put you into action, as readers and writers, travellers between positions, where the movement between poles comes to be seen as of more importance than the locations themselves.

*Julian Wolfreys*

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the production of this book. I would like to thank the editorial staff at Palgrave Macmillan for their extraordinary patience, especially Sonya Barker and Felicity Noble. I would like to thank Julian Wolfreys for his unstinting support throughout the writing of this book. I would also like to thank Eleanor Byrne, Robert Eaglestone, Graham Allen, Simon Morgan Wortham, Nicholas Chare, Mark Currie, Derek Attridge and Stephen Barker for their various contributions known and unknown. The writing of the extended essay that forms the core of this book was made possible by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

This book is dedicated to my friends in the north, where life is good.

The image of le Petit Diouf on p. 112 is reproduced courtesy of *Paris-Match*.

If I had to define myself it would be as a 'philosopher', which does not refer to a degree of competence, because I had no philosophical training. What I do is philosophise, reflect on my experience. This reflection is a joy and a benefit to me, and when I'm unable to pursue this activity, I become unhappy.

Roland Barthes, interview 1978, *The Grain of the Voice* (p. 307). See pages 3 and 7 for discussion.

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# Introduction: Roland Barthes, About This Book

The aim of this book is to ask: why should the reader of today (or tomorrow) attend to the text of Roland Barthes? It is not in a straightforward sense an 'introduction' to Barthes as an explication of the basic theories and paradigms to be found in Barthes' work. There are two very fine books that already fill this niche: Jonathan Culler's *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (2002) and Graham Allen's *Roland Barthes* (2003). There have been posthumous publications by Barthes since these books first appeared but these late books 'signed' by Barthes do little to undo the lucid comprehension of his work offered by Culler and Allen. These books should be read alongside this present study by any student reader wishing to gain a foothold in Barthes' text. The opening chapter of this book is an account of the life and textual production of Roland Barthes. This introduction is necessary because this 'bio-bibliography' directly impinges upon the work that follows as an account of the complexities of the theory-writing life. Readers who feel themselves to be suitably familiar with Barthes' biography might wish to proceed straight to Chapter 2, 'Reading Roland Barthes in a Time of Terror'.

My own book responds to a different 'introductory' concern with regard to Barthes. It sets out from the premise that while the conceptual basis of what is called today, in an Anglophone context, 'cultural studies' is derived from the translation of work by Barthes in the 1970s, the figure of Barthes himself is almost entirely absent from the present theoretical scene. This suggests to me that a work of theoretical archaeology is required to understand this current situation. In particular, the substantial work to be found in this book is an extended reading of Barthes' 1957 text *Mythologies*, published in English in two volumes, *Mythologies* (1972) and *The Eiffel Tower* (1979). The gap between the

French text and its English-language reception, a veritable theoretical 'life-time', is telling. While the leap between Barthes' concerns of the 1950s and the post-human, cultural studies reader of today is substantial, the impact of Barthes in the intervening years was considerable, transforming (along with others) every channel of the Anglophone humanities. This includes the terms under which a text or a thinker might make an opening within the academic space itself. The widespread and popular appeal of Annette Lavers' 1972 translation of selected essays from Barthes' original is no longer matched by the specialist distribution of Barthes' seminar today or his recently published diary texts. The entire 'academediatic' space had shifted in this time. The connection between the complicated thought of the university and the multi-platform journalistic scene has become entirely attenuated. This mutation is formed of several related paths, on the one hand the specialisation of academic literary and cultural criticism, on the other the increasing domination of metropolitan culture by a reductive mediatic apparatus predicated on the logic of the market. In truth, as Barthes' own *Critique et Vérité* (1966) argues, this situation has always existed to a degree. However, our present situation is particularly acute as the twenty-five years between these two publications by Barthes in English have witnessed the almost complete dismantling of a critical sub-culture in Europe and North America (this includes Australia, of course) and the stratification of niche markets according to academic interests. Barthes' own career, which moved between journalism and research institute, post-Liberation small presses and the Collège de France, would no longer be possible; as much for the professional requirements of the university as for the inhospitality of the media to complexity. Barthes' life is a case study in the possibility of the impossible. The fact that he lived it and moved between the competing demands and idioms that he did is testament to the form of survival as invention characteristic of the theory-writing life.

This situation, as is always the case with the present, is considerably complex. While cultural studies has transformed the university and broken down, irreversibly perhaps, disciplinary boundaries across the humanities, it remains aporetically estranged from the mediatic space upon which it comments. On the contrary, the reductive power of journalism more frequently than not positions 'cultural studies' as an object of scorn, in some way less 'scholarly' than traditional disciplinaryity such as 'philosophy', 'history' or 'English literature'. In this sense, those importantly engaged in the media have a blind spot over the

media itself as a subject, which is thought not important enough for scholarly study. Equally, the academic apparatus treats the media as an arena to be both desired and feared: one should be wary of becoming ensnared in its reductive power and so no longer able to speak as a 'professor'; at the same time the professor should desire to profess across all the channels of communication. What interests me about Barthes is the way in which it is possible to read his text today in light of these transformations. The epigram that keeps guard over this book, from an interview Barthes gave in 1978 towards the end of his writing career, is suggestive of the value and difficulty presented by Barthes' work: 'If I had to define myself', he says, 'it would be as a "philosopher"'. This term is in inverted commas, for who would ever have the resources to lay claim to the purity of such a provenance? He recognises that this appellation 'does not refer to a degree of competence, because I had no philosophical training'. Rather, Barthes is a philosopher of tomorrow, one whose philosophy is more than philosophy: 'what I do is philosophise, reflect on my experience. This reflection is a joy and a benefit to me, and when I'm unable to pursue this activity, I become unhappy.' I would like to suggest in this book that cultural studies is the philosophy of the present, the philosophy that as philosophy attends to the present as its subject. The semioclast-philosopher is the one who analyses and then draws the practical and effective consequences between the philosophical heritage and the dominant political and cultural structures of the present, which are called into question and put under transformative stress by the events of the present itself. This is a form of critical intelligence, a habitual mode of critical reading and writing in the world, that I would like to suggest places Barthes in a tradition of Enlightenment thought and that I would wish to salvage from his legacy and the legacy of cultural studies today.

One might characterise a text such as *Mythologies* as the 'origin of cultural studies'. It is a text that makes its entrance(s) (1956, 1972, 1979) under singular circumstances that are revealing of the general aporias of cultural studies. The argument is made here that while the French academy today eschews 'cultural studies' as an Anglo-Saxon disciplinary disease, of course the migration of French thought is the 'origin' of a certain cultural studies. France, one might say, had its cultural studies moment long before this soubriquet entered into the vocabulary of the English-speaking university. In fact France had its cultural studies moment at a particular historical conjuncture, which we might describe as the French Empire's own 'war on terror', between

the eclipse of the relative liberalism of the Mendès-France government and the military coup d'état that brought De Gaulle to power. This period in French history might be said to be its own 'war on terror' not because this phrase is a just syntagm that maps one historical moment onto another but precisely because it points to an instant when ideology and the political realm overspill the previously-thought-possible-or-acceptable. As with the years between 2001 and 2008 in the United States and United Kingdom, 1954 to 1958 in France were dominated by an assault on colonial privilege and the overwhelming, unilateral, repressive response of Empire, which justified military and judicial actions of all kinds, domestically and internationally. It is under such circumstances that Barthes produced his *Mythologies*, at once the most trivial aspect of his scholarly output and his most significant intervention in both the academic and mediatic realms. While the reading offered here presents this parallel, it is not systematically concerned with the events of our own contemporary moment (this has been done elsewhere). Rather, the concern follows a double braid. On the one hand, it seeks to reclaim Barthes as a thinker of Ideology and to recover Ideology itself as a theoretical term beyond its normative inscription. On the other hand, it attends to a wider structure of response and responsibility for theory and the scholar.

One possible answer to the question of why the student of today (tomorrow) should read Barthes revolves around the issue of historical pertinence. The answer is not directly that the time of the mythologies is also our time, or, that Barthes explains our time for us through historical similarity. Rather, the text of Barthes, before, during and after the *Mythologies*, walks the tightrope between scholarly-theoretical research, commentary on the here and now, and an intelligent intervention in the public realm. The text of Barthes did not affect the course of the Algerian War of Independence in the way that Émile Zola's polemic may have influenced the events of the Dreyfus case in 1898, nor will a belated reading of Barthes redirect the course of the world war between the Christian west and its others. The temporality of theory does not run along this course. Rather, and here is the first aporia of cultural studies, the task that cultural studies (and by extension all theoretical-political inquiry) is engaged in by reading *today*, is the longer, decades and century long struggle over the transformation of the forms of intelligibility for the present. Those who lack patience with the philosophical's seeming inability to make an impact in the present moment (to intervene in the here and now) lack historical

perspective. Give it two hundred years or so and philosophy and theory change everything. Cultural studies is nothing if it is not the philosophy of the present moment.

I want to suggest that Barthes is, to use his own term, a 'logothete' (a founder of language or initiator of discourse). Just as he identifies Sade, Loyola and Fourier, he is someone who has created a discourse, the means by which theory can address the present as both scholar and citizen. That is to say, Barthes, knowingly or not, invented cultural studies. However, the value of Barthes is more than this particular inauguration. Instead I would like to emphasise in this study an understanding of Barthes as a writer. That is to say, the value of Barthes today lies in the way that his work is concerned with writing as such, with the symbolisation of language itself, as the envelope of understanding. It will be a frequent gesture in this book to suggest that Barthes' own theoretical insights are either limited or have been superseded by subsequent work. However, what remains today of Barthes is his immersion in the idiom of his writing as a transformation of the means of intelligibility. This is what makes Barthes part of a great Modern tradition of theory-writers, such as Benjamin and Adorno, Arendt and the late Derrida, who dared to move their writing between genres and realms of meaning, as a writerly and philosophical intervention beyond philosophy itself. I do not wish to reclaim the term 'public intellectual'. Who could say this phrase today with a straight face? Barthes was not a public intellectual, at least not in the sense that this term is frequently used. Indeed, Barthes was considerably reluctant to take on this role, as exemplified by a contemporary such as Sartre. Rather, the value of Barthes' writing is precisely that it is inhospitable to the terms of reference of the 'public intellectual' as such. Whenever Barthes makes a public intervention it is always in the name of 'dumbing up' the public realm rather than reducing his thought for ease of transmission. Consequently, Barthes is not necessarily remembered as a 'political thinker' in the way that Sartre is, but equally, I would argue, Barthes' writing remains infinitely more 'relevant' to the reader of today than does Sartre. This is because what we find in Barthes is an attempt to open up new channels of interrogation and self-questioning as a space for thought in the face of the unexpected appearance of the present, while in Sartre one will only ever find the application to events of an already considered philosophy. Barthes risks the powerlessness of his writing in the jaws of the powerful inertia of the political realm and by the otherness of his writing effects a discernible movement in an

arena that can neither master alterity nor ignore this thought. It is this version of Barthes, as the theory-writer of Modernity that I would wish to salvage from amid the intellectual furniture of post-war France. Of course, as I will go on to argue, the choice is never between Barthes and Sartre, never a case of either/or. Not if we are to move beyond the hermeneutic seal of academic readership, in order to redefine reading itself as a general practice and a way of life.

Finally, the reason why we should read Barthes today is because in doing so we will become better readers. So much of the text of Barthes lies before us waiting to be reread, reassembled and re-evaluated. The theoretical tradition must always recognise itself as a tradition, which inevitably means the constant return to the texts of the tradition in order to turn them around and to open up new directions in the present. To my mind Barthes remains a considerably under-read author today. I hope that this study will give others a reason to explore more widely and wildly the text of Barthes.

\*

It is traditional for books in the Transitions series to conclude with readings of literary texts 'after the manner' of the theorist to whom the book is devoted. In the case of Roland Barthes I do not feel that such an approach would be either possible or productive. Which Roland Barthes would we choose to imitate, if imitation were called for? Will it be the Barthes of 'Structural Analysis of Narrative', which would call for a full-blown categorisation of the structural elements of a given text? What benefit would the reader derive from such an exposition of a typology that they could not receive directly, and better, unmediated from the structuralist Barthes? Will it be the Barthes of *S/Z*, which would call for a forensic examination of a text at the level of the letter, the signifier, the code and every minimal unit of sense? Entertaining as this would be, for the author, what use will it serve for the reader of today who wishes to mobilise the spirit of Barthes beyond a technical application? Will it be the Barthes of the *Mythologies*? Good reasons will be given for believing that any attempt to revive myth-hunting *per se*, in the style of Barthes, would not be unproblematic today given Barthes' profound influence on those who are now the conductors of our present mythology, from the advertisers to the spin doctors. Will it be the index-card writing Barthes of the book on Michelet, or the later autobiographical, fragmentary Barthes of his final texts? Will it be

the Barthes of his seminar, or the Barthes of his texts on fashion or the *Empire of Signs*? All of these Barthes would be in some way radically heterogeneous. There is no one single Barthes for us to copy. Barthes is plural, there is more than one. Such would be the point of my thesis in this book. The interest in reading Barthes today lies not in the curiosity of an obsolete hermeneutic methodology that can be reapplied today to literary or cultural texts. Rather, what is engaging about Barthes is precisely his fluidity, adaptability and persistent heterogeneity when faced with the contingency of the present and the evolving intellectual scene. It is this spirit of a heterodox, writerly and critical Barthes that I wish to reclaim rather than the specificities of his technical operations and vocabulary. The pedagogical challenge of Barthes does not fall within the locus of such an exposition today; rather it lies in an altogether more compelling and demanding place. Given the radical disjuncture between theoretical thought and the public space today and the example that Barthes sets us of the critical-writer-theorist, the question that lies before the reader of Barthes is: what resources can we find in Barthes' own response to his particular historical situation that will assist us in determining a new criteriology for distinguishing between comprehending and criticising/justifying the world that surrounds us today?

The book therefore concludes in two ways. First, there is a text that responds to one of the persistent themes of the longer study of Barthes in this book, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Cultural Studies?' This essay responds to Barthes' own, late self-definition as a philosopher (see epigram above) and examines Barthes' relation to what we call cultural studies and the relation of cultural studies to the philosophy of Enlightenment critique. This chapter is therefore an important step in justifying the particular reclamation of Barthes that this book attempts. Other prolonged considerations of the questions raised by the essay 'Reading Roland Barthes in a Time of Terror', such as the trope of 'cultural archaeology' and the question of an alternative philosophical history of ideology, will have to wait for another occasion and another philosophical return. However, neither of these promised excursions will be possible without first properly placing Barthes and the philosophical heritage of cultural studies. The book concludes finally, as the Transition series requires, with an annotated bibliography of Barthes' published work, which will point the reader towards Barthes' expanded corpus and hopefully to a compelling re-examination of the texts of Roland Barthes.

# I R.B.: Bio-bibliography

Roland Barthes and Jean-Paul Sartre died within three weeks of each other in the spring of 1980. Barthes' funeral in the town of Urt in the Bayonne region of south-west France was attended by a handful of his close friends; Sartre's funeral in Montparnasse in Paris attracted a crowd of over fifty thousand mourners along a two-hour route. Today, the name of Sartre is instantly recognisable in the media as a touchstone for the 'committed intellectual'. In contrast the name of Roland Barthes is readily familiar to humanities academics and students of cultural studies or literary theory, perhaps to the readership of 'elite liberal' publications such as *The London Review of Books*, but has little currency with a more general audience. However, what remains untold in this scenario is the fact that from the perspective of today the majority of Sartre's cold war political interventions look disastrously misjudged, while his philosophy and literature appear, on first inspection, to be somewhat dated, while the majority of the text of Barthes seems, to the theory-hound, fresh and vital some thirty years after his death. Now, Sartre is a fascinating writer, a complex and compelling figure who deserves to be read and reread: we will never be done with Sartre. However, there is no time for that here, this is not a book about Jean-Paul Sartre. Rather, I would like to suggest that while the public response to the death of these two thinkers points towards the ways in which different idioms of writing and different modes of living the philosophical life are appreciated by a public audience, there remains a subterranean route through which thought lives on. In this respect, while Sartre's highly visible public engagements make for an epic biography, Barthes' relative academic isolation would tend to indicate what is often mistaken for 'political quietism'. On first appearances, the schematic division between the life and times of Sartre and those of Roland Barthes looks like a choice between a figure such as André Gide and a Marcel Proust. The one provides the model for the 'engaged' writer, the other the one who never leaves his study. Thankfully, the choice is never between one and the other, Sartre or Barthes. However,



while the text of Sartre now looks like a bridge in the history of ideas, the significance of Barthes' writing continues to irrigate the humanities today. This then is the first question we must ask: what is the relation between the biography of Barthes and the text of Barthes? In particular, what significance does this biography have in the reading of Barthes today?

Barthes, of course, offers one possible answer to this question in his text 'The Death of the Author'. Here Barthes does not deny the link between the transformative process of writing and the biographical experience of a writer. On the contrary, this is a constant theme of much of Barthes' writing on those authors who spoke to him enough to make him feel compelled to write about them: Michelet, Sade, Flaubert and so on. Rather, Barthes' object in this essay is to initiate a new idiom of reading that provisionally untied the reader from the tyrannous culture of the Author and the critical authority that stood as the expert witness able to unlock the relation between book and biography. So, let us not too easily dismiss the life of Barthes simply because Barthes once wrote about the need to consider more than just the life of an author when reading literature. Instead, what I would like to propose here is that the life of Barthes, while hardly dramatic in the way that Sartre's might be considered, tells a singularly interesting story about the dilemmas and contradictions of the theoretical and writerly life. I do not hold by Heidegger's famous dismissal of the biography of Aristotle: he was born, he thought, he died. By this calculation, the life of Aristotle is of no interest to philosophy; it is mere anecdote in contrast to the rigour and precision of a philosophical system. On the one hand, it may be possible to read productively and to admire philosophical writing without knowledge of its author (this would be the point of Barthes' own essay). However, on the other hand, this is not a proposition that will hold with any degree of rigour itself as soon as one scratches the surface of the philosopher's biography. I am not suggesting that we will find in the life of Barthes a key to unlock the secrets of his text; rather I am suggesting that the act of writing in whatever genre is always in some significantly complex way autobiographical. This is the case even, and doubly so, when the writing in question seems at its most distant from a biographical source. There is nothing more autobiographical than the administrator's report, nothing more revealing of the life of the bureaucrat, their concerns and influences. It is through such texts that one might effect a psychoanalysis of the institution. Nor am I proposing that we can read backwards from the