

9 Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes (1915–80) was the most brilliant and influential of the generation of literary critics who came to prominence in France in the 1960s. After a slow start to his academic career (due mainly to illness), Barthes became a teacher at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, and at the time of his death was Professor of Literary Semiology (a title of his own choice) at the prestigious Collège de France. His first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953; English translation 1972) was a polemical essay on the history of French literary style, in which the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre is perceptible. *Mythologies* (1957; translated 1973), perhaps Barthes' most accessible work, wittily analysed various manifestations of popular and high culture at the expense of bourgeois 'common sense'. A controversy with a traditionalist Sorbonne professor, Raymond Picard, in the mid-1960s, made Barthes famous, or notorious, as the leading iconoclast of '*la nouvelle critique*'. This movement, a rather loose alliance of critics opposed to traditional academic criticism and literary history, drew some of its inspiration from the experiments of the *nouveau roman* (see Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'A Future for the Novel', section 34 in *20th Century Literary Criticism*), and in the late 60s and early 70s was associated with radical left-wing politics (especially in the journal *Tel Quel*—see headnote on Julia Kristeva, below p. 229); but methodologically it depended heavily on structuralist semiotics in the tradition of Saussure and Jakobson.

Barthes himself produced an austere treatise on *The Elements of Semiology* in 1964 (translated 1967) and an influential essay entitled 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' in 1966 (included in *Image-Music-Text* (1977), essays by Barthes selected and translated by Stephen Heath). At this period he seems to have shared the structuralist ambition to found a 'science' of literary criticism. Later, perhaps partly under the influence of Derrida and Lacan, his interest shifted from the general rules and constraints of narrative to the production of meaning in the process of reading. In a famous essay written in 1968, reprinted below, Barthes proclaimed that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author'—an assertion that struck at the very heart of traditional literary studies, and that has remained one of the most controversial tenets of post-structuralism.

Barthes' most important work of literary criticism was probably *S/Z* (1970; translated 1974), an exhaustive commentary on a Balzac short story, 'Sarrasine', interleaved with bold theoretical speculation. The method of analysis, which is confessedly improvised and provisional and claims none of the rigour of struc-

turalist narratology, is exemplified on a smaller scale by 'Textual Analysis of a Tale by Poe' (1973), reprinted below. By breaking down the text into small units of sense, or 'lexias', Barthes aims to show how they carry many different meanings simultaneously on different levels or in different codes. In *S/Z*, this demonstration is linked to a distinction between the 'lisible' or 'readerly' classic text, which makes its readers passive consumers, and the 'scriptible' or 'writerly' modern text, which invites its readers to an active participation in the production of meanings that are infinite and inexhaustible. Paradoxically, the effect of Barthes' brilliant interpretation of 'Sarrasine' is to impress one with the plurality rather than the limitation of meanings in the so-called classic realist text.

In the last decade of his life, Barthes moved further and further away from the concerns and methods of literary criticism and produced a series of highly idiosyncratic texts which consciously challenge the conventional distinctions between critic and creator, fiction and non-fiction, literature and non-literature: *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977) [first published in France 1975], and *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978) [1977]. He was a writer who disconcerted his disciples as well as his opponents by continually rejecting one kind of discourse in favour of another, and to this extent lived the assertion in 'The Death of the Author', that 'the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text . . . and every text is eternally written *here and now*'.

'The Death of the Author' is reprinted here from *Image-Music-Text*, and 'Textual Analysis of Poe's "Valdemar"', translated by Geoff Bennington, from *Untying The Text: a post-structuralist reader* (1981), ed. Robert Young, whose contributions to the numbered notes are in square brackets.

CROSS-REFERENCES: 8. Todorov

10. Foucault

COMMENTARY: Jonathan Culler, *Barthes* (1983)

Annette Lavers, *Roland Barthes: structuralism and after* (1982)

Philip Thody, *Roland Barthes: a conservative estimate* (revised edn 1984)

The death of the author

In his story *Sarrasine* Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: '*This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fustings, and her delicious sensibility.*' Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac

the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that 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.

No doubt it has always been that way. As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. The sense of this phenomenon, however, has varied; in ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose 'performance'—the mastery of the narrative code—may possibly be admired but never his 'genius'. The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'. It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author. The *author* still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs. The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us.

Though the sway of the Author remains powerful (the new criticism^a has often done no more than consolidate it), it goes without saying that certain writers have long since attempted to loosen it. In France, Mallarmé^b was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'. Mallarmé's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author in the interests of writing (which is, as will be seen, to restore the place of the reader).

^a Barthes refers not to the Anglo-American 'New Criticism' of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, but to the French *nouvelle critique* of the 1960s.

^b Stéphane Mallarmé (1871–1945), French symbolist poet.

Valéry^c, encumbered by a psychology of the Ego, considerably diluted Mallarmé's theory but, his taste for classicism leading him to turn to the lessons of rhetoric, he never stopped calling into question and deriding the Author; he stressed the linguistic and, as it were, 'hazardous' nature of his activity, and throughout his prose works he militated in favour of the essentially verbal condition of literature, in the face of which all recourse to the writer's interiority seemed to him pure superstition. Proust himself, despite the apparently psychological character of what are called his *analyses*, was visibly concerned with the task of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation between the writer and his characters; by making of the narrator not he who has seen and felt nor even he who is writing, but he who *is going to write* (the young man in the novel—but, in fact, how old is he and who is he?—wants to write but cannot; the novel ends when writing at last becomes possible), Proust gave modern writing its epic. By a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as is so often maintained, he made of his very life a work for which his own book was the model; so that it is clear to us that Charlus does not imitate Montesquiou but that Montesquiou—in his anecdotal, historical reality—is no more than a secondary fragment, derived from Charlus.^d Lastly, to go no further than this prehistory of modernity, Surrealism, though unable to accord language a supreme place (language being system and the aim of the movement being, romantically, a direct subversion of codes—itself moreover illusory: a code cannot be destroyed, only 'played off'), contributed to the desacrilization of the image of the Author by ceaselessly recommending the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning (the famous surrealist 'jolt'), by entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of (automatic writing), by accepting the principle and the experience of several people writing together. Leaving aside literature itself (such distinctions really becoming invalid), linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors. Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.

The removal of the Author (one could talk here with Brecht of a veritable 'distancing', the Author diminishing like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage) is not merely an historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text (or—which is the same thing—the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent). The temporality is different. The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of

^c Paul Valéry (1871–1945), French poet and critic. See section 20 of *20th Century Literary Criticism*.

^d The Baron de Charlus is a character in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27) thought to be modelled on Proust's friend, Count Robert de Montesquiou.

his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*. The fact is (or, it follows) that *writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates exactly what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense) in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered—something like the *I declare* of kings or the *I sing* of very ancient poets. Having buried the Author, the modern scriptor can thus no longer believe, as according to the pathetic view of his predecessors, that this hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently, making a law of necessity, he must emphasize this delay and indefinitely 'polish' his form. For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin—or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet,^e those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely; something experienced in exemplary fashion by the young Thomas de Quincey^f, he who was so good at Greek that in order to translate absolutely modern ideas and images into that dead language, he had, so Baudelaire tells us (in *Paradis Artificiels*), 'created for himself an unfailing dictionary, vastly more extensive and complex than those resulting from the ordinary patience of purely literary themes'. Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate

^e The names of the principal characters in Gustave Flaubert's novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, a study in bourgeois stupidity posthumously published in 1881.

^f Thomas de Quincey (1785–1859), English essayist, author of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyché, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic. Hence there is no surprise in the fact that, historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic, nor again in the fact that criticism (be it new) is today undermined along with the Author. In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.

Let us come back to the Balzac sentence. No one, no 'person', says it: its source, its voice, is not the true place of the writing, which is reading. Another—very precise—example will help to make this clear: recent research (J.-P. Vernant¹) has demonstrated the constitutively ambiguous nature of Greek tragedy, its texts being woven from words with double meanings that each character understands unilaterally (this perpetual misunderstanding is exactly the 'tragic'); there is, however, someone who understands each word in its duplicity and who, in addition, hears the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him—this someone being precisely the reader (or here, the listener). Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. Which is why it is derisory to condemn the new writing in the name of a humanism hypocritically turned champion of the reader's rights. Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical^g

^g Antiphrasis is the rhetorical figure which uses a word in an opposite sense to its usual meaning.

recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.

NOTE

1. Cf. Jean-Pierre Vernant (with Pierre Vidal-Naquet), *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, Paris 1972, esp. pp. 19–40, 99–131. [Tr.]

Textual analysis: Poe's 'Valdemar'

The structural analysis of narrative is at present in the course of full elaboration. All research in this area has a common scientific origin: semiology or the science of signification; but already (and this is a good thing) divergences within that research are appearing, according to the critical stance each piece of work takes with respect to the scientific status of semiology, or in other words, with respect to its own discourse. These divergences (which are constructive) can be brought together under two broad tendencies: in the first, faced with all the narratives in the world, the analysis seeks to establish a narrative model—which is evidently formal—, a structure or grammar of narrative, on the basis of which (once this model, structure or grammar has been discovered) each particular narrative will be analysed in terms of divergences. In the second tendency, the narrative is immediately subsumed (at least when it lends itself to being subsumed) under the notion of 'text', space, process of meanings at work, in short, 'signifiante' (we shall come back to this word at the end), which is observed not as a finished, closed product, but as a production in progress, 'plugged in' to other texts, other codes (this is the intertextual), and thereby articulated with society and history in ways which are not determinist but citational. We have then to distinguish in a certain way structural analysis and textual analysis, without here wishing to declare them enemies: structural analysis, strictly speaking, is applied above all to oral narrative (to myth); textual analysis, which is what we shall be attempting to practise in the following pages, is applied exclusively to written narrative.¹

Textual analysis does not try to describe the structure of a work; it is not a matter of recording a structure, but rather of producing a mobile structuration of the text (a structuration which is displaced from reader to reader throughout history), of staying in the signifying volume of the work, in its 'signifiante'. Textual analysis does not try to find out what it is that determines the text (gathers it together as the end-term of a causal sequence), but rather how the text explodes and disperses. We are then going to take a narrative text, and we're going to read it, as slowly as is necessary, stopping as often as we have to (being at ease is an essential dimension of our work), and try to locate and classify

without rigour, not all the meanings of the text (which would be impossible because the text is open to infinity: no reader, no subject, no science can arrest the text) but the forms and codes according to which meanings are possible. We are going to locate the avenues of meaning. Our aim is not to find the meaning, nor even a meaning of the text, and our work is not akin to literary criticism of the hermeneutic type (which tries to interpret the text in terms of the truth believed to be hidden therein), as are Marxist or psychoanalytical criticism. Our aim is to manage to conceive, to imagine, to live the plurality of the text, the opening of its 'signifiante'. It is clear then that what is at stake in our work is not limited to the university treatment of the text (even if that treatment were openly methodological), nor even to literature in general; rather it touches on a theory, a practice, a choice, which are caught up in the struggle of men and signs.

In order to carry out the textual analysis of a narrative, we shall follow a certain number of operating procedures (let us call them elementary rules of manipulation rather than methodological principles, which would be too ambitious a word and above all an ideologically questionable one, in so far as 'method' too often postulates a positivistic result). We shall reduce these procedures to four briefly laid out measures, preferring to let the theory run along in the analysis of the text itself. For the moment we shall say just what is necessary to begin as quickly as possible the analysis of the story we have chosen.

1 We shall cut up the text I am proposing for study into contiguous, and in general very short, segments (a sentence, part of a sentence, at most a group of three or four sentences); we shall number these fragments starting from 1 (in about ten pages of text there are 150 segments). These segments are units of reading, and this is why I have proposed to call them 'lexias'.² A lexia is obviously a textual signifier; but as our job here is not to observe signifiers (our work is not stylistic) but meanings, the cutting-up does not need to be theoretically founded (as we are in discourse, and not in 'langue',^a we must not expect there to be an easily-perceived homology between signifier and signified; we do not know how one corresponds to the other, and consequently we must be prepared to cut up the signifier without being guided by the underlying cutting-up of the signified). All in all the fragmenting of the narrative text into lexias is purely empirical, dictated by the concern of convenience: the lexia is an arbitrary product, it is simply a segment within which the distribution of meanings is observed; it is what surgeons would call an operating field: the useful lexia is one where only one, two or three meanings take place (superposed in the volume of the piece of text).

2 For each lexia, we shall observe the meanings to which that lexia gives rise. By meaning, it is clear that we do not mean the meanings of the words or groups of words which dictionary and grammar, in short a knowledge of the French language, would be sufficient to account for. We mean the connotations of the lexia, the secondary meanings. These connotation-meanings can be associations

^a 'Discourse' here corresponds to *parole* in Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* (see above, pp. 1–9).