

BARTHES

MYTHOLOGIES

by Andrew Leak

critical guides to French texts

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EDITED BY ROGER LITTLE, WOLFGANG VAN EMDEN
DAVID WILLIAMS

107 Barthes: Mythologies

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Prefatory Remarks

TWENTY-FIVE years after its first publication, *Mythologies* is still the most widely read of all Barthes's works. It gained for its author the reputation of being a 'committed' writer: a description which sat uneasily on Barthes's shoulders in later years. Whilst for many readers – specialist and non-specialist alike – *Mythologies* represents the quintessential Barthes, admirers of a so-called postmodern Barthes tend to be less enamoured: one recent study which purports to clarify the 'inner dynamics of [Barthes's] career' manages to avoid a single mention of *Mythologies* in its two hundred pages. This tendency to find Barthes's more overtly 'political' work somehow embarrassing was no doubt encouraged by the fact that the author himself disavowed *Mythologies* on a number of occasions, not least in the preface to the 1970 edition which sits like a disapproving guardian at the threshold of that volume.

The present study attempts simply to elucidate Barthes's project in *Mythologies*, and to set the work in its historical and intellectual context. Myth is thus examined in relation to semiology, ideology and literature. At each stage fresh problems arise, which are then taken up at a different level. A brief consideration of the place of *Mythologies* within Barthes's *œuvre* is reserved chiefly for the concluding chapter.

References to *Mythologies* are to the 1970 paperback edition published by Seuil in the 'Points' collection. Other references in the text are to numbered items in the select bibliography situated at the end of the volume. I would like to thank Annette Lavers, Roger Little, and Dorothy Stein, whose comments on the typescript helped me to produce a clearer and more readable book.

The Life of Signs

i) LUTTER AVEC UNE CERTAINE INNOCENCE DES OBJETS

IT could all start in the street. A man in the street, Barthes. Towards the end of Rue Gambetta he receives an unexpected and importunate summons: a charming little chalet, white with exposed joists and an asymmetrical red-tiled roof. The chalet appeals to him directly, aggressively; it demands to be named: it is a *basque* chalet. More than that: it demands that Barthes recognize it to be the very essence of *Basqueness*.

Alternatively, it could already have started with another man in the street; this one is called Roquentin. He has been bothered for some months by an experience he had in the municipal art gallery (28, pp. 132-34). The large room adorned with the portraits of the Third Republic notables who laid the foundations of the town's prosperity is disquieting enough in itself: the faces which look down on him are the expression of pure Value: they speak of values such as Property, Order, the Family, values from which Roquentin, as an unmarried, unpropertied marginal, has disqualified himself. He is isolated by the singularity of his vision. But one portrait in particular has given him food for thought; there is something slightly wrong about Olivier Blévigne, and Roquentin now knows what it is: Blévigne is the same height as all the other worthies who surround him in the gallery, but in life he was virtually a dwarf. The artist could hardly commit such a disobliging image to posterity, so he surrounds his model with miniature objects in order to exaggerate his stature. Unfortunately, the delicate pedestal table in his portrait appears almost as large as the enormous table in a neighbouring painting. It was this instinctive visual comparison which had caused Roquentin's unease: 'admirable puissance de l'art'!

Roquentin is not alone in the gallery; he is accompanied on his round by a respectful couple who find the portraits so life-like that they expect them, at any moment, to start moving. He feels no inclination to destroy their illusions: they would offer him no thanks. The *jouissance* he feels at having uncovered the lie is satisfaction enough in itself.

The whole of *Mythologies* is already contained in this scene from Sartre's *La Nausée*: the myth itself, its naïve readers, or victims, and the 'mythologist' who already knows why the myth is proffered – and the ends to which it is destined – but who in addition is able to explain, and thereby demystify, its structure. Like Roquentin, Barthes is not content with 'pious denunciations': the demonstration of *how* myth functions plays an evidential role in the overriding enterprise of denouncing the *uses* to which it is put in our society. But unlike Roquentin, Barthes is not content with the solitary pleasures of lucidity; his aim is to cause the scales to fall from the eyes of the naïve reader: after Barthes a publicity photograph, an advertisement, a wrestling match, even a hairstyle, will never be the same again.

It must be said that the images and objects which Barthes analyses in *Mythologies* are, for the most part, produced by a sleight of hand of an altogether more devious nature than the simple trick of perspective in the Blévigne portrait: for Barthes, the other portraits in the gallery – so apparently *natural* and life-like – would be more potent mythical objects.

The posture of isolation and singularity which Barthes cultivates in *Mythologies* presupposes an already-existing critical distance from the ideological representations of the society in which he finds himself. That is, he grasps the meaning of these representations before he is able to analyse the ways in which that meaning is constructed. It is possible, then, to discern two facets of myth: on the one hand, myth as a signifying practice (the semiological), and on the other, the uses to which that signifying practice is put in our modern societies (the ideological).

Although it may be impossible in practice to maintain the separation of the semiological and the ideological for very long, I shall start by following Barthes in his analysis of the way myth is constructed. This first – descriptive – movement is clearly

intended as a gesture towards 'scientificity'; later, we will have to consider the significance of this gesture for Barthes himself.

The activity of the mythologist is one of decipherment, but to decipher, wrote Barthes, is always to struggle against 'une certaine innocence des objets' (12, p. 228). I propose therefore to follow Barthes, for a few rounds, in this struggle.

It has long been recognized that items of clothing have the capacity to signify something about their wearer above and beyond his simple desire to keep warm or hide his nakedness. Every garment, from the luxurious fur-coat to the hard-wearing pair of jeans, has a ready-made connotation which we 'put on' along with the garment. The same could be said of hairstyles. The blue-rinse, the skin-head, the flat-top, the dreadlocks, the irritatingly boyish fringe of the middle-aged executive: all of these styles carry their own social, economic, cultural – even moral – connotations. But what of the simple haircut? The term implies the accomplishment of a natural necessity (hair must be cut when it becomes impractically long) rather than a desire to make some sort of statement. The majority of haircuts seem to aim at a kind of neutrality: not too short, not too long, tidy without being obsessively plastered to the skull, casual without being unkempt. In short, insignificant. But Barthes's essay 'Iconographie de l'abbé Pierre' casts serious doubt on the possibility of this neutrality.

'Abbé Pierre' was the resistance *nom de guerre* of a certain Henri Grouès; a former Franciscan friar, Grouès was a *curé* at the time Barthes was writing. The extremely harsh winter of 1953-54 had drawn attention to the housing crisis and the government's inadequate response to it: the homeless were dying of cold. Abbé Pierre organized a charity drive which was taken up by large sections of the media.¹ His hairstyle would seem in itself to be irreproachable in its very muteness, 'à moitié rase, sans apprêt et surtout sans forme' (p. 54). It says nothing, and there would appear to be nothing to be said about it, either es-

¹ In 1990 he was back in the news, with a new book and a film (*Hiver 54*) devoted to him.

thetically or technically – it is innocent, a kind of ‘état zéro de la coupe’. But this is where the problems begin. In linguistics, the term ‘degré zéro’, which provided Barthes with the title of his first book, designates, for example, the indicative as an affectively neutral mood between the imperative and the subjunctive moods, and Barthes had used it in order to characterize certain modern forms of writing which aimed at neutrality, or blankness, as a means of rejecting the dominant form of traditional literary writing. Barthes’s point was that even this blankness or neutrality, once recognized as such, could be taken up and used to signify itself, thus toppling over from neutrality into mannerism. The haircut of Abbé Pierre is destined to take the same tumble: ‘c’est qu’ici comme ailleurs, la neutralité finit par fonctionner comme *signe* de la neutralité’ (p. 54). When Saint Francis of Assisi first adopted the style it was intended to reinforce the insignificance of his person: the saint is the epitome of self-abnegation: the apostolate does not easily accommodate the dictates of fashion. But this is a trick which cannot be repeated: the hairstyle of Abbé Pierre inexorably advertises him as a Franciscan; worse still, ‘elle *déguise* l’abbé en saint François’ (p. 54).

The hapless friar may have thought that he was effacing himself beneath this supremely neutral haircut, but his head and his chin (he sports a beard also, of course) find themselves abruptly covered with a forest of signs; he has called down upon his head all the connotations which history has attached to Franciscanism: disregard of the conventions of this temporal existence, missionary zeal, poverty, the common touch. In ecclesiastical circles one does not wear a beard with impunity: ‘porter la barbe, c’est explorer d’un même cœur la Zone, la Brittonie ou le Nyassaland’ (p. 55).

The point Barthes is making in this essay (as, indeed, in all the other essays in *Mythologies*) is that there is no such thing as a non-significant or innocent object; or, at any rate, that there is no object whose innocence is so resistant, whose virtue is so intransigent, that it cannot be transformed by the superimposition of cultural connotations into what Barthes calls a myth. No-one is accusing Abbé Pierre of the cynical and cunning exploitation of these cultural codes – the metamorphosis of his hairstyle into

myth takes place 'à l'insu de l'abbé, il faut le souhaiter' – rather, the point at which the myth comes into being is marked by the Abbé's entry into the media-machine: he appears in a film, albeit in the person of the actor Reybaz; he is the subject of feature articles in glossy magazines such as *Paris Match*.

The common concern of *Mythologies* is, precisely, with demonstrating how the organs of mass culture suck in the raw materials of everyday life and transform them into modern myths. As the title of this particular essay indicates, the man of flesh and blood becomes a myth when he is transformed into a schematic image, an icon. The question remains as to why the media – through their iconography – should devote such energy to elevating the unassuming abbé to the status of saint. The answer, as often in *Mythologies*, comes at the end. The myth of Abbé Pierre serves to sanctify charity, whilst naturalizing, and excusing, the very situation which charity is intended to palliate: 'je m'inquiète d'une société', says Barthes, 'qui consomme si avidement l'affiche de la charité qu'elle en oublie de s'interroger sur ses conséquences, ses emplois et ses limites' (pp. 55-56). That is, it is easier to consume the signs of charity, than to work towards a social organization in which charity would no longer be required. A given image of Abbé Pierre has, in the first instance, a *literal* meaning for its beholder; this is purely analogical insofar as the image denotes the man of flesh and blood through its resemblance to him. But in a second movement a parasitic bundle of connotations attaches itself, through usage, to this image: it is when the two levels of meaning – denoted and connoted – work in tandem that the myth is fully constituted.

The producer of myth and the decipherer of myth (or 'mythologist') approach the problem of the innocence of the object from diametrically opposed points of view. For the former, it is essential that the object retain an appearance of innocence: the most efficacious mythical objects are those which do not appear to be mythical at all. The mythologist, on the other hand, grapples with this spurious innocence in an attempt to reveal the depths of tendentiousness it conceals. This struggle is well illustrated by two other essays: 'Le vin et le lait' and 'Le bifteck et les frites'.

Barthes detects several layers of meaning in the humble glass of wine, above and beyond its substantial reality; or, perhaps, which are in practice inseparable from this reality. And therein lies the difficulty. This multiplicity of mythical schemas is also indicative of the range of theoretical models Barthes is capable of bringing to bear on his objects. A 'phenomenological' analysis reveals that wine is the distilled essence of earth and sun; and that, despite its evident liquidity, it partakes more of the mythology of dryness than of wetness. In addition to this, and often in contradiction to it, wine has been an element of popular folklore and mythology for as long as it has been produced. But the popular mythology of wine is not embarrassed by contradictions: wine will not only warm you up on a cold winter's day, it will also cool you down at the height of a Provençal summer. When victims are in short supply, vampires could well quench their thirst with a glass of claret, since wine is a sanguine substance. It endows the taciturn with a startling loquacity, and it turns a mouse into a man. Nothing is better able to rouse a man from sombre melancholy, but when a man is 'in his cups' the chances are that wine put him there. It is, then, 'une substance de conversion, capable de retourner les situations et les états' (p. 74). All things to all men.

There is nothing particularly original in these remarks; as Barthes himself says, 'Tout cela est connu' (p. 75). But what is interesting is the very fact that 'all of that' is supposedly 'well-known'. For wine is also a 'totem vivace'. The term is well-chosen. The totem – as analysed by the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss and others – is the signifier of an invisible network of relations of belonging and exclusion. Seen in this way, wine is a socialized, even a nationalized substance. It is, says Barthes, a national property (in both senses of the word: possession and attribute) and no less a national property than France's three hundred and sixty types of cheese . . . and its culture (p. 74). Somehow, wine, or the drinking of it, has become the acid-test of patriotism; for once, the French dictum of 'chacun à son goût' ceases to be an excuse: to refuse a glass of wine, or to declare a distaste for it, is tantamount to revoking one's French nationality: 'le Français qui prendrait quelque distance à l'égard du mythe s'exposerait à des

problèmes menus mais précis d'intégration, dont le premier serait justement d'avoir à s'expliquer' (p. 75). To fall foul of this shibboleth could entail complications only marginally less dramatic than those experienced by the Ephraimites at the hands of the Gileadites. Witness the national outcry provoked by M. Coty whose presidential term of office was marred by the blunder of allowing himself to be photographed with a bottle of mineral water rather than the ubiquitous bottle of wine which was the indispensable backdrop to all Gallic rites, from a game of tarot in the local bar to a presidential inauguration; or witness the ridicule heaped on Mendès-France for his promotion of milk. The terms in which the extreme right-wing politician Pierre Poujade denounced the latter give an idea of the collusion between insidious racism and economics in this particular myth: 'Si vous aviez une goutte de sang gaulois dans les veines [Mendès-France was a Jew], vous n'auriez jamais osé, vous, représentant de notre France producteur mondial de vin et de champagne, vous faire servir un verre de lait dans une réception internationale! C'est une gifle, monsieur Mendès, que tout Français a reçue ce jour-là, même s'il n'est pas un ivrogne' (25, p. 65).

All of this may seem like a heavy burden to place on a simple glass of wine. Is Barthes not guilty of 'making a mountain out of a molehill', of over-intellectualizing for effect? The fact is that a glass of wine is indubitably also just a glass of wine. It is objectively pleasing to contemplate, pleasing to smell and even more pleasing to drink. That is to say, it retains a certain essential, or functional innocence. This is what Barthes calls the 'ambiguïté habituelle de notre vie quotidienne': the fact, for example, that one cannot drink a glass of wine without simultaneously drinking the nationalistic myth which attaches to it. Barthes baptizes this ultimate mythical signified 'francité'. Even, or especially, not to drink is still to situate oneself *vis-à-vis* this nebulous concept of 'Frenchness'.

Barthes confronts the problem again in his next essay, when wrestling with the imperturbable innocence of a plate of steak and chips. An American in Paris (or any other outsider, for that matter) could take a decisive first step towards integration and acceptance by walking into a café and ordering 'steak-frites'.

But all the good work could be undone in a moment of rashness, were he to specify that he would prefer to have his steak 'bien cuit', or, even worse, 'carbonisé'. The waiter's countenance would darken, his lips would pinch into a disapproving pout, and he would depart, but not before pronouncing sinister mutterings about 'these foreigners'. What has happened? What unwritten totemic law has been transgressed? One could say, in linguistic terms, that the size, shape and quality of the steak are – as far as this particular myth is concerned – 'redundant' features; the truly 'pertinent' feature of the French myth of 'le bifteck' is how cooked it is. For the steak participates in the same sanguine mythology as wine: 'Le sanguin est la raison d'être du bifteck' (p. 78). When a steak is 'saignant' it suggests the blood gushing from the freshly slaughtered beast; when it is 'bleu', the pulsing of arterial blood is evoked; even when it is 'à point' (barely browned on the outside), this term – which seemingly denotes a state of perfection – connotes in reality the absolute limit beyond which the steak would become not just insipid, but morally ambiguous! As Barthes says, 'Manger le bifteck saignant représente donc à la fois *une nature et une morale*' (p. 78, my italics).

Like wine, steak in France is an 'élément de base, nationalisé plus encore que socialisé' (p. 78). The extent to which steak is socialized is indicated by its omnipresence, in all its various avatars, in the lowliest of bistrotts as in the most expensive of fashionable restaurants. But whilst one might plausibly argue that the consumption of raw steak is 'natural' or 'life-enhancing', other elements of the myth appear less motivated. Indeed, the most arbitrary features of the myth prove to be the most virulent. This is the level at which steak, like wine, is transformed into a patriotic emblem: 'National, il suit la cote des valeurs patriotiques: il les renfloue en temps de guerre, il est la chair même du combattant français, le bien inaliénable qui ne peut passer à l'ennemi que par trahison' (p. 79).

The potato chip basks in the reflected patriotic glory which accrues to steak. *Paris Match* (one of Barthes's favourite sources of mythical data) reported that General de Castries, after the humiliation of Diên Biên Phu which saw France effectively boot-ed out of Indo-China, had gone on record as requesting 'des

pommes de terre frites' for his first meal 'back in civilization': in other words, the general proved as adroit in his sensitivity to, and manipulation of, cultural connotations, as Coty proved inept in his slip-up with the mineral water.

Steak and chips, like wine, are the 'signe alimentaire de la "francité"' (p. 79).

As can be seen, the innocence of the mythical object (the objective qualities of wine, for example) causes the mythologist a degree of embarrassment, and this embarrassment bears first and foremost on the question of methodology. The activity of deciphering myth can always be made to appear either excessively motivated or excessively arbitrary – but excessive in either case. If the mythologist starts by exposing the mythical concept transmitted by the object in question ('francité' in the case of wine; 'basquité' in the case of the white chalet) he can be attacked on the grounds that his analysis is motivated purely and simply by ideological contestation. But a failure to pin down the ideological dimension – which is after all the *motive* which causes the myth to be proffered – leaves the analyst hanging uncomfortably in the air: he has produced a joke without a punch-line. The longish theoretical essay, 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui', published as a postface to the volume, could be read as Barthes's attempt to provide a firm base from which to combat these accusations of excess.

Writing in 1974, Barthes said of the model he had adopted in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui': 'il rassurait l'engagement intellectuel en lui donnant un instrument d'analyse' (12, p. 11). Now is perhaps the moment to take a look at this instrument of analysis.

ii) DÉFINIR D'UNE FAÇON MÉTHODIQUE LE MYTHE CONTEMPORAIN

Before proceeding a word of caution is in order. Although the positioning of 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' invites us to use it as an interpretative grid by which to read the preceding essays, to do so would be to miss both the point of the essays and the import of the postface: the essays can be read and understood perfectly well without the help of the postface; they stand on their

own. The postface was written in the summer of 1956 and was, according to one critic, intended to be 'un texte additif pour donner au recueil une unité, une direction' (16, p. 155). Whilst it clearly does systematize many of the insights of the essays, this retrospective, unifying glance should not be allowed to obscure those aspects of 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' which were evidently prospective: Barthes later referred to it as his first semiological text, and it was to feed directly into the research which produced works such as *Système de la mode* and *Éléments de sémiologie*. In the necessarily brief discussion that follows, it will not be possible, or even desirable, to attend to the minutiae of Barthes's exposition. I shall concentrate only on the broad lines of the argument. Perhaps the most significant aspect of 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' is the way it gestures towards a 'scientific' foundation. The fact that it falls some way short of achieving that ambition serves only to emphasize the importance of the gesture, in itself.

Barthes's first step in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' is to insist on a methodological separation between the description of myth as form, and the analysis of myth as content: '[le mythe] est un mode de signification, c'est une forme. Il faudra plus tard poser à cette forme des limites historiques, des conditions d'emploi, réinvestir en elle la société: cela n'empêche pas qu'il faut d'abord la décrire comme forme' (p. 193). Ironically enough, this attempt to bring the practice of 'mythology' under the umbrella of science is less notable for what it actually achieves, than for what it connotes: to espouse the procedures of linguistic 'science' is to justify, to lend credibility to a practice which might otherwise appear arbitrary or excessive.

So myth, Barthes tells us, is 'une parole'. Not the spoken word, nor even the written word, but 'toute unité ou toute synthèse significative, qu'elle soit verbale ou visuelle: une photographie sera pour nous parole au même titre qu'un article de journal; les objets eux-mêmes pourront devenir parole, s'ils signifient quelque chose' (p. 195). One might add to this list the exaggerated grimaces and protestations of agony of an all-in wrestler, a glass of wine or a plate of chips, or the then new Citroën DS 19.

Thus defined, the 'parole mythique' (and the 'science' which studies it) find their place within a much wider scientific pro-

gramme: semiology. Semiology was the name, borrowed from medical terminology ('the diagnosis of symptoms'), given by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure to a 'science which studies the life of signs within society' (31, p. 16). Saussure envisaged this future science as a part of social psychology, and further envisaged linguistics as a mere part of semiology. In later works Barthes was to invert this hierarchy, seeing semiology as a particular branch of linguistic science. By the time he came to write *Système de la mode*, for example, he doubted whether there is any system of objects that can dispense with articulated language: 'la parole n'est-elle pas le relais fatal de tout ordre signifiant?' (5, p. 9). Or if such systems do exist (semaphore, the system of traffic signals. . .) they tend to be singularly uninteresting. But this is leading us away from the matter at hand. Barthes considers Saussure's definition of the linguistic sign to be the essential postulate of any possible semiology (p. 197). Saussure's schema is tripartite: the *signifier* (an acoustic or visual image) the *signified* (a concept), and the *sign* itself, which is the associative total of signifier and signified. This unvarying structure is useful for Barthes in that it provides a descriptive matrix immediately applicable to *any* signifying medium: natural language, image, spectacle etc.

The diagram on p. 200 of *Mythologies* both clarifies and obscures the use Barthes makes of this notion of the linguistic sign. What emerges clearly is that myth somehow grafts itself on to an already existing literal meaning: '[le mythe] s'édifie à partir d'une chaîne sémiologique qui existe avant lui: *c'est un système sémiologique second*' (p. 199). The mythical signified appropriates, or takes over, an existing sign and uses it as its own signifier. In more concrete terms, 'le départ du mythe est constitué par l'arrivée d'un sens' (p. 208). The obscurity arises from the imprecision of Barthes's terminology. He calls the first-order sign the 'object-language', and the second-order (mythical) system the 'metalanguage'.² In fact, the terms *denotation* and *connotation*,

² Barthes later corrected 'metalanguage' to 'connotation', in line with the definitions of these terms provided by the Danish linguist Hjelmslev. See, for example, 'Eléments de sémiologie' in *L'Aventure sémiologique*, pp. 76-80.

which I have already used without explanation, would have been both clearer and more accurate. Alternatively, 'literal meaning' and 'rhetorical meaning' would adequately describe these two interlocking levels of a system which presents itself as a flawless whole. Barthes's very first book, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, had opened with an excellent example of this procedure: 'Hébert ne commençait jamais un numéro du *Père Duchêne* sans y mettre quelques "foutre" et quelques "bougre". Ces grossièretés ne signifiaient rien, mais elles signalaient' (1, p. 7). The terminology is not yet that of structural linguistics, but the idea is already present: Hébert's obscenities denote nothing ('signifier'), but they are used for what they connote ('signaler').

A few more examples might perhaps serve to clarify this point. When I read in *Elle* (another mythological treasure-house) the following information regarding women novelists: 'Jacqueline Lenoir (deux filles, un roman); Marina Grey (un fils, un roman); Nicole Dutreil (deux fils, quatre romans)' (p. 56) how am I intended to understand this? Quite simply, or literally, that Jacqueline Lenoir has written one novel and that she has two daughters. But I also receive a second message, composed of a whole bundle of connotations. The grammatical equivalence between children and books leads one to suppose that both are 'produits miraculeux d'une parthénogénèse idéale qui donnerait en une seule fois à la femme les joies balzaciennes de la création et les joies tendres de la maternité' (p. 57). Indeed, this equation is long established in the Romantic myth of creativity. But there is more. This insistence on the child-bearing 'essence' of women serves above all to remind them that their status is properly defined only in relation to men. The world of *Elle* is the world of the harem: the women can roam at leisure within its walls, indulge themselves in their little fantasies, enjoy the illusion of freedom, but only after the door has been securely locked from the outside. Barthes describes an identical operation in the agony columns of women's magazines ('Celle qui voit clair') and, in a significantly attenuated form, in horoscopes ('Astrologie').

The literal meaning in the above example is formed by a linguistic message, a phrase, a series of phrases, but it could equally well be an image, like the electoral publicity photographs

analysed in 'Photogénie électorale'. Since one is entitled to expect an electoral candidate to have a more or less human appearance, one may suppose that the literal meaning of such photographs is not of primary importance. The underlying message is quite disproportionate to the modest material which serves as its vehicle. It is vast, nebulous: 'c'est une assiette sociale, le confort spectaculaire de normes familiales, juridiques, religieuses [. . .] bref ce qu'on appelle une idéologie' (p. 161). This secondary meaning – or myth – can be communicated through obvious 'props' such as an army uniform (with decorations of course), an entourage of adoring and manifestly well-behaved children, and so on. But also through less obvious, if more interesting, means such as the angle of the shot. In this latter respect, the 'ascensional three-quarter shot' is particularly favoured: 'le visage est levé vers une lumière surnaturelle qui l'aspire, l'élève dans les régions d'une haute humanité, le candidat atteint à l'olympes des sentiments élevés, où toute contradiction politique est résolue . . .' (p. 162).

It is important to note that the connoted meaning does not simply abolish the first-order, denoted meaning, and this because it needs it. Or, more precisely, because it needs its unbesmirched innocence to serve as its alibi. This is made possible by the fact that the mythical signifier is a double-sided entity; it is at one and the same time a fully constituted denoted meaning (*sens*), and the signifier (*forme*) of a mythical signified. In order to be a 'perpetual alibi', all that myth requires is that 'son signifiant ait deux faces [. . .]: le sens est toujours là pour *présenter* la forme; la forme est toujours là pour *distancer* le sens' (p. 209). In our earlier example, the undeniably factual information that Jacqueline Lenoir has written one novel and has two daughters serves as a cast-iron alibi for the more tendentious meaning detected by Barthes. And he finds a striking image to describe this way in which myth worms its way into a first-order meaning, colonizing it from within: '[Le mythe] arrache aux sens dont il s'alimente une survie insidieuse, dégradée, il provoque en eux un sursis artificiel dans lequel il s'installe à l'aise, il en fait des cadavres parlants' (p. 219). Invasion of the Body Snatchers!

There is one final twist in this formal description of myth. The mythical concepts which constitute the connotative level ('francité', 'basquité', 'ce qu'on appelle une idéologie' etc.) are evidently *cultural* through and through: they are fashioned by History, they did not fall fully-formed from the heavens. But the essential function of myth is, precisely, to cause them to be read or consumed as if they were natural: as self-evident and devoid of human origin as a rock or a tree. One of the most sustained analyses of this 'naturalisation' is to be found in 'Grammaire africaine'. Writing of the official government discourse on the colonial wars in North Africa, Barthes remarks: 'Nous sommes ici au cœur même de la formation du mythe: c'est parce que *la mission de la France, le déchirement du peuple marocain ou le destin de l'Algérie* sont donnés grammaticalement comme des postulats (qualité qui leur est généralement conférée par l'emploi de l'article défini) que nous ne pouvons discursivement les contester (la mission de la France: mais, voyons, n'insistez pas, vous savez bien . . .). La notoriété est la première forme de la naturalisation' (p. 142). Such assertions are, in their own way, as unanswerable as the question 'when did you stop beating your wife?'

This should enable us to grasp the nature of the mythologist's struggle against the 'innocence' of the object: 'C'est pour cela que le mythe est vécu comme une parole innocente: non parce que ses intentions sont cachées: si elles étaient cachées, elles ne pourraient être efficaces; mais parce qu'elles sont naturalisées' (p. 217). Myth, then, transforms Culture into Nature, or better, into a kind of bastardized pseudo-nature.

There are a number of blind spots in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui'. It is, for example, remarkable that myth is described as a semiological operation, its function is analysed, but it is nowhere defined substantially. In the passage where Barthes considers the question of the production and reception of myth (pp. 214-15), his analysis raises more questions than it answers. In Barthes's account, the production of myth appears to be a highly conscious and intentional process. This may well be true in some cases, in the creation of the advertising myths, for example, which are the object of several of the 'mythologies', and which Barthes was later to analyse in 'Le Message publicitaire'

(12, pp. 243-48); or in the fashion myths exhaustively analysed in *Système de la mode*, where a decision-group arbitrarily decides on what is 'in' and what is 'out' each year. But the vast majority of myths cannot be ascribed to a single originator, or even to a restricted group. An analogous problem arises in connection with reception (how the myth is 'read' or 'received' by the public). Barthes points out, correctly, that connotations will be read differently by different individuals and groups, depending on factors such as social class, education, political orientation, and so on. But the same could also be said of the literal meaning: denotation appears to benefit in Barthes's analysis from a special dispensation – it is a referential Utopia where words 'speak the world' directly. In fact, the denotative use of language is no less conventional, or cultural, than the mythical meanings which adhere to it. These points will all be re-examined in later chapters.

Despite the interesting lacunae in the theoretical apparatus, the fact remains that Barthes felt it necessary to provide a theoretical reflection on these essays written 'au gré de l'actualité'. I have already suggested that this could lead us to see 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' at one level at least, as a kind of justification. But for what? Critical opinion is by no means unanimous. Louis-Jean Calvet sees the postface as an attempt to ground the existing (basically ideological) practice of the essays in linguistic theory. The postface would therefore be 'un pont dialectique entre deux pratiques, celle présente dans l'ouvrage et celle à venir . . .' (15, p. 53). Philippe Roger, on the other hand, is unimpressed by the 'minces propositions théoriques' of the postface, which he qualifies as an 'improbable échafaudage', designed to 'protéger un élan d'écriture, une démarche d'écrivain' (27, p. 92). It is worth noting that these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

Having followed Barthes in his formal description of myth, it is now time for the 'reinvestiture of society'. This means considering the uses to which myth is put in our western societies: myth as a kind of corporate venture, an ideological operation.

Ideology and Myth

'A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.'

Karl Marx

i) LE MONDE COMMENCE LÀ OÙ LE SENS FINIT

As we saw in the last chapter, Barthes established a methodological distinction between semiology and ideology; that is to say, between the study of how mythological signs function, and the study of what those signs are telling us. He insists in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' that 'l'idéologie a ses méthodes, la sémiologie a les siennes' (p. 224), and that it would be a mistake to confuse them. Be this as it may, the critical practice represented by the essays themselves – prior to any attempt at theorization – conjugates these two levels, and creates the impression that Barthes was, at least initially, rather more interested in laying bare the 'abus idéologique' perpetrated by myth, than in demonstrating the formal devices which myth employed to this end.

At first sight, the connotations brought to light in the course of *Mythologies* might appear to be as heteroclitic as the subjects of the essays themselves: the 'francité' embodied by a glass of wine, the 'romanité' residing in the plastered-down fringes of Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar*, the 'assiette sociale' of the electoral candidate, the divine right of the colonialist etc. But in reality, all of these 'fragments of ideology' are subsumed under a single connoted system which is that of bourgeois ideology itself. The time has come, then, to focus on Barthes's use of the notion of ideology in *Mythologies*. What is the nature of this ideology? What is the nature of the society which produces it? Why should myth be its preferred form of expression?

Whilst the essays themselves, by their very diversity, tend to present a fragmented view of the way in which this society represents itself – as if it were viewing itself in a mirror cracked into a thousand segments – Barthes's theoretical reflections begin from a unified vision. This is because, precisely, the essays deal initially with *manifest* images, whereas the theoretical reflections go straight to the heart of the *latent* reality: beneath the surface of mutating political parties, succeeding governments, demographic change, urbanization, developing technology and so on, France remains fundamentally what it had been one hundred and fifty years before: 'le statut profond demeure, qui est celui d'un certain régime de propriété, d'un certain ordre, d'une certaine idéologie' (pp. 224-25).

The notion of ideology has to be understood in the context of the Marxist philosophical tradition.³ The actual term only appears in Marx's middle period: the works written around and about the 1848 revolutions in Europe. It refers to a distortion of thought which both stems from and conceals social contradictions. This distortion takes the form, specifically, of an *inverted* consciousness of reality. For example, if one were to look at the rhetoric of nineteenth-century bourgeois liberalism, one would find it to be dominated by 'buzz-words' such as 'freedom' and 'equality', but if one delved beneath this manifest level of discourse to the social realities of the period (how wealth was produced, by whom, for whom etc.), then, as Marx wrote in a later work, 'this apparent individual equality and liberty disappear and prove to be inequality and unfreedom' (13, p. 220). One could say that ideology is society's subjective representation of its objective position, and this representation is characterized by the way it inverts that 'objective reality': the world of ideology is the world turned upside down.

The frequent occurrence in *Mythologies* of terms such as 'image renversée' and 'renversement idéologique' suggests that it is this classical Marxist definition that provides Barthes with

³ Concise definitions, as well as suggestions for further reading can be found in: Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, Blackwell, 1983.

his reference point. The most fundamental inversion carried out by ideology is the one which turns Culture into Nature, the historical into the eternal. This is why Barthes claims that the peculiar characteristic of bourgeois ideology is that it pretends not to be one: 'la bourgeoisie se définit comme *la classe sociale qui ne veut pas être nommée*' (p. 225). The bourgeoisie attempts to pass off its own class values (and interests) as something eternal and natural . . . and therefore unquestionable: there are no bourgeois or workers, there are only men, born free and with equal stakes in an eternal 'human nature'. Just as for Margaret Thatcher, that great champion of 'freedom' and 'choice', there is no society, 'only individuals and their families'.

And this is where myth re-enters the picture. We saw in the last chapter that the function of myth (as a semiological system) is to impose cultural messages under a cover, or alibi, of naturalness: 'fonder une intention historique en nature, une contingence en éternité' (p. 229). This, of course, is precisely what ideology seeks to accomplish, and myth is therefore the perfect instrument for the job: 'Si notre société est objectivement le champ privilégié des significations mythiques, c'est parce que le mythe est formellement l'instrument le mieux approprié au renversement idéologique qui la définit' (pp. 229-30).

So what, in fact, distinguishes myth from ideology? Barthes's failure to give a single precise definition of myth in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' makes this question more difficult than it might have been. The term is used in at least three slightly different ways in the essays and postface. First, it refers to the secondary system analysed in Chapter 1, and which could, in any case, be defined simply as 'connotation'. Second, it refers to the mythical signified itself, to that which is connoted. Lastly, it refers to a general discursive strategy which embraces both denotation and connotation in a global inversion of reality. It is, then, a kind of machine which sucks in the world at one end, and spews it out at the other miraculously cleansed of conflict and contradiction. Its end product is 'un monde sans contradictions parce que sans profondeur, un monde étalé dans l'évidence, [le mythe] fonde une clarté heureuse: les choses ont l'air de signifier toutes seules' (p. 231). Taken at the level of content, myth is

virtually indistinguishable from ideology. At the purely formal level, the distinction appears better founded.

But some of the essays appear to be using a slightly different, less theorized, notion of myth. Barthes uses the idea of a 'poetic myth', derived perhaps from phenomenological criticism, in several of the essays – one thinks, for example, of 'Nautilus et Bateau ivre' or 'Paris n'a pas été inondé'. In these essays, the ideological 'punch-line' is not particularly self-evident. In another essay, 'Saponides et détergents', the rather abrasive, not to say detergent, final reminder that *Persil* and *Omo* are both produced by the sinister 'trust anglo-hollandais *Unilever*' (p. 40), somehow fails to break the spell woven by Barthes's elegant analysis of the poetic resources marshalled by the advertisements for these products. Further to this, Louis-Jean Calvet has pointed out that earlier essays such as 'Le monde où l'on catche', 'L'écrivain en vacances' and 'Les Romains au cinéma' use a notion of myth which is closer to the Greek mythological sense: a *legend* which explains and interprets man's place in the world. Indeed, Calvet calls this version of myth 'mythe-légende', and remarks that it progressively mutates into 'mythe-mensonge' – with all its Marxist connotations of mystification (15, pp. 39-52). By the final essay in the volume, 'Poujade et les intellectuels', Barthes is practising a form of full-blown ideological discourse analysis.

In general, one could say that Barthes's ideological vision of myth becomes increasingly Marxist as his target becomes clearer to him.

ii) LA DÉPERDITION DE LA QUALITÉ HISTORIQUE DES CHOSES

So once again it can be seen that the postface adds nothing new to the practice which it theorizes. If anything, it introduces an interesting element of confusion into the proceedings. We can gain an idea of Barthes's demythifying intentions, at least as clear as that furnished by the postface, by looking at some of the essays themselves.

One of the main reasons why Vichy France was so eager to collaborate actively with the Nazis was its desire to protect its overseas colonies from annexation by the allies, especially Britain. It need not have bothered. From the end of the war, France was embroiled in a series of savage colonial wars in Indochina, Madagascar (the arena of a particularly bloody struggle) and North Africa: Morocco, Tunisia, and, most notoriously, Algeria. Many of these struggles were coming to a head at the period in which *Mythologies* was written, and they form an insistent backdrop to a number of the essays. 'Grammaire africaine' is one such essay. In setting out to analyse the 'vocabulaire officiel des affaires africaines' (p. 137), Barthes uses a parodic dictionary form which is rather reminiscent of Flaubert's 'Dictionnaire des idées reçues'. He remarks that the official discourse is a kind of coded language, the function of which is to 'donner à un réel cynique la caution d'une morale noble' (p. 137). Its principal device is the inversion of reality. When the term 'déchirement' (normally qualified by 'cruel' or 'douloureux') is wheeled out, it imposes the image of an abstract tragedy, a vague fatality, in order to conceal the historical reality of the conflict. Similarly, the 'destinies' of the French and Algerian people are presented as being mysteriously – or even mystically – wedded: if the French have a colonial presence in North Africa it is because they are simply fulfilling the terms of the 'mission' entrusted to them, as the term implies, by God. But God, as Barthes laconically points out, is merely the 'Forme sublimée du gouvernement français' (p. 139).

It is not difficult to see how these 'myths' operate a 'renversement idéologique': if the reality of the situation is one of economic exploitation and political oppression, the mythical image either magics this away completely (the verb 'escamoter' is repeatedly used by Barthes to describe this sleight of hand), or presents it as being in the order of things: all part of some obscure divine plan, the details of which have apparently been vouchsafed only to selected members of the French government.

Pertinent as these remarks may be, they are not particularly surprising. Indeed, it would be surprising if official discourse did not have a more or less perceptible ideological bias. It is a ques-

tion of context: we are accustomed to viewing government ministers as purveyors of half-truths and lies – these are, after all, their stock-in-trade – so our critical senses are alerted from the outset. This point does not escape Barthes, who closes the essay by remarking on the growing desperation of the ideologues: they are continually obliged to reinforce their ‘substantive myths’ – which are fooling fewer and fewer people – by the addition of redundant adjectives. For once, myth is on the run, and it is almost triumphantly that he concludes, ‘La rhétorique officielle a beau entasser les couvertures de la réalité, il y a un moment où les mots lui résistent et l’obligent à révéler sous le mythe l’alternative du mensonge ou de la vérité: l’indépendance est ou n’est pas, et tous les dessins adjectifs qui s’efforcent de donner au néant les qualités de l’être sont la signature même de la culpabilité’ (pp. 143-44).

If all the essays in *Mythologies* dealt with official discourse, the book would make tedious and repetitious reading. But herein lie the interest and originality of Barthes’s undertaking: the point is not only that ideology reproduces itself in the most unexpected of places, but also that it is at its most potent when expressed through a medium and in a context where we would least expect to encounter it. The most ‘innocent’ of objects can often be the most maleficent. Take a child’s toy, for example, or the latest model of Citroën. Or that interesting, gossipy little piece we might read whilst waiting for the barber to turn our top-knot into a forest of signs.

Today’s popular press has an unquenchable thirst for stories about royalty. The Queen’s corgis or Prince Charles’s latest mishap on the ski slopes are always good for filling a page or two. This is not a recent trend, as ‘La croisière du Sang bleu’ proves. A hundred or so princes and princesses, kings and consorts, had embarked on a cruise on a kind of floating royal stud farm, the *Agamemnon*, where, as Barthes remarks, any issue of discreet maritime couplings could at least be guaranteed to be born with blue blood (p. 35). But how did they occupy their time? Well, they were clearly ‘roughing it’: kings had actually dispensed with their flunkies and had even stooped so low as to shave themselves in the morning; King Paul had disguised him-

self in a short-sleeved shirt, and Queen Frederica had been seen sporting a printed fabric dress of the kind ordinary mortals might wear. The fact that this was considered both singular and amusing is instructive: 'Afficher que les rois sont capables de prosaïsme [. . .], c'est constater que le roi est encore de droit divin' (p. 34). These newspaper articles use a kind of anti-phrasis – or inversion – in order to promote a very old myth: the divine right of royalty. If we are expected to find the spectacle of a king assuming the habits and attire of mortal men somehow strange, it can only be because we are also expected to regard their divine status as *natural*.

In this essay, the two conceptions of myth mentioned above ('mythe-légende' and 'mythe-mensonge') actually overlap. The Olympian myth is foregrounded (by its *apparent* contradiction: kings are just ordinary chaps after all) all the better to hide the deeper mystification which Barthes brings to light at the very end: 'tout ce baratin anecdotique, dont la grande presse a saoulé ses lecteurs, n'est pas donné impunément . . .' The deepest level of dissimulation concerns the political . . . 'le comte de Paris abandonne l'*Agamemnon* pour venir à Paris "surveiller" le sort de la C.E.D., et l'on envoie le jeune Juan d'Espagne au secours du fascisme espagnol' (p. 35).

Both 'Grammaire africaine' and 'La croisière du Sang bleu' serve to illustrate Barthes's dictum that 'le mythe est une parole dépolitisée' (p. 230). But it should be noted that Barthes means something quite specific by 'le politique'; it refers to the deepest (and most hidden) level of social reality: the relations of production, and resulting power structures, which form the base of any given society. This notion of 'le politique' (as opposed to 'la politique') is further explored in other essays, dealing this time not with discourse but with actual objects.

'Jouets', for instance, analyses the ideological investment in children's toys. Toys are never trivial, they condition children into an unquestioning acceptance of a ready-made world, and prefigure the place which awaits them in that world. More specifically, they prepare the child for his role as a *consumer*: 'l'enfant ne peut se constituer qu'en propriétaire, en usager, jamais en créateur' (p. 59). When a child plays with a model car,

a miniature post-office or a toy soldier, he is conditioned into accepting them as aspects of some kind of *natural* reality. And when a little girl is given a doll whose nappy she is expected to change, she is hardly likely to infer from this that a future as an engineer or a lorry driver awaits her! No one is denying the existence in reality of post-offices, soldiers or housewives: Barthes's point concerns the kind of existence the child is led to ascribe to them. The child will most likely regard the existence of soldiers and tanks (and by extension war itself) as being as *natural* as trees, rivers and lakes: 'Que les jouets français préfigurent *littéralement* l'univers des fonctions adultes ne peut évidemment que préparer l'enfant à les accepter toutes, en lui constituant avant même qu'il réfléchisse l'alibi d'une nature qui a créé de tout temps des soldats, des postiers et des vespas' (p. 59). In Barthes's vision, the process of mystification which culminates in the presentation of colonial war as some kind of natural catastrophe, begins in the 'innocent' games of childhood.

Another central theme of *Mythologies*, and which appears in 'Jouets', is the split between production and consumption, or rather the difference in consciousness between producer and consumer.

Barthes was later to write in *Système de la mode*: 'Calculatrice, la société industrielle est condamnée à former des consommateurs qui ne calculent pas; si producteurs et acheteurs du vêtement avaient une conscience identique, le vêtement ne s'achèterait (et ne se produirait) qu'au gré, fort lent, de son usure' (5, p. 9). These comments on the fashion industry could be extended to the rules governing the process of exchange of all commodities in the consumer society. The notional child of 'Jouets' who is unwittingly indoctrinated 'avant même qu'il réfléchisse' is, perhaps, the prototype of all 'receivers' of ideological messages in the world of *Mythologies*. The eager, admiring crowds who flock to the Motor Show where the latest Citroën is on show are, in this respect, children too.

In 'La nouvelle Citroën', Barthes demonstrates how consciousness becomes distorted through its fascination with a 'magical object'. He likens the new car to a modern equivalent of the Gothic cathedral, in that it is 'consommée dans son image,

sinon dans son usage, par un peuple entier qui s'approprie en elle un objet parfaitement magique' (p. 150, my italics). It is both perfect and seemingly devoid of origin. The bodywork panels appear to fit together by simple juxtaposition: there are no visible rivets or welded joints which would betray the labour that went into producing it. It is the very embodiment of that essentialist ideology in which 'les choses [. . .] perdent le souvenir de leur fabrication' (p. 230). The manner in which the car is marketed, or promoted, quite apart from its design features, also contributes to the creation of this mythical object which everyone can *consume*, either in reality (by purchasing it), or in imagination (by admiring the image), but which nobody appears to have *produced*. This idea of the disparity between the consciousness of the producer and that of the consumer is another theme which Marx developed in, for example, his notion of 'commodity fetishism', or in the distinction he made between use-value and exchange-value (see 13, pp. 86-87). But the broad theme is present in nearly all of Barthes's works, both before and after *Mythologies*, and it could equally well have had its origin in a reflection not on consumer durables, but on books. The idea is present in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, in the opposition between a classical literature of pure consumption and the utopian vision of a literature of production. Barthes did not need to go directly back to Marx to discover this idea. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre too had explored the opposition between a literature of consumption and a literature of production (30, p. 288); he too talks of the bourgeoisie as a class which cloaks itself in anonymity (30, p. 142), and of 'exoticism' as an ideological alibi (30, p. 236), and of the necessity to pit dialectical thought against the ravages of bourgeois analytic reason (30, p. 146) – a clarion call echoed in many of the 'mythologies', but most memorably in 'L'usager de la grève' and 'Quelques paroles de M. Poujade'. This is not to impugn the originality of Barthes's thought in *Mythologies*: it simply serves to indicate the extent to which Marxist – not to mention linguistic and psychoanalytic – notions were all part of the intellectual baggage of intellectuals writing at this period.

One commentator has likened the cumulative effect of the 'mythologies' – the way a 'system' emerges from an analysis of disparate-seeming elements – to the work of an unwitting bricklayer: 'à force d'accumuler des briques, on finit parfois par faire un mur' (15, p. 49). To pursue the analog, 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' could be likened to the theoretical cement required to hold these elements together. Except that, as we will now see, there are cracks in this edifice. These could be plastered over, but *Mythologies* is a more interesting book when they are laid bare and explored.

iii) CET 'ENNEMI' UN PEU MYTHIQUE

The question of ideology and consciousness is as good a place to start as any: how conscious of their own operations are the propagators of ideology ('les producteurs de mythes')? What degree of awareness should we ascribe to their victims? In short, who is fooling whom?

One critic pointed out that Barthes 'had, after all, ascribed the most alienating features of modern mass communications to a nefarious but ill-defined conspiracy entitled the bourgeoisie and had never paid his readers the compliment of saying who the bourgeoisie actually were, where they got their money from, and where the supposed plethora of *idées reçues* was actually to be found' (33, p. 50). Whilst the suggestion that Barthes should have supplied the names and addresses of the conspirators is irresistibly ludicrous, Thody nevertheless does have half a point. The fact is that on occasion Barthes does talk of the myths he is dismantling as if they were the *highly conscious* fabrications of some secretive corporation bent on world domination ('société anonyme' in the commercial sense). The problem is highlighted by the vacillating distinction he draws between the bourgeoisie and the petite bourgeoisie, and their supposedly different ideologies.

The term 'bourgeois' can be used to refer to the middle classes in their entirety (as distinct from proletariat or aristocracy), but Barthes also uses the term to designate specifically the

(grande) bourgeoisie who seized power in the nineteenth century through their ownership of the means of production, as opposed to the (petite) bourgeoisie who merely kept the machine oiled and ticking over, feeding off the crumbs that dropped from the real masters' table. The latter are seen to be the victims of the former: 'La bourgeoisie ne cesse d'absorber dans son idéologie toute une humanité qui n'a point son statut profond, et qui ne peut le vivre que dans l'imaginaire' (p. 228). The upper middle class convinces the lower middle class that they have a community of fundamental interests, but this is a cunning illusion. If the political alliance between bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie has held more or less solid for over a century, it is based on a case of mistaken identity, as it were. And Barthes's commentary on his own essay 'Conjugales' confirms this vision of a dominant bourgeois ideology which works by surreptitiously erasing real class distinctions: 'c'est à partir du moment où une dactylo à vingt-cinq mille francs par mois *se reconnaît* dans le grand mariage bourgeois que l'ex-nomination bourgeoise atteint son plein effet' (pp. 228-29). This 'dactylo à vingt-cinq mille francs par mois' is also the notional mystified receiver of myth in essays such as 'Celle qui voit clair' and 'Astrologie'. The ideological operation involved in horoscopes, for example, consists in assuring the quietism of this 'employée' and her respect for the established order: 'Les astres ne postulent jamais un renversement de l'ordre, ils influencent à la petite semaine, respectueux du statut social et des horaires patronaux' (p. 166). This is a reproduction, in microcosm, of the uneasy 'alliance' between bourgeois and petits bourgeois: the former need to maintain, for electoral purposes, the stability of what is, historically and to this day, a highly volatile class.

So far so good. The model appears clear. We have our victims, and we have our perpetrators: 'En répandant ses représentations à travers tout un catalogue d'images collectives à usage petit-bourgeois, la bourgeoisie consacre l'indifférenciation illusoire des classes sociales' (p. 228). It is a conspiracy, or is it? For the above assertion surely overstates the *awareness* of those held responsible for the creation of myth, as much as it understates the *awareness* of those who consume it, who fall victim to it. It

must be said that Marx himself appears rather vague as to the alternatives: are all men the unwitting mouthpieces of an ideology which 'speaks itself' through them, which transcends their awareness of it? Or are ideological representations weapons, wielded *consciously* in the class struggle? The following comment on bourgeois economic theories in *The German Ideology* tails off into eloquent equivocation: 'production, as distinct from distribution etc., is to be presented as governed by eternal laws which are independent of history, and at the same time *bourgeois* relations are clandestinely passed off as irrefutable natural laws of society *in abstracto*. This is the more or less conscious purpose of the whole procedure' (22, p. 127).

It could be that a further complicating factor in *Mythologies* is introduced by the semiological model which Barthes adopts to describe ideological operations. The model which is used to demonstrate how myth is produced and consumed derives from communication theory. The idea that myth is a message presupposes a sender and a receiver. The sender is the producer of myths, and the message he sends is tailored ('approprié') to a particular receiver, or 'consommateur de mythes' (p. 204). This model may just work for limited cases – such as advertisements, fashion edicts, or government communiqués – but it does not seem sensitive enough to account for the dissemination of ideology on the global scale which Barthes is envisaging in *Mythologies*. One obvious objection could be formulated thus: if myth is a message, then it must be transmitted in a code *known* to both sender and receiver. But it is unclear from Barthes's model whether myth is deciphered, read, or just received (see 20, p. 106). There must surely be degrees of blindness and insight at both ends of the process: the producer/consumer split which I analysed above is also operative here, and it produces in this case a rather oversimplified image of rascals and dupes.

But this image is just one side of the coin. In fact, Barthes is a very long way from presenting the petits bourgeois as the innocent victims of the devilish machinations of their social superiors. The 1957 preface to *Mythologies* talked only in terms of a 'sémiologie générale de *notre monde bourgeois*' (p. 10, my italics), whereas the 1970 preface sees the enemy in more defined

terms: 'la mystification qui transforme *la culture petite-bourgeoise* en nature universelle' (p. 7, my italics). The erstwhile victims seem to have been promoted to the status of perpetrators. In fact, this *progressive* narrowing of the aim can be seen at work even within *Mythologies*, which culminates in a savage assault on that doyen of petit bourgeois ideologues, Pierre Poujade. Whilst admitting in his postface that there can be no fundamental differences between bourgeois and petit bourgeois ideologies, since, 'quel que soit le public qui le consomme, le mythe postule l'immobilité de la Nature' (p. 237), Barthes nevertheless identifies certain mythological 'figures' such as 'L'identification', 'La tautologie' and 'La quantification de la qualité' (pp. 238-42) as being specifically petit bourgeois. It should also be noted that his comments on 'Conjugales' (see above p. 33), which tended to see the petits bourgeois as victims of the trickle-down effect of bourgeois values, are not reflected by the conclusion of that essay where, it seems, 'la petite-bourgeoisie française [est] manifestement aujourd'hui dans une phase d'impérialisme mythique' (p. 50). Furthermore, in several of the essays he is at pains to point out the *complicity* of the petit bourgeois consumers of myth in their own mystification, most memorably in 'L'opération Astra': 'Qu'importe, *après tout*, que l'ordre soit un peu brutal ou un peu aveugle, s'il nous permet de vivre à bon marché? Nous voilà, nous aussi, débarrassés d'un préjugé qui nous coûtait cher, trop cher, qui nous coûtait trop de scrupules, trop de révoltes, trop de combats et trop de solitude' (p. 46). And 'L'acteur d'Harcourt' presents us with a glimpse of Barthes's *bête noire*: that public which is, 'à la fois blasé et vivant de mensonge' (p. 26). So lie there may be, but a strange kind of lie. Barthes was later to refer to connotation (myth) as 'cette sorte de "mauvaise foi" formelle' (5, p. 283), and this Sartrean concept of *bad faith* also informs his conception of myth and its reception in *Mythologies*. It is probably the ethical overtones of Sartre's notion that attracted Barthes: it implies not only self-delusion, but the *complicity* of the individual in this state of affairs. Indeed, Sartre had long identified bad faith as the habitual *modus vivendi* of a whole class: the bourgeoisie. And his famous distinction between *salauds* and *lâches* (29, pp. 84-85) seems to have been adapted

by Barthes to characterize the relations between bourgeois and petit bourgeois: the petits bourgeois may well be (partially) mystified, but they have conspired in their own mystification. In short, Barthes is not letting them off the hook; there are no attenuating circumstances.

Barthes's hostility towards the petite bourgeoisie in *Mythologies* is manifest from even the most cursory reading, but this hostility has an intensity quite disproportionate to the theoretical justification provided by 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui'. It may be useful to ask oneself why.

There are a number of possible explanations, some more plausible than others. The least attractive one would see Barthes as a kind of intellectual snob. He distinguishes 'la culture bourgeoise proprement dite' from 'ses formes étendues, vulgarisées, utilisées' (p. 227), the latter being further characterized as 'des vérités bourgeoises dégradées, appauvries, commercialisées . . .' (p. 228). All of these adjectives imply a loss of *quality*; as if the 'original' bourgeois ideology was a mystification, true, but at least it was a mystification of substance!

A second reason for this unwonted savagery could be found in a characteristic which Barthes identifies uniquely with the ideology of the petite bourgeoisie: its anti-intellectualism. When Poujade evokes the degeneracy of the 'grosses têtes' and 'technocrates apatrides' by means of the rather unpleasant dictum, 'le poisson pourrit par la tête', it is hardly surprising that Barthes – a notable 'grosse tête' himself – should feel stung into returning the compliment.

This mention of Poujade leads us into perhaps the most compelling explanation of Barthes's virulent critique of petit-bourgeois 'thought' in *Mythologies*: the political context of the period in which the essays were being written. In the postface, Barthes comments that 'la petite-bourgeoisie n'est pas libérale (elle produit le fascisme, alors que la bourgeoisie l'utilise): elle fait en retard l'itinéraire bourgeois' (p. 240). Fascism had not been killed off by the war, only rendered dormant, and the petite bourgeoisie was the class most likely to resurrect it. In 1953, Pierre Poujade, a bookseller/stationer, had founded the UDCA (l'Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans de France),

and was elected to parliament, along with fifty-three other Poujadist deputies,⁴ in January 1956. Basically, the movement expressed the anxieties of small businessmen in the face of a changing economic and political situation: an accelerating process of decolonization abroad, and the rapid development of corporate capitalism at home.

In some respects, Poujadism was a throwback to the 1880s and to Paul Déroulède's *Ligue des patriotes* with its unpleasant mix of ultra-patriotism, xenophobia, envy, racism and anti-intellectualism. Then too the petite bourgeoisie had felt itself squeezed between Capital and Labour: when confronted by the contradictions in his objective position, the 'little man' of *fin de siècle* France had thrashed around, blindly searching for panaceas, and had finished by creating a monster that can only be described as proto-fascism.

If one adds to the resistible rise of Pierre Poujade, the fact that the men of Vichy – rehabilitated with unseemly haste – were beginning to crawl out of the woodwork and worm their way into government, then the reasons for Barthes's targeting of the petite bourgeoisie in *Mythologies* start to become clearer. Of course, one could also argue that the most striking thing about all of this is the element of repetition: Poujade is Déroulède repeated as farce; and Barthes was later to confirm that repetition itself had always been a 'thème maléfique' in his work (10, p. 218).

The situation on the other side of the Atlantic could not have appeared very much rosier: McCarthyism was in full swing and its patented representatives were abroad. In 'Billy Graham au Vél d'Hiv' Barthes likens the evangelical preacher to a music hall magician and warns, anxiously, that his petit bourgeois audience with its evident susceptibility to 'des formes de pensée alogiques et hypnotiques' is in a 'situation d'aventure' (p. 101). Although the word 'fascism' is not pronounced in that essay, the implicit intertext (Thomas Mann's parable of Fascism, *Mario and the Magician*) leaves readers to draw their own conclusion.

⁴ Including a certain Jean-Marie Le Pen (Paris, 5th arrondissement).

What, then, can we conclude about the relationship between myth and ideology in *Mythologies*? It would appear that many of the problems encountered in trying to gain a clear theoretical picture derive from the heterogeneity of Barthes's influences. The decidedly idiosyncratic Marxisms of Sartre and Brecht are as 'useful' to him as is Marx himself. Barthes's attitude towards constituted theoretical thought in *Mythologies* – and elsewhere – could be described as cavalier, in the best sense of the word: he picks up concepts, uses them, and drops them when they have overstayed their welcome. John Sturrock thought Barthes was writing from a 'near-Marxist point of view' in *Mythologies* (32, p. 91), but how 'near'? And does it really matter? It strikes me that Marxist thought is more often *connoted* in Barthes's discourse than faithfully *used*. This issue will be taken up again in Chapter 4, where I consider the question of tactics and strategies. Another problem best left till later concerns the presence – or rather the absence – of the proletariat, or working-class, in *Mythologies*. Where are they? Nowhere, or, rather, *elsewhere*: in a utopia which Barthes appears to have hankered after, in the company of other bourgeois intellectuals of the period, not least Sartre.

Barthes's conception of the bourgeoisie has been described by Calvet as 'un fourre-tout commode' (16, p. 121). And we have seen that his notion of ideology is a no less handy and voluminous hold-all. Therein, perhaps, lie both its weaknesses and its strengths.

If Barthes's theoretical bag of tricks is capable of carrying objects as disparate as children's toys and a Citroën DS19, a monk's hairstyle and the ravings of a politician, it is also capable of enveloping whole institutions. And it is to one of these that I will now turn: Literature.

Literature and Myth

i) LA LITTÉRATURE VIENT DE CONDAMNER UN HOMME À L'ÉCHAFAUD

ABOUT a quarter of the essays in *Mythologies* are directly or indirectly concerned with literary topics, but this statistic belies the central importance to Barthes's project in *Mythologies* of a certain reflection on literature. Broadly literary subjects, such as those explored in essays like 'Adamov et le langage', 'La critique Ni-Ni' or 'L'art vocal bourgeois' could be said to have a special status which sets them apart from the other subjects – like striptease or Abbé Pierre's hairstyle – which constitute the bulk of this heteroclite collection. They are in fact refinements and continuations of a critique of the institution of Literature which Barthes had embarked upon before *Mythologies*, and which provided him with a way of thinking about other cultural institutions. The realization that 'Literature, which uses the objects and events of the world as signifiers to speak its own meanings, is technically speaking a connotation, a myth' (20, p. 120) provides Barthes with the means of extending his critique of the literary discourse to other discourses ('paroles'), most notably those spawned by modern mass culture.

In *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Barthes had refined Sartre's analysis of the novelistic discourse by identifying within it three elements: *Langue*, *Style* and *Écriture*. The first refers to the actual structures of the language in which the novelist writes. Inasmuch as the grammar and syntax of a language constitute the parameters which ultimately determine all possible utterances in that language, 'langue' is experienced as a limit. Style, on the other hand, is a necessity; it refers to those aspects of a writer's language which are absolutely personal, obeying a visceral, corporeal necessity. Barthes's *Michelet* was a stylistic analysis in

this sense of the word. In between this limit and this necessity comes 'writing'. It is through his choice of writing that a writer declares his commitment to society. We have already encountered one example of what Barthes means by 'writing', in the case of Hébert and the sprinkling of 'foutre' and 'bougre' with which he habitually began his editorials: 'writing' is a form whose significance lies in what it connotes rather than what it denotes. In truth, Barthes does not analyse the phenomenon extensively in *Le Degré zéro*; he concentrates primarily on two narrative devices: the third person singular and the preterite. The former is nothing more, says Barthes, than the conventional sign of a pact between author and reader, it is the formal manifestation of the myth of Literature; whereas the preterite, or past historic, has the paradoxical function of abolishing time: it compresses the 'multiplicité des temps vécus et superposés' (I, p. 25) into a single pinpoint, never to be repeated. Where lived reality is chaotic and multilayered, the preterite imposes, and *signifies*, an order, a hierarchy of events. It is, says Barthes, 'le temps factice des cosmogonies, des mythes, des Histoires et des Romans' (I, p. 26). Both devices tend towards a presentation of the world which, literally, leaves nothing to be desired. In terms more akin to those employed in *Mythologies*, one could say that these devices attempt to serve up the world like pre-packaged goods in a supermarket freezer, whereas in reality the world better resembles the vibrant anarchy of a flea-market: 'jeté, étalé, offert' (I, p. 26). As may now be clear, 'writing' and 'myth' are formally synonymous.

The 'classical' or 'traditional' novel whose writing is analysed in *Le Degré zéro* is therefore a literature of consumption. If one felt like taking this term literally, one could say (mais je sens des foudres à l'horizon . . .) that the difference between reading a Balzacian novel, and reading a 'modern' novel of the type promoted by Barthes, is comparable to the difference between eating a T.V. dinner, and eating sukiyaki: a dish in which the difference between 'le temps de sa fabrication et celui de sa consommation' (6, p. 33) is abolished.

It will have been noted that Barthes indulges his fondness for capitalization ('Romans') in one of the above quotations. This is

intended to signal a particular kind of novel, the 'bourgeois novel' of the French nineteenth century. It is no accident, for Barthes, that the development of this particular novelistic form coincided with the rise of the bourgeoisie. He argues in *Le Degré zéro* that the forms known as Récit, Histoire and Roman express a specific historical moment: the novel is a vehicle for 'une certaine mythologie de l'universel, propre à la société bourgeoise, dont le Roman est un produit caractérisé' (1, p. 28). The ideology invested in the everyday myths of modern life is present also in the writing of the novel. This is hardly surprising if one accepts Barthes's basic premise, namely that the socio-economic base of Balzac's France has survived fundamentally unchanged into the France of the 1950s.

It is now time to look more closely at the various myths which come to light in Barthes's literary *mythologies*. The essay on 'La Littérature selon Minou Drouet' is a veritable compendium of bourgeois myths of literature. Minou Drouet was a child poet, the authenticity of whose works was vigorously contested. Barthes's essay is contemporaneous with the lively debate surrounding her second opus, *Du brouillard dans les yeux* (1956). The bourgeois press mounted a virtual inquisition into her 'case', wheeling out 'expert witnesses' in the form of cashiered but eminent poets – like the superannuated generals who materialize on television whenever a war breaks out – in order to ascertain whether Drouet was a genuine child prodigy or a fake. These extraordinary measures set Barthes to wondering precisely what investment was being protected in this notion of the 'child poet'. In fact, the stakes could not have been higher. The mythical figures of 'genius', 'child' and 'poet' are all sublimated figures of 'le mythe central de l'art bourgeois: celui de l'irresponsabilité' (p. 153). A small digression is necessary at this point. As may have emerged from my brief foray into *Le Degré zéro*, the whole of Barthes's thought on literature at this period is directed towards countering this myth, through his insistence on the 'responsabilité de la forme'. Sartre had exhorted writers to a conscious commitment; Barthes had argued that, consciously or not, 'writing' was always an act of historical solidarity: 'Comme

Liberté, l'écriture n'est donc qu'un moment. Mais ce moment est l'un des plus explicites de l'Histoire, puisque l'Histoire, c'est toujours et avant tout un choix et les limites de ce choix' (I, p. 16). We will see shortly the reasons why bourgeois society is so eager to deny the inescapable responsibility of the artist. But first we will see how.

One such operation is described in 'L'écrivain en vacances'. An illustrated article in *Le Figaro* had revealed to its readers the astonishing fact that writers go on holiday too. Like the aristocrats in the 'Croisière du Sang bleu', these awesome demiurges were just like you or me, really. But no! Even when floating down the Congo on a raft, or indulging his taste for 'les jolies filles, le reblochon et le miel de lavande' (p. 33), the writer kept his notebook ready to hand, lest he be 'caught short' by an importunate attack of logorrhoea. All of this simply reaffirms the irresponsibility of the creator. The writer is merely a mouth-piece, the plaything of some divine inspiration, the base form in which the sublime occasionally condescends to manifest itself. And when the operation is complete the writer is even more firmly ensconced in his Olympus, and no more accountable for his creation than is God for his!⁵

So, to return to Minou Drouet, the flurry of media attention was directed to precisely the same end. There were those who claimed that only the innocence and spontaneity of childhood could have produced these poems; there were others who insisted that they bore the unmistakable mark of adult sophistication. Barthes pours scorn on both groups: as if childhood and adulthood were *essences* which existed autonomously, in complete isolation one from the other! Clearly the happiest outcome of the inquisition would have consisted in the proof that the poems were indeed the work of a child prodigy: as we all know, geniuses are wild eccentric creatures, barely capable of lacing their own shoes; poets (cf. garrets) are little better, and children are not even held responsible in law. What a windfall, then, to find

⁵ In July 1955 Barthes himself became an 'écrivain en vacances', of sorts, when *L'Express* recommended *Mythologies* as 'à lire en vacances'.

so much irresponsibility concentrated in a single figure! The pay-off of the operation is this: 'croire au "génie" poétique de l'enfance, c'est croire à une sorte de parthénogénèse littéraire, c'est poser une fois de plus la littérature comme un don des dieux. Toute trace de "culture" est ici portée au compte du mensonge' (p. 155). So, like the conventional signs of the traditional novel which immobilize History in an eternal bourgeois present, the myth of the irresponsibility of the writer serves to convert Culture into Nature, Existence into Essence. This is why Barthes sees it as 'le mythe central de l'art bourgeois' (p. 153).

In drawing his readers' attention to the *tautological* nature of the arguments advanced for or against Minou Drouet, Barthes points to the parallel with the Dominici affair. An illiterate peasant, Gaston Dominici was condemned to death for the murder, in 1952, of Sir Jack Drummond, his wife and daughter. Although his sentence was commuted to a prison term (he was freed in 1960, ostensibly on compassionate grounds) the case is still regarded as a probable miscarriage of justice. In 'Dominici ou le triomphe de la Littérature', Barthes scrutinizes the speculative reasoning which condemned Dominici, in the absence of any concrete evidence. The reasoning of the court was founded on a spurious universalism: the belief that the prosecutor and judges spoke the same language as the accused, the belief that their minds worked in the same way. But any language implies a cast of mind, and this particular psychological system, inhabited by essentialist 'types' ('vantard, coléreux, égoïste, rusé, paillard, dur . . .') would doubtless have been recognized by contemporaries of Molière. For this notion of psychology is also 'comme par hasard celle de la Littérature bien-pensante' (p. 50). As if by chance . . . As the rest of the essay demonstrates, chance has nothing to do with it. If Barthes's conception of ideology is valid, then all manifestations of individual and collective life will be impregnated by the same ideological world-view – in this case an essentialist view of human reality and the concomitant belief in the universality of that most perfect of communicative instruments, the French language: 'Or cette psychologie-là, au nom de quoi on peut très bien aujourd'hui vous couper la tête, elle vient en droite ligne de notre littérature traditionnelle, qu'on appelle

en style bourgeois, littérature du Document humain [. . .]. Justice et littérature sont entrées en alliance, ont échangé leurs vieilles techniques, dévoilant ainsi leur identité profonde' (p. 52). That is, the legal system and Literature are outgrowths of the same root-stock.

But it is also literature, albeit of a rather different sort, that provides Barthes with his tools of analysis. He himself points to the worrying similarity between Dominici and that other 'cœur criminel', Meursault in Camus's *L'Etranger*. In both cases the court has recourse to the figure which Barthes calls Identification (see p. 239), in order to endow the accused with a 'cerveau de rechange', all the better to condemn him. It should also be noted that, at a *formal* level, Camus's book had sought to undermine that 'écriture traditionnelle' by eschewing, precisely, the third-person narrative voice and the past historic. . . .

All bourgeois thought is tautological, since it posits implicitly that which it claims to reveal, and it is with this notion of tautology that Barthes concludes his essay on Minou Drouet: 'Vouloir à grands cris que le Roman soit roman, la Poésie poésie et le Théâtre théâtre, cette tautologie stérile est de même sorte que les lois dénomminatives qui régissent dans le Code civil la propriété des Biens' (p. 160). As the context of this quotation makes clear, this particular tautology is especially characteristic of a discourse which presents itself – like the discourse of advertising – as a mediation between producer and consumer: literary criticism.

ii) RACINE EST RACINE

Critics, wrote Sartre, are the guardians of illustrious corpses: 'Tout se passe pour eux comme si la littérature tout entière n'était qu'une vaste tautologie et comme si chaque nouveau prosateur avait inventé une nouvelle manière de parler pour ne rien dire' (30, p. 38). And Barthes is scarcely more complimentary: 'Nos critiques essentialistes passent leur temps à retrouver la "vérité" des génies passés; la Littérature est pour eux un vaste magasin d'objets perdus, où l'on va à la pêche' (p. 98). In the

first of the *Mythologies* devoted to literary criticism, 'Critique muette et aveugle', Barthes analyses the unusual spectacle of a band of specialists who seem happy, even eager, to declare their own incompetence. But the confusion of these critics when faced with certain works (Existentialist and Marxist, as it so happens) is not what it appears: it is a 'feinte panique d'imbécillité' (p. 36). Beneath this disarming modesty lies the most terrorist of positions: 'Je ne comprends pas, donc vous êtes idiots' (p. 37). The denunciation rests, implicitly, on the very myth which, when unleashed in the courtroom, assured the condemnation of Dominici. Namely, 'la transparence et l'universalité du langage' (p. 51).

It is clear from Barthes's essay that he sees these 'critiques bien-pensants' as the direct heirs of Boileau, that scourge of poseurs, *précieux* and jargonizers:

Ce que l'on conçoit bien s'énonce clairement,
Et les mots pour le dire arrivent aisément.⁶

When Boileau was writing, French was the language of a minority of the population: the aristocracy and bourgeoisie of the large towns. In other words, it was the language of the dominant classes, and the codification of the language reflected the dominant ideology. The watchwords were clarity and common sense. The latter is a seemingly inoffensive notion, but Barthes would, indeed does, argue that there is always something 'terroristic' about the appeal to common sense, about the evocation of 'ce-qui-va-de-soi'. Curiosity is stopped dead in its tracks; one is forced to recognize this timeless wisdom, forced to demur to the judgement of some vast but anonymous community of like-minded, right-thinking sages. We are dealing, then, with 'ce vieux mythe obscurantiste selon lequel l'idée est nocive, si elle n'est contrôlée par le "bon sens" et le "sentiment": le Savoir, c'est le Mal' (p. 37).

In 'La critique Ni-Ni', Barthes describes another operation designed to silence dissident voices by relegating them to the

⁶ Boileau, *L'Art poétique*, Bordas, 1972. Chant 1, vv. 153-54.

limbo of their obscure jargon. He calls this device the Scales ('la Balance'). This is how it works: take an ideology, such as Marxism, and throw it in one pan; take another, such as Fascism, and place it in the other – they cancel each other out, or better still, appear to be one and the same thing. But who is holding the scales? From which Olympian, or Archimedean, vantage point are Marxism, Fascism or Existentialism, judged to be 'ideologies'? Clearly, the judgement is pronounced in the name of 'eternal truths' such as 'aventure, passion, grandeur, vertu, honneur' (p. 145). In the name of some universal culture which arrogates to itself the right to judge without being judged: 'La culture est un bien noble, universel, situé hors des partis pris sociaux: la culture ne pèse pas. Les idéologies, elles, sont des inventions partisans: donc, à la balance!' (p. 144). These 'impartial' critics are not so different from the politicians derided in 'Grammaire africaine': 'Pour les gens de droite, la Politique, c'est la Gauche; eux, c'est la France' (p. 140). This enormous operation – which sees literary critics in alliance with politicians, journalists hand-in-glove with judges etc. – cannot quite hide the fact that culture is fundamentally ideological, and we saw the nature of that ideology in the last chapter. Barthes's point is this: *there is no innocent discourse*, and those discourses which attempt to hide their *parti-pris* beneath the invisible cloak of self-evidence are less innocent than most: 'un jugement littéraire est toujours déterminé par la tonalité dont il fait partie, et l'absence même de système – surtout porté à l'état de profession de foi – procède d'un système parfaitement défini, qui est en l'occurrence une variété fort banale de l'idéologie bourgeoise' (p. 145).

It is not so much the nature of the hidden system underlying bourgeois criticism that irks Barthes, as its insistence on playing hide-and-seek. This point is made with some force in one of his later critical essays. Referring to the celebrated critic Gustave Lanson, whose positivist approach still reigned supreme in academic circles of the 1950s, Barthes wrote: 'Ce ne sont donc pas ses partis pris que l'on peut reprocher au lansonisme, c'est de les taire, de les couvrir du drapé moral de la rigueur et de l'objectivité' (3, p. 254). This 'perpétuel tourniquet entre la mauvaise

foi et la bonne conscience' (3, p. 100) is, of course, nothing other than myth itself.

Barthes returns to the charge in 'Racine est Racine'. This essay, along with those already mentioned here, could be regarded as the opening salvos in the battle royal which was to rage after the publication of his iconoclastic *Sur Racine* (1963). Here is not the place to discuss that notorious Disputation, save to say that the terms in which Barthes's adversaries responded, clearly indicated that he had hit a raw nerve with unerring accuracy. The title of this essay alludes to a statement made *à propos* of a new production at the Comédie Française: '*Athalie* est une pièce de Racine' (p. 96). Well, yes. But what does this statement *imply*? Barthes brings out the colossal stupidity of the tautology, but also its hidden depths of aggression: 'elle signifie une rupture rageuse entre l'intelligence et son objet, la menace arrogante d'un ordre où l'on ne penserait pas' (p. 97).

The distinguished bourgeois critic Gustave Lanson would no doubt have been surprised to learn that he would one day find himself in bed with the king of the rutabaga, Pierre Poujade. But this is very much the logic of Barthes's argument, for tautology, with its covert appeal to 'common sense' and 'clarity', is invariably identified by Barthes as a petit-bourgeois mode of thought. Classical Realism degenerated into the cheap Naturalism of Zola and his acolytes, and Zola, in his turn, has spawned horoscopes, agony aunts and . . . 'Les Romains au cinéma'.

It is certainly no accident for Barthes that this downward spiral tracks the shift of cultural hegemony from upper to lower middle class, from Classicism to Naturalism and the 'culture de masse' which is properly the object of *Mythologies*.

iii) CE PLÉONASME D'INTENTIONS

The savagery of Barthes's assault on literary Naturalism is one of the more amusing features of *Le Degré zéro*: here was a form of literature whose practitioners aspired to the cool detachment of the surgeon, the neutrality of the camera, but whose work was 'chargée des signes les plus spectaculaires de la fabri-

cation' (1, p. 49). Here again, it was not so much the conventions or artifices of Naturalism that Barthes found so objectionable, as the attempt, simultaneously, to deny their existence. Naturalism is defined by its attempt to pass off its stale conventions as either natural, or spontaneously invented. As we saw in Chapter 1, this is precisely what characterizes myth itself. And it is this duplicity that Barthes finds again and again in the cultural products of the industrial society.

Take a film such as Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar*. Despite the plethora of balding pates in Caesar's Rome, Mankiewicz's Romans all seem to be endowed with a spectacular fringe: 'Les uns l'ont frisée, d'autres filiforme, d'autres huppée, d'autres huilée, tous l'ont bien peignée, et les chauves ne sont pas admis' (p. 27). One can only assume that someone is trying to tell us something. This message is reinforced by the beads of (vaseline) perspiration which permanently cover the foreheads of all the 'thinking men' in the film. These signs – for this is what they are – function as a kind of shorthand: the fringe is the sign of 'romanité', just as the excessive perspiration is taken to indicate the appalling toll exacted on the body by any form of intellectual activity. One could add to this catalogue the trailing lock of hair – in an otherwise immaculate coiffure – which is meant to alert us to the fact that the character has been hauled from her bed in the middle of the night. Barthes finds here precisely the same duplicity as in the Naturalist novel: '[Le signe] veut faire comprendre (ce qui est louable), mais se donne en même temps pour spontané (ce qui est triché), il se déclare à la fois intentionnel et irrépressible, artificiel et naturel, produit et trouvé [. . .] s'il est heureux qu'un spectacle soit fait pour rendre le monde plus clair, il y a une duplicité coupable à confondre le signe et le signifié. Et c'est une duplicité propre au spectacle bourgeois' (p. 30).

It seems that no art form is immune to this mystificatory procedure, not even music. In a recording of Fauré by the baritone Gérard Souzay, Barthes detects a 'surcharge d'intentions' in the singer's almost comical efforts to wring the last grain of meaning from the words he is singing: a 'pléonasmе d'intentions' which succeeds in smothering not only the words and the music, but also the subtlety of their interplay. In 'Photos-chocs'

and 'Photogénie électorale' the same 'pléonasme d'intentions' is seen at work in the medium of photography. Elsewhere it leaves its mark on the theatre, more particularly the bourgeois theatre. The melodramatic diction of 'les acteurs traditionnels' is designed to make their inner turmoil visible for all to see. The spectacle of their suffering ('un travail physiologique effroyable, une torsion monstrueuse des tissus internes', p. 108) is the precise equivalent of Souzay's emphatic phrasing or the perspiring brows of Mankiewicz's Romans, and it is not so far removed from the grimace of the all-in wrestler caught in a particularly gruesome half-nelson (see 'Le monde où l'on catche'). But at least the wrestler's grimace is not intended to fool anyone, it *signifies* pain rather than *expressing* it. The problem with Naturalism is that it continually blurs this distinction between signification and expression: 'l'expressivité est un mythe: elle n'est que la convention de l'expressivité' (1, p. 50).

All of this explains why Barthes refers to bourgeois art as 'un art du détail'. There is an inference to be drawn from Souzay's pointilliste technique, or from the technical 'trouvailles' which seem to be the *sine qua non* of popular success in the theatre: namely, that bourgeois art is little more than an accounting exercise. The object of this exercise is to 'faire de la "psychologie" un phénomène quantitatif [. . .] en sorte que la passion devienne elle aussi une marchandise comme les autres, un objet de commerce, inséré dans un système numérique d'échange' (p. 108). This also explains the pun in 'un art du détail': an art of accumulated details, but also a *retail* art. For all commodities in the mass society, including cultural ones, are subject to 'la dure loi de l'échange' (p. 109), and Barthes rather unkindly posits a population of readers, theatre-goers, listeners, and viewers endowed with all the critical percipience of M. Poujade! For this public, value for money must be highly *visible*: 'le théâtre est toujours l'objet d'un contrat entre le spectateur qui donne son argent, et le directeur qui doit lui rendre cet argent sous la forme la plus visible possible' (3, p. 57). The quotation continues: 'aujourd'hui la richesse coûte trop cher, on se contente du *simili*' (*idem*). As *Mythologies* progresses, Barthes uses this notion of the *simili* (an imitation substance such as paste dia-

monds or false fur) with increasing frequency, to symbolize the degradations of petit bourgeois culture. Mass society is the glorification of the spectacular, the illusory, the ephemeral, and the artist who is willing to pander to this cultural Poujadism must also be willing to see his art dragged not only into the supermarket, but into the corner shop.

There is also a 'constructive' side to Barthes's critique of Naturalism and its modern avatars. His opposition is programmatic insofar as he is eager to promote certain counter-mythical alternatives. One of these is the notion of 'literality', presented as the precise opposite of this 'métaphore du détail': it seemed for a time that Barthes had found his champion of literality in the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet and his 'littérature littérale'. But this is perhaps best left to the next chapter, which will be devoted to a consideration of Barthes's various counter-mythical tactics. It was in fact the German theoretician and playwright Berthold Brecht who turned out to be Barthes's staunchest theoretical ally at this period. The 1950s were Barthes's 'theatre years' and he did as much as anyone, through his articles in *Théâtre populaire* and elsewhere, to promote Brecht's work in France. The latter's contribution to the war on Naturalism was twofold. Ideologically, he countered the bourgeois myth of irresponsibility by demonstrating that 'les maux des hommes sont entre les mains des hommes eux-mêmes, c'est-à-dire que le monde est maniable' (3, p. 52). But it was the way he did this that impressed Barthes most. Brecht's theatre was the opposite of naturalistic, in that it refused to blur the distinction between the conventional and the natural. By advertising its own artifices it sought actively to prevent the audience from falling victim to the myth of expressivity. By preventing (or trying to prevent . . .) identification between the audience and the characters, Brecht's theatre forced the audience to retain a certain *critical* distance. The desired effect was quite the opposite of the passive consumerism fostered by the bourgeois theatre.

Indirectly, Brecht provided Barthes with the criteria for making value-judgements. On the one side, Naturalism with its insidious conflation of semiology and ideology, on the other the frankness of the Brechtian position which laid all its cards on the

table. On the one hand, the 'maladies des costumes de théâtre', on the other the 'santé du signe'. This dividing line is the same as the one which informs Barthes's strictures on bourgeois criticism: the duplicity of a critical system which pretends not to be one, versus the 'franchise du système'.

In light of this, one would expect Barthes's attitude towards the 'Littérature du monde petit-bourgeois' (p. 168) to be one of unalloyed abhorrence and unrelenting hostility. This is not quite the case. As I will now suggest, there are moments when he hesitates, as if paralysed both by the ambiguity of his object and by the ambivalence of his own feelings.

iv) UNE RÉCONCILIATION DU RÉEL ET DES HOMMES

The creation of the Tour de France in 1903 by the entrepreneur Henri Desgranges sprang from both nationalistic and economic motives. This trial of sporting prowess was consonant with the proto-fascistic promotion of the body beautiful – burgeoning gymnastic societies, rugby clubs etc. – following defeat at the hands of the Prussians in 1871. It corresponded to a tough new national self-image which was, needless to say, entirely mythical. At the same time, and as if by magic, it was a boon for the emergent French sports press, in which Desgranges himself had a considerable stake, and for sponsoring manufacturers such as Michelin (see 21, p. 368). I mention these points precisely because, in 'Le Tour de France comme épopée', Barthes does not, or hardly. It is true that he mentions, twice in eleven pages, the 'déterminismes économiques de notre grande épopée' (p. 118), but this recall to reality appears almost grudging, for the form. It is as if his fascination with the *literariness* of this myth outweighed his obligation to denounce its ideological abuses. He appears eager to justify his fascination, arguing that *despite* being a catalogue of 'impostures traditionnelles' thrown up as a smoke-screen to mask the 'mobiles économiques' of the Tour, this myth has a certain liberating potential. It allows one to glimpse 'l'image utopique d'un monde qui cherche obstinément à se réconcilier par le spectacle d'une clarté totale des rapports entre l'homme, les hommes et la Nature' (p. 119).

A similar idea is floated in the earliest essay in the volume, 'Le monde où l'on catche', where the spectacle of all-in wrestling gestures towards 'une intelligence idéale des choses, [. . .] une euphorie des hommes, haussés pour un temps hors de l'ambiguïté constitutive des situations quotidiennes et installés dans la vision panoramique d'une Nature univoque' (p. 23). Given that the contradictions inherent to capitalist society can only be resolved, in reality, by action and not by fables, both myths are ultimately alienating. But not entirely. It is as if 'Le Tour de France comme épopée' marked a return to the Olympian myth which served as a model for many of the earlier *mythologies*; that is to say, a vision of myth as potentially heuristic, or at least evidential: an indirect representation of the objective contradictions which vitiate the relations between man and man, man and the world.

So, alienation or liberation? Barthes's ambivalence can be traced through three essays which are closely linked in their preoccupations: 'Celle qui voit clair', 'Astrologie' and 'La Dame aux camélias'. The analysis of the 'agony aunt' columns of the popular women's magazines is rather negative. The ideological operation is particularly pernicious in that the surface morality of *Feminine Independence* 'entraîne naturellement une impuissance complète à toute ouverture sur le monde réel' (p. 127). The function of the 'Courrier du Cœur' is to imprison women in a kind of psychological gynaeceum: a harem to which only men hold the key. The solutions put forward by the agony aunt invariably assume a single universal panacea: find yourself a man! Preferably a rich one. Even the apparently liberating advice to 'se moquer des hommes, se serrer les coudes entre femmes' (p. 127) masks the whiff of sour grapes: it is a meagre compensation for the ultimate humiliation of having been rejected by a man in the first place. The advice, then, is entirely parasitic; it simply reinforces the image of women as relative beings. But the really significant thing about the 'Courrier du Cœur' is that it is a 'monde d'essences'. These essences, *puella*, *conjux* and *mulier*, are sanctioned by the statute book: 'loin de tout romantisme ou de toute investigation un peu réelle du vécu, [la typologie] suit au plus près un ordre stable des essences, celui du Code civil' (p. 126).

However, it is precisely an 'investigation un peu réelle du vécu' that Barthes discovers in that other staple of women's magazines, the horoscope. He notes with a degree of surprise that 'on n'y trouve nul monde onirique [as in 'Celle qui voit clair'], mais plutôt une description étroitement réaliste d'un milieu social précis, celui des lectrices du journal' (p. 166). At bottom, the solutions to the problems which beset the women readers are no less mystificatory than those proposed by the agony aunts; they tend to cancel each other out by 'le balancement des possibles': the meeting of Neptune and Uranus in Capricorn might signal the start of a beautiful friendship, on the other hand it might presage its end! Moreover, the reader's alienation is reflected back to her in a fragmented fashion: there is no suggestion that her lack of job prospects, her stormy home life and the claustrophobia of her social circle might actually be expressions of a single problem: 'rien qui, d'un horaire à l'autre, puisse suggérer l'idée d'une aliénation totale' (p. 166). And yet. And yet Barthes is insistent that, precisely because of its descriptive realism, the horoscope is not escapist like the agony column, but 'évidence réaliste des conditions de vie de l'employée, de la vendeuse' (p. 168). It is for this reason that the horoscope finds a place among 'toutes les entreprises de semi-aliénation (ou de semi-libération) qui se donnent à tâche d'objectiver le réel, sans pourtant aller jusqu'à le démystifier' (p. 168). The most interesting of these undertakings is, of course, Literature itself; especially the realist novel in the bourgeois tradition which this chapter started by analysing.

We find the same ambivalence in the penultimate essay in the volume, 'La Dame aux camélias'. Marguerite Gautier is caught in the same trap as the correspondents to the agony columns or the readers of horoscopes: she *knows* that she is alienated, but her conduct simply reinforces her alienation. She perceives her sickness but is blind to the remedies. Barthes defines her consciousness as semi-lucid, and once again his ambivalence is articulated in this alternative between (semi-)alienation and (semi-)liberation.

How are we to understand this hesitation? There are a number of factors at play. First, it is notable that Barthes supposes the

consumers of these particular myths to belong to social groups vis-à-vis which he, as a middle-class intellectual, harbours a strange inferiority complex not atypical of other left-wing intellectuals of the period: wrestling and the Tour de France are *popular* entertainments. The readers of horoscopes are *women* – they may belong to the hated petite bourgeoisie, but they find grace in Barthes's eyes by virtue of the fact that their alienated condition at least makes them marginal within that class. One is reminded of Barthes's lament about the loneliness of the 'mythologue' in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui': 'Déchiffrer le Tour de France, le bon Vin de France, c'est s'abstraire de ceux qui s'en distraient, de ceux qui s'en réchauffent' (p. 245). Another important factor is highlighted by Philippe Roger, who writes: 'Le paradoxe central des *Mythologies* est là: tous leurs bonheurs d'écriture, Barthes les doit précisément à l'engluement, à la fascination, à cette "compacité savoureuse" que le sémiologue empoissé doit s'imputer à crime' (27, p. 98). This would certainly explain the fascination with the literary myth of the Tour de France to which I drew attention earlier. It explains also the *loving care* with which Barthes reconstitutes the myths, before dismantling them. Clearly, myth is not simply an object of denunciation, it is also a pretext for writing.

This last point is closely related to a final factor upon which I have inevitably already touched: the possibility of literature being turned to counter-mythical ends. Having condemned the ultimately mystificatory presentation of Marguerite in *La Dame aux camélias*, Barthes remarks that it would not have taken very much for the character to be a 'source de critique' rather than an 'objet aliéné'. What it would have taken, in fact, is for the play to have been written by Brecht rather than Dumas. The problem is Marguerite's semi-lucidity: if she had been presented as wholly blind ('sotte dérisoirement') then the spectacle of her blindness might have caused the scales to fall from the eyes of the audience. In a 1955 article on Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*, Barthes had drawn his readers' attention to precisely this mechanism. It is the total blindness – as opposed to a deceptive semi-lucidity – of Mother Courage that obliges the audience to see not only her blindness, but also the reality to which she is

blind. The idea is formulated most clearly in 'Le Pauvre et le Prolétaire': 'Or Charlot, conformément à l'idée de Brecht, montre sa cécité au public de telle sorte que le public voit à la fois l'aveugle et son spectacle; voir quelqu'un ne pas voir, c'est la meilleure façon de voir intensément ce qu'il ne voit pas' (p. 41).

Interestingly enough, it is this same metaphor of blindness and insight that informs Barthes's comments, in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui', on literature as counter-myth. Writing of Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, he says: 'Le pouvoir du second mythe, c'est de fonder le premier *en naïveté regardée*' (p. 223, my italics). Literature, or at least 'writing', may be myth, but it is possible to imagine a counter-mythical literature, a few examples of which may already exist: Flaubert, Brecht, Queneau, Robbe-Grillet. It is perhaps this – along with his writerly fascination for the objects of this world – that most fully explains Barthes's ambivalence to the literariness of myth. As Philippe Roger has put it: 'la visée mythologique [. . .] est d'explorer les voies d'un "romanesque" de type nouveau' (27, p. 99).

Through the insight it provided Barthes into the connotative mechanism of myth, Literature is at the origin of *Mythologies*. Through the counter-mythical vistas it opens up, literature is also perhaps at the end. Barthes the 'mythologist' may not be in a 'situation moïsséenne' (p. 246), but Barthes the *écrivain* is offered a teasing glimpse of the promised land: 'une réconciliation du réel et des hommes, de la description et de l'explication, de l'objet et du savoir' (p. 247).

Tactics without a strategy

'Il n'est point de serpent, ni de monstre odieux.
Qui par l'art imité, ne puisse plaire aux yeux.'

Boileau

THE necessity of combating myth is never doubted by Barthes; the problems begin with method, and these problems are the consequence of certain characteristics of the mythical discourse itself. The first of these is its ubiquity: everything can be a myth; nothing, ultimately, is safe from myth. In 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' Barthes despondently records the failure of some recent literary attempts to escape the clutches of myth. He had argued in *Le Degré zéro* that 'Le consentement volontaire au mythe peut d'ailleurs définir toute notre Littérature traditionnelle' (p. 221), but even writers who have subsequently attempted to withdraw their 'consent', who have tried to place themselves out of reach of myth, have not fared so well. The metrical irregularity and disjointed syntax of much modern poetry can be seen as an attempt to subvert the Order connoted by the very regularity of classical verse. But undeterred, myth simply seizes on this attempted subversion and uses it to signify itself: 'en refusant farouchement le mythe, la poésie se livre à lui pieds et poings liés' (p. 220). Similarly, it might be thought that a totally unambiguous 'parole', such as formal logic or mathematical symbolism, offered no foothold for myth: a seamless suit of armour presenting no chink or crevice upon which myth could gain purchase. But Barthes shows in 'Le cerveau d'Einstein', and again in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui', that the language of mathematics is no more invulnerable than modern poetry: 'aucune signification parasite ne peut s'insinuer en [le langage mathématique]. Et c'est pourquoi précisément le mythe va l'emporter en bloc; il prendra telle formule mathématique ($E = mc^2$), et fera de ce sens inaltérable le signifiant pur de la mathématicité' (p. 219). The prognosis is gloomy: 'Le mythe peut tout atteindre, tout

corrompre, et jusqu'au mouvement même qui se refuse à lui' (p. 219). Why is this a problem for the would-be mythologist? Because it confronts him with the spectre of failure even before he has set pen to paper: if what has been argued is correct, then the *language* used by the mythologist himself risks falling victim to the very myth it is attempting to dispel.

'Le mythe est toujours un vol de langage' (p. 217), writes Barthes. And herein lies a second problem: the theft of language perpetrated by myth is so subtle that nothing appears to have been taken. How do you alert a blasé public to an effraction which you cannot *prove* to have happened in the first place? This is what Barthes means when he refers to the 'improbable' nature of myth: at once 'unlikely' and 'unprovable'. If myth is a 'signification qui est reçue, mais qui n'est pas lue' (3, p. 235), he must demonstrate this 'vol de langage' with sufficient cogency for his readers to be obliged – despite their bad faith or scepticism – to graduate from passive reception to active decipherment.

It seems that the most Barthes could hope to achieve would be a generalized deconditioning of the public with regard to myth, something akin to the '*déconditionnement* du lecteur par rapport à l'art essentialiste du roman bourgeois' (3, p. 70), which he sees as the aim of Robbe-Grillet's novels.

So one way of approaching the stylistic features of *Mythologies* is to see them as a *tactical* response to the specific problems encountered by anyone who sets out to explain the way myth functions and what purposes it serves in our society.

Myth is axiomatic: it operates a sort of fusion of fact and value, it is assertive. One way of countering myth is to reply in kind, to adopt an axiological language which is as unanswerable as myth itself. The first 'tactic' I shall examine involves the assumption on Barthes's part of an authoritative position from which to speak: if one is trading blows with an adversary, it is advisable to be standing on firm ground at the time.

i) SOYEZ SÛRS QUE LE MARXISTE LEFEBVRE COMPREND
PARFAITEMENT...

In 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui', Barthes writes: 'tout, dans notre vie quotidienne, est tributaire de la représentation que la bourgeoisie *se fait et nous fait* des rapports de l'homme et du monde' (p. 227). If this 'representation' is a mystification, as Barthes clearly believes it is, what would constitute a *true* representation? In the postface, a Marxist vision of true, or real, social relations is explicitly invoked as a counterweight to the inverted image of reality conveyed by myth. Marx is actually named and quoted, albeit in a footnote, as authoritative support. But the essays themselves are far less explicit. Here, a Marxist position is indirectly evoked, rather than openly adopted.

The occasions on which Barthes actually nails his colours to the mast are relatively rare. One example is, however, to be found at the end of 'Critique muette et aveugle' where he clearly aligns himself with the Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre (p. 37). Similarly, in 'La grande famille des hommes', we find the prescriptive statement: 'L'humanisme progressiste, au contraire, doit toujours penser à inverser les termes de cette très vieille imposture, à décaper sans cesse la nature, ses "lois" et ses "limites" pour y découvrir l'Histoire et poser enfin la Nature comme elle-même historique' (p. 175). But even here Barthes stops short of naming this 'humanisme progressiste', except by circumlocution, as if he was reluctant to identify himself too explicitly with a doctrinaire position.

All the elements of a Marxist world-view are present in the essays: the assumption that the deepest, most thoroughly obfuscated level is that of economics; the division of society into antagonistic classes; the alienation and reification of man under capitalism; the necessity of dialectical thought as a counter to bourgeois reason etc. But this world-view is more often *connoted*, in exactly the same way that myth connotes the '*représentation que la bourgeoisie se fait et nous fait* des rapports de l'homme et du monde' (p. 227).

The economic determinants which myth strives to hide are frequently suggested by a single word. In 'Conjugales' we read 'le mensonge, l'exploitation, la cupidité, tout le mal social bourgeois est renfloué par la vérité du couple' (p. 47). Or, in the same essay, 'que ce bonheur, par définition mesquin, puisse être cependant *choisi*, voilà qui renfloue les millions de Français qui le partagent par condition' (p. 48). And again, in 'La croisière du Sang bleu': 'forts de leur divinité renflouée, les princes font démocratiquement de la politique' (p. 35). 'Renflouer' functions here as Barthes's own myth-word. The most usual sense of the word is to 'refloat' or 'bale out' (a vessel, or a person in difficulties), but it is also commonly used in economics to refer to a financial rescue achieved by injecting new cash into an ailing business. Similarly, when he uses the verb 'relancer' (in 'Conjugales' or 'Dominici' for example) he is playing on the, at the time, neologistic meaning of 'to boost a business' or 'stimulate the economy'. The effect of these words, especially when used persistently, is to give a jolt to the reader, to remind him of what, at bottom, is *really* at stake.

As Barthes himself remarks in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, these economic or political 'reminders' are often delivered in the form of a sting in the tail, a delayed punch-line. Sometimes this 'pointe finale' is quite direct, as in 'Saponides et détergents' (p. 40). Elsewhere, the jolt is more subtle, more of an nudge and a wink than an elbow in the ribs. Take for example the ending of 'L'acteur d'Harcourt': 'ne pas suspendre aux escaliers les d'Harcourt classiques [. . .], c'est une audace dont bien peu de théâtres se payent le luxe' (p. 27). Here the literal, pecuniary meaning of 'se payer' interferes with the common figurative meaning of 'se payer le luxe de . . .', in order to emphasize the fact that, like bourgeois marriages (see 'Conjugales', p. 47), bourgeois art is 'une opération fructueuse de comptabilité'.

The notion of class is used by Barthes whenever he needs to counter bourgeois attempts to de-politicize social conflict by recourse to categories such as 'caste' or 'human nature'. In 'Le Guide Bleu' he shows how, in the Hachette tourist guide, the real specificity of Spain's ethnic mix is 'réduite à un vaste ballet classique, une sorte de commedia dell'arte fort sage, dont la

typologie improbable sert à masquer le spectacle réel des conditions, des classes et des métiers' (p. 122). On occasion, he is not above resorting to a table-thumping rhetoric that any PCF (Parti Communiste Français) apparatchik would have been proud of: 'l'individualisme est un mythe bourgeois qui permet de vacciner d'une liberté inoffensive l'ordre et la tyrannie de classe' (p. 133).

But table-thumping was not really Barthes's style, whatever the cause. The discomfiture of his position can be glimpsed in the piece on Charlie Chaplin, 'Le Pauvre et le Prolétaire'. The essay opens with the remark that Chaplin's latest gag was to donate half of his 'prix soviétique' to Abbé Pierre's fighting fund! Hardly an act guaranteed to endear Chaplin to the author of 'Iconographie de l'abbé Pierre': 'Au fond, cela revient à établir une égalité de nature entre le prolétaire et le pauvre' (p. 40). Yet Barthes cannot bring himself to condemn Chaplin; he talks rather of the 'political ambiguity' of Chaplin's productions, in particular of *Modern Times*. What Chaplin shows us, says Barthes, is the individual, isolated by his poverty and unable to transcend this isolation towards collective struggle: that is, to pass from 'pauvre' to 'prolétaire'. Nevertheless, despite being 'discutable politiquement' (Barthes's political super-ego talking . . .), his anarchy 'représente en art la forme peut-être la plus efficace de la révolution' (p. 42). The fact is that the alternative was not very seductive: 'En montrant l'ouvrier déjà engagé dans un combat conscient, subsumé sous la Cause et le Parti, les autres œuvres rendent compte d'une réalité politique nécessaire, mais sans force esthétique' (p. 41). Given that 'les autres œuvres' is Barthes's way of alluding to the current products of socialist realism, one can only admire the delicacy of the understatement contained in the last phrase: the section of *Le Degré zéro* entitled 'Ecriture et Révolution' consists of a critical lapidation of socialist realism, more savage than anything Barthes wrote about any bourgeois writer. His comments on Roger Garaudy give some idea of the tone: 'Evidemment, il faut faire la part de la médiocrité; dans le cas de Garaudy, elle est immense' (I, p. 52). In discussing alternatives, it is important to bear in mind that Barthes did not believe in the existence of a genuine working-class culture, or even that such an autonomous culture was a possibility in the circumstances (p. 226).

So, returning to the quotation from 'Le Pauvre et le Prolétaire', Barthes seems to be stuck between ethics and esthetics: the one is necessary, but the other is desirable.

One critic has summed up Barthes's position in these terms: 'When in *Degree Zero* Barthes described the sort of political axiological writing which presents a theory as a fact, he clearly spoke as one oppressed by it: he views it with more lightness of heart in 'Myth Today' because there he is using it himself and believes in its necessity' (20, p. 115). But not, I think, in its truth-value. It can be seen that Barthes's appropriation of a 'strong discourse' like Marxism has a purely *tactical* value in *Mythologies*; it is an expedient which must be adopted despite its inconveniences. And there are plenty of these. An episode from this period captures the essence of Barthes's unease. The first half of 1955 was marked by a polemic with Albert Camus over an article on *La Peste* which Barthes had published in February of that year. In this article he had criticized Camus's novel for its lack of 'solidarity' and its 'refusal of History'. Having survived – albeit battered and bruised – a similar and far more traumatic attack at the hands of the team of Sartre's *Temps Modernes*, Camus was more than capable of defending himself; he countered the second point by demanding that Barthes lay his cards on the table: from precisely what point of view was Barthes speaking when he criticized his, Camus's, conception of History? Outmanoeuvred and with his back to the wall, Barthes had little choice but to grit his teeth and declare his point of view to be that of 'historical materialism'. This open declaration of a position must have been acutely embarrassing for Barthes, especially when one recalls that here was a man whose political activism never even extended to putting his name to a petition, let alone 'coming down on to the streets'.

The basic problem, however, was one he shared with others on the non-communist Left: the route for a 'fellow traveller' of the Stalinist PCF was not an easy one, especially when it was strewn with 'pavés' produced by the likes of Garaudy and Stil!

'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' adds another strong discourse to Barthes's arsenal in the form of semiology. However, the essays themselves – whilst certainly studying the 'life of signs within

society' – are not, thankfully, exercises in semiological analysis of quite the type adumbrated in the postface. If Barthes had wielded in *Mythologies* the cumbersome theoretical machinery that was to lumber through the three hundred pages of *Système de la mode*, the essays would very soon have become intolerably repetitive. The only 'hard currency' imported from linguistic science is the denotation/connotation distinction, but its value is decisive, not only to the way Barthes conceptualizes myth, but also to the way he himself writes about it. This much is made clear by Stephen Heath: 'il s'agissait de décrire le procès de signification de la parole mythique, et ainsi de la défaire, de donner à lire l'appropriation idéologique qu'elle opère – le schéma de la connotation fournissant à la fois le moyen de comprendre cette opération et celui de représenter cette compréhension, de la montrer' (19, p. 65).

We have just seen how Barthes's writing characteristically *connotes* the authority of a Marxist discourse, instead of *using* it in a systematic way. But this is only one instance of a more generalized tactic; and this consists not in talking *about* myth by means of an 'analytic' metalanguage (be it Marxist, psychoanalytic or linguistic), but rather in *extending* it: myth is copied, or mimicked, and in the process magnified in such a way that its operations are exposed to scrutiny and derision.

ii) LIRE 'MYTHOLOGIES' COMME UN ROMAN DE FLAUBERT

'La meilleure arme contre le mythe', speculates Barthes, 'c'est peut-être de le mythifier à son tour, c'est de produire un *mythe artificiel*: et ce mythe reconstitué sera une véritable mythologie' (p. 222). The example he gives of such an 'artificial myth' is Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. In this book, claims Barthes, Flaubert has *copied* a certain bourgeois ideology, reconstituting it in the way that the archeological restorer Eugène Viollet-le-Duc had imaginatively restored Gothic cathedrals, but with one crucial difference: 'moins naïf que Viollet-le-Duc, il a disposé dans sa reconstitution des ornements supplémentaires qui la démystifient' (p. 223). A footnote specifies that the principal

'ornament of style' added by Flaubert is the 'style indirect libre'. This narrative device, much affected by Flaubert, has the effect of introducing a subtle yet pervasive irony into the narrative; the reader is never quite certain how seriously the narrative is intended to be taken: the actions and words of the characters are mediated by a vaguely sarcastic presence, but a presence which is felt rather than perceived, and which one would be hard pressed to ascribe to a personal narrator, still less to the author himself. Barthes later commented on Flaubert's use of this device: '*on ne sait jamais s'il est responsable de ce qu'il écrit (s'il y a un sujet derrière son langage); car l'être de l'écriture (le sens du travail qui la constitue) est d'empêcher de jamais répondre à cette question: Qui parle?*' (7, p. 146). It is possible that Flaubert's uses of uncertainty were not as dazzlingly modernistic as Barthes claims, but there is no doubting his admiration for this writer who made *irony* his stock-in-trade.

Barthes once defined irony as 'la question posée au langage par le langage' (4, p. 74). The language which is being questioned in *Mythologies* is the language of myth, and I will now consider just a few of the myriad ways Barthes finds of asking this question.

One commentator has described the typical pattern of the essays in *Mythologies* as 'starting with the detail which "interpellated" Barthes and indicated the presence of a myth', followed by a 'supple mimetic description, the seductive aspects of which make myth attractive and thus credible' (20, p. 105). By no means all of the essays follow this pattern, but a great many do include reproductions of the myth they are analysing. Take, for example, the following description of the mythical qualities of milk: 'le lait est contraire au feu par toute sa densité moléculaire, par la nature crémeuse, et donc sopitive, de sa nappe; le vin est mutilant, chirurgical, il transmute et accouche; le lait est cosmétique, il lie, recouvre, restaure. De plus, sa pureté, associée à l'innocence enfantine, est un gage de force, d'une force non réulsive, non congestive, mais calme, blanche, lucide, tout égale au réel' (pp. 76-77). At this point the reader is on the verge of doubling his order, and writing a letter of tearful gratitude to the Milk Marketing Board . . . only to be shaken out of his

rêverie by the remark that this is actually '[un] mythe parsi-falien' – and one which goes some way towards explaining why milk-shake is so popular amongst Parisian 'thugs and hard-nuts' (p. 77). Milk, when all is said and done, is just milk. The description of the 'Nouvelle Citroën', likewise, is more alluring, more seductive than any advertising copy could ever be: 'La Déesse est visiblement exaltation de la vitre, et la tôle n'y est qu'une base. Ici, les vitres ne sont pas fenêtres, ouvertures percées dans la coque obscure, elles sont grands pans d'air et de vide, ayant le bombage étalé et la brillance des bulles de savon, la minceur dure d'une substance plus entomologique que minérale' (p. 151). The rhythm, the soft alliterations and the musical hendecasyllable ('ouvertures percées . . .') with its Mallarmean resonances: all of this points to an attempt to seduce. But this seductive beauty is swiftly defiled: 'les tôles, les joints sont touchés, les rembourrages palpés, les sièges essayés, les portes caressées, les coussins pelotés' (p. 152). This second passage, in which Barthes himself exploits the full resources of (sexual) connotation, encapsulates the message of the essay: that the Déesse is a *fetishized* object in every sense of the term.

The loving reconstitution of the myth could be seen as the statement of the 'thesis' or *doxa*, which is then contested by antithesis or paradox. These two rhetorical figures are used extensively in *Mythologies*. In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, he comments on his use of antithesis in these terms: 'L'Antithèse est *un vol de langage*: j'emprunte la violence du discours courant au profit de ma propre violence, du *sens-pour-moi*' (9, p. 142). And paradox is identified as the figure which defines the dialectic of his whole *œuvre* (9, p. 75). Examples of these two figures abound in *Mythologies*: 'Passé de la "scène" à la "ville", l'acteur d'Harcourt n'abandonne nullement le "rêve" pour la "réalité". C'est tout le contraire . . .' (p. 25); 'Mais on aurait bien tort de prendre cela pour un effort de démystification. C'est tout le contraire . . .' (pp. 32-33); 'La liberté apparente des conseils dispense de la liberté réelle des conduites . . .' (p. 128); 'la liberté en vitrine, à titre décoratif, mais l'Ordre chez soi, à titre constitutif' (p. 133). On occasion he takes irony one step further by casting his antithesis in the form of the hated bour-

geois aphorism: 'Un peu de mal "avoué" dispense de reconnaître beaucoup de mal caché' (p. 46).

By this tactical manoeuvre, the seductive power of the reconstructed myth is undermined retroactively, by the 'ornement supplémentaire' of antithesis. Elsewhere, the language used to render the myth carries within it the seeds of doubt. This is particularly the case where Barthes resorts to a form of mock-heroic parody, or overstatement, designed to provoke mirth on the part of the reader. The description of the spectacle offered by an actor of the 'young theatre' is a case in point: 'Il faut à tout prix "bouillir", c'est-à-dire à la fois brûler et se répandre; d'où les formes humides de cette combustion [. . .]. On avait l'impression d'assister à un travail physiologique effroyable, une torsion monstrueuse des tissus internes' (p. 108). One is willing to accept that the actor in question was trying a little too hard, but not even the most ardent practitioners of method-acting have yet, to my knowledge, mastered the art of spontaneous combustion! A similar device can be seen at work in Barthes's hyperbolic assessment of the physical torments experienced by 'un peuple d'hommes d'affaires' for whom thinking is: 'une opération violente, cataclysmique, dont la sueur est le moindre signe' (p. 29). It is difficult to resist, finally, the reconstituted myth of the Olympian actor: 'la face de l'acteur semble rejoindre sa demeure céleste dans une ascension sans hâte et sans muscles, au contraire de l'humanité spectatrice qui, appartenant à une classe zoologique différente et n'étant apte au mouvement que par les jambes (et non par le visage), doit regagner à pied son appartement' (p. 25). We have here a veritable catalogue of literary devices. The use of 'face' instead of the more normal 'visage' serves to reinforce the bogus divinity of the actor: 'face', as well as being used to designate the masks of certain animals, is the word reserved in the French translation of the Bible for the countenance of God; the (mythical) gulf between the actor and the rest of us mere mortals is underlined by the contrast between the humorously overstated divinity of the actor and the understated humanity of the theatre-goers ('une classe zoologique . . .'); finally, the overblown, mock-scientific language is deflated *in extremis* by the bathetic opposition between 'demeure céleste' and

'appartement'. A similar effect of bathos, or perhaps inverted bathos, is achieved in the opening of 'Le vin et le lait' where Barthes states that wine is felt to be a national property 'au même titre que ses trois cent soixante espèces de fromages et sa culture' (p. 74). Here, the seemingly ludicrous *rapprochement* between Culture and cheese serves to shock us into recognizing the nationalistic myth in which they really are equivalent.

Perhaps the most spectacular devices in *Mythologies* are those that bear not on discursive structures, but on the word itself: *Mythologies* is crawling with mutant adjectival and substantive life-forms. Barthes had a self-professed love of neologisms. His coinages include 'francité', 'romanité', 'mathématicité', 'gouvernementalité', 'basquité', 'sinité', even the splendidly self-parodic 'bouvard-et-pécuchéité'. He points out in 'le mythe, aujourd'hui' that these 'barbaric' forms are necessary in order for him to be able to *name* myths: the dictionary is of little use when one is dealing with the nebulous (and constantly renewed) meanings of mythical concepts. But this explanation seems less apposite to the essays themselves, where the theoretical framework of the postface is absent. Two other explanations suggest themselves. The first is that Barthes's neologisms are the expression of the pure joy of inventiveness, the joy of *writing*. But one could also argue that these words have a tactical value. In the *Essais critiques*, Barthes notes that 'l'objet classique secrète fatalement son adjectif [. . .] Robbe-Grillet poursuit cette fatalité, son analyse est une opération anti-coagulante' (3, p. 36). It is possible that Barthes sees his own use of neologisms, archaisms, and technical terms – drawn, for the most part, from philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis – as a similar kind of anti-coagulant operation. Admittedly, the meaning of these strange nouns, adjectives and verbs is not normally hard to fathom, as they are invariably generated according to isomorphic principles: 'cryptuaire' (by analogy with 'crépusculaire'), or 'gestuaire' (by analogy with 'dictionnaire'); 'tendreur', which conflates 'tendresse' and 'douceur' to suggest the *human* warmth of wood, as opposed to the inhuman coldness of plastic; 'réifier' and 'classifier' (in the odd sense of 'divided into social classes') which follow the pattern of adding '-ifier' to a noun in order to create a verb. But

comprehensible as they may be, they bring the reader up short, capture his attention, and alert him to the fact that here – unlike in myth – ‘à la surface du langage, quelque chose bouge’.

The frequent use of amphibology needs to be added to this catalogue of tactics. A particularly fine specimen closes the essay on ‘Le vin et le lait’: ‘[la production du vin] participe lourdement du capitalisme français, que ce soit celui des bouilleurs de cru ou celui des grands colons algériens qui imposent au musulman, sur la terre même dont on l’a dépossédé, une culture dont il n’a que faire, lui qui manque de pain’ (p. 77). The word ‘culture’ (crop and culture) encapsulates perfectly, by its very ambiguity, the thrust of Barthes’s essay, which is to demonstrate the real nature of ‘cultural alibis’.

A review, however cursory, of Barthes’s stylistic arsenal would not be complete without at least a mention of his reinvention of obsolete literary forms; the dictionary form, for example, which is used sparingly but to great humorous effect. I have already had occasion to mention (in Chapter 2) the lexicon of colonialist key-words that Barthes compiles in ‘Grammaire africaine’; he uses the device again in ‘Le Tour de France comme épopée’, which concludes with a LEXIQUE DES COUREURS. Some of the entries rival Flaubert’s *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* in their laconic stupidity:

- COLETTO. Coureur le plus élégant du Tour.
 DE GROOT. Rouleur solitaire, taciturne batave.
 MOLINERIS. L’homme du dernier kilomètre. (pp. 120-21)

Given that the full force of Barthes’s rhetoric, like myth itself, is received and not read, one feels that the most desirable, if least practical, solution would be to quote the whole book . . .

iii) DENOTATION/DETONATION

In a much later work Barthes finds a characteristic metaphor to describe his œuvre to date: ‘Le mouvement de son œuvre est

tactique: il s'agit de se déplacer, de barrer, comme aux barres, mais non de conquérir' (9, p. 175). This takes up a distinction made nearly twenty years earlier in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui'. There Barthes describes myth on the Left as tactical rather than strategic (p. 235): although the Left may have occasional recourse to myth, there is nothing in the nature of the Left that implies myth as its necessary form of expression; unlike the Right, for which myth is an *organic* ideological form. It seems that strategy, for Barthes, is linked with the idea of victory. This is why his approach in *Mythologies* is tactical rather than strategic: he does not believe in the final victory. If myth will only disappear along with the economic base it is designed to reproduce and perpetuate, it follows that victory will come only with the Revolution. But Barthes does not believe in the Revolution. It must be said that the concluding pages of 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' do not exactly ooze confidence in the inevitability of Revolution: 'Le mythologue n'est même pas dans une situation moiséenne: il ne voit pas la Terre promise. Pour lui, la positivité de demain est entièrement cachée par la négativité d'aujourd'hui' (p. 246). Barthes was a man of little faith, but I do not intend this as a criticism. It is perfectly possible to *use* a philosophy such as Marxism without subscribing to its every last tenet. Unless, of course, you are working within a particularly orthodox party organization: this is why the most interesting left-wing thought in the 1940s and '50s was elaborated outside the PCF, on the margins of orthodoxy.

If myth is ubiquitous, the only way to escape it is to be perpetually elsewhere, or nowhere: utopia. The various utopias in which Barthes takes refuge could also be seen to have a tactical value. I will examine just one: literalism, or language cleansed of connotation, reduced to an edenic innocence, a language which 'acts the world' rather than just talking about it. In this sense, Barthes's praise of Camus's 'écriture blanche' in *Le Degré zéro*, or his promotion of Robbe-Grillet's 'littérature littérale' in the *Essais critiques*, can be seen in retrospect to have a similar tactical value. This is a point which was not lost on Robbe-Grillet himself, who wrote subsequently: 'Ma prétendue blancheur – qui n'était que la couleur de mon armure – venait à point nommé

pour alimenter son [i.e. Barthes's] discours' (26, p. 38). This nostalgia for an original 'innocence' of language hovers over the whole of *Mythologies*. Occasionally it comes into focus, in 'Minou Drouet' for example: 'c'est [la littéralité] seule pourtant qui peut ôter à la métaphore poétique son artifice, la révéler comme la fulguration d'une vérité, conquise sur une nausée continue du langage' (p. 158). Or in 'L'art vocal bourgeois', where he praises the 'literality' of Panzéra's singing style (p. 170). Robbe-Grillet's writing was, of course, no more 'literal' than any other, and Panzéra's vocal style was as 'expressive', in its own way, as Souzay's. Barthes recognizes this when he talks about the inevitable '*expressivité de la langue*' (p. 218). But this particular utopia seems to hold a deep attraction for Barthes, and one which goes beyond its tactical usefulness as antidote to the 'nausée continue du langage'.

There is a veritable myth of the object-language in *Mythologies*. In 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui', Barthes asks us to consider the politics of tree-felling (destruction of the rain forests was not high on the political agenda at the time!): let us imagine, says Barthes, that I am a lumberjack, and that I *name* the tree I'm about to fell: '[mon langage] me présente la nature dans la mesure seulement où je vais la transformer, c'est un langage par lequel j'*agis* l'objet' (p. 233). But here is Barthes back in his smoky study, scribbling away on the end-product of the woodcutter's labour: 'face au langage réel du bûcheron, je crée un langage second, un méta-langage, dans lequel je vais agir, non les choses, mais leurs noms, et qui est au langage premier ce que le geste est à l'acte' (p. 233). The myth of object-language might then be a 'personal myth': an antidote to the uncertainty Barthes clearly felt about the 'use-value' of his own activity. The similarity with Sartre, again, is striking: the latter also harboured an inferiority complex towards the proletariat: the worker was felt to enjoy direct access to the stuff of reality, and this lent him a solidity, a real-ness to which the intellectual, who was always working at one remove from reality, could not hope to accede.

This is, of course, nonsense: as if the woodcutter were *only* a producer, as if he too were not obliged to *exchange* his product against the products of others! Moreover, one lesson of *Mythol-*

ogies – and it leaps out from every page – is that this *unmediated* contact with reality is not possible in the society in which we live, if it ever was . . . And yet this nostalgia for a golden age of language, which merges into a nostalgia for the Arcadia of pre-industrial society, coupled with a scarcely disguised envy of those whose work involves *material production*, resurfaces at the end of the book where Barthes laments the alienation from ‘the real’ which is the unfortunate correlate of his critical position: ‘Le mécano, l’ingénieur, l’usager même *parlent* l’objet; le mythologue, lui, est condamné au méta-langage’ (p. 246). But curiously, this ‘mythologue’ is a fictional character, who bears only a passing resemblance to the *écrivain* who wrote *Mythologies*.

The problem, if there is one, lies more at the theoretical than the practical level. The (semiological) theory of myth (see Chapter 1) is itself balanced precariously atop an unexploded myth: the myth of object-language, or denotation as a ‘natural state of language’. When Barthes uses images of ‘rape, prostitution, criminality, sacrilege, corruption, vampirism, slavery and parasitism’ (20, p. 114) to describe the operation whereby myth preys on object-language, he ascribes to the latter, by implication, the qualities of innocence, purity and integrity; this is a pre-lapsarian utopia: there are no myths inside the gates of Eden.

‘Le mythe, aujourd’hui’ leads into a theoretical dead end: ‘nous voguons sans cesse entre l’objet et sa démystification, impuissants à rendre sa totalité: car si nous pénétrons l’objet [idéologiser], nous le libérons mais nous le détruisons; et si nous lui laissons son poids [poétiser], nous le respectons, mais nous le restituons encore mystifié’ (p. 247). Esthetics or ethics, sarcasm or revolution, description or explication, literature or science. The alternatives retain a meaning only if one believes that denotation is the ‘truth of language’. To rid oneself of this belief involves putting a bomb under the sign itself. The resulting explosion has a name, and it is left hanging as the ‘final word’ of Barthes’s 1970 preface to *Mythologies: sémioclastie*.

Mythology Today

'Je me souviens de: "Dop Dop Dop, adoptez le shampooing Dop".'

Georges Perec

THE publication of *Mythologies* in 1957 did not quite mark the end of Barthes's involvement with the genre. Between March and November 1959 a second series of 'petites mythologies du mois' was published in *Les Lettres Nouvelles*. That appeared to be it, until twenty years later, in 1978, he unexpectedly returned to the charge. Towards the end of that year, Barthes approached Jean Daniel, the editor of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, with a view to writing a new series of weekly *mythologies*. The pieces appeared for fifteen weeks, between December 1978 and March 1979, at which date they were discontinued by mutual agreement. It is fair to say that these new *mythologies* had been a disappointment to all concerned, not least the readers. Calvet echoes the majority of commentators when he points to the changed political situation in France as a reason for this failure: 'les issues gauchistes ne sont désormais plus guère concevables et l'intellectuel "critique", s'il existe toujours, vit dans une société dont il accepte les principes' (16, p. 276). Substantially the same point emerges from Roger's comments on Barthes's inability to find the tone of the earlier essays: 'leur écriture se prive du procédé primordial des *Mythologies*: ce déclic final du sens qui les bouclait idéologiquement [. . .] prenant infailliblement la main de la Culture dans le sac de sa naturalisation par la "pensée petite-bourgeoise"' (27, p. 116). In other words, the confidence with which the Barthes of 1957 identified his target had guaranteed the sureness of his aim. For a variety of reasons, not all of them 'political', this confidence had been eroded by 1978.

We have seen that *Mythologies* had a double articulation: semiological and ideological, corresponding to the 'how' and the

'why' of myth. The evolution of Barthes's thought in the 1960s and 1970s is marked by a radical reflection on the aims and limits of semiology, which, I believe, resulted in an inevitable broadening of his conception of ideology.

1970 was the year the cock crowed: twice in that year – in the preface to the new edition of *Mythologies*, and in the preamble to *S/Z* – Barthes repudiated, at least partially, his 1957 *Mythologies*. A third denial figured in an article published in *Esprit* in April 1971, 'La Mythologie aujourd'hui'. Thereafter he lost no opportunity, in interviews, books and articles, of distancing himself from the manner, if not the substance of *Mythologies*.

The positioning of the new preface to *Mythologies* is clearly significant; coming first, before the original preface and the essays themselves, it has the effect of directing one's reading, of pre-empting one's response to the texts. The laconic first paragraph, stating simply when the essays were written and published, is, ironically, an example of the sort of assertive 'constat' so frequently denounced in the essays themselves: as if to say: 'that was then, this is now'. All the more so since the second paragraph does not follow on directly from the first. It is not, however, immediately obvious what has changed between 1957 and 1970: the two 'gestes' which were at the origin of *Mythologies* (semiology and ideology) could not, we are told, be repeated today in the same manner. But it is not that the object, myth, has disappeared, nor that it no longer needs combating, nor even that a conjugation of ideology and semiology is no longer the means to this end. So what has changed? Clearly, the precise meaning Barthes now gives to these terms. Semiology itself 'est devenue le lieu théorique où peut se jouer, en ce siècle et dans notre Occident, une certaine libération du signifiant. [. . .] pas de dénonciation sans son instrument d'analyse fine, pas de sémiologie qui finalement ne s'assume comme une *sémioclastie*' (pp. 7-8). But these vague indications as to what this *sémioclastie* might entail are not enlarged upon in this preface. For further details, the reader is obliged to apply to 'La Mythologie aujourd'hui'.

It is here that Barthes crosses the t's and dots the i's, providing a more substantial account of the evolution in his position.

The same points that he made in the preface are rehearsed in this article: 'Il y a toujours, abondant, du mythique dans notre société: également anonyme, retors, fragmenté, bavard, offert à la fois à une critique idéologique et à un démontage sémiologique' (11, p. 80). What has changed, it seems, is that semiology itself has started to reflect on its own assumptions: 'Ce ne sont plus les mythes qu'il faut démasquer [. . .] c'est le signe lui-même qu'il faut ébranler: non pas révéler le sens (latent) d'un énoncé, d'un trait, d'un récit, mais fissurer la représentation même du sens; non pas changer ou purifier les symboles, mais contester le symbolique lui-même [. . .] à la "mythoclastie" succède [. . .] une "sémioclastie"' (11, pp. 80-81).

In simple terms, what can this mean? The semiological analysis inaugurated in 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' hinged on the distinction between connotation and denotation. The bedrock of this schema is the Saussurean concept of the sign, but it is on this very conception of the sign that suspicion now falls: is there not, in the very nature of the signs of natural language a certain mythical predisposition? Even if the signifier and signified are meant to be thought of as inseparable, perhaps this schema lends itself to a fundamental misapprehension: the notion that the signified exists autonomously and independently, *prior to* its entry into a signifying network. In *Mythologies* Barthes wanted to denounce a lie, but in order to do this he had to posit some sort of truth. The ultimate 'truth' was denotation as the 'truth of language', or language in a state of nature. In retrospect, Barthes views his erstwhile distinction between denotation and connotation as a tactic which may have outlived its usefulness: 'L'opposition n'a donc d'usage que dans le cadre d'une opération critique analogue à une expérience d'analyse chimique: chaque fois que je crois à la vérité, j'ai besoin de la dénotation' (9, p. 71).

Sémioclastie, then, refers to the sundering of this bedrock, the radical questioning of this assumption: that the sign could be the expression of a *natural, essential* meaning, somehow existing prior to its articulation.

We can now see how the concept of ideology which informed *Mythologies* had necessarily to undergo a corresponding mutation. A certain equivalence is established in *Mythologies*

between, on the one hand the 'innocent' object-language, and on the other, 'real' social relations: what is pirated and distorted by myth? – the *real*, or *original* meaning of the utterance. What is concealed, or inverted, by myth? – the *real* relations of production obtaining in mass society. As the critique of the sign becomes more far-reaching, more radical, so the critique of ideology becomes infinitely broader. I am referring here not simply to Barthes's realization that the political Left traded in myth just as arrogantly as his ancient bugbear, the bourgeoisie (in any case, this had been well recognized in works predating *Mythologies*, such as *Le Degré zéro*): there is now seen to be a massive covert ideological investment in the very concept of the sign itself. On this account, the 1970 preface is relatively modest, simply identifying 'la Norme bourgeoise' as the 'ennemi capital' (p. 8). But 'La Mythologie aujourd'hui' envisages a somewhat wider target: 'toute la civilisation occidentale (gréco-judéo-islamo-chrétienne), unifiée sous une même théologie (l'essence, le monothéisme) et identifiée par le régime de sens qu'elle pratique, de Platon à *France-Dimanche*' (11, p. 81).

The article goes on to specify that *sémioclastie* could take two complementary directions in practice. The first would be an evaluative typology of discourses, or 'ideolects', according to their 'density'; that is to say, how hackneyed, stereotyped or sclerotic they are. Here the operative terms of 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' – signifier, signified and signification – are to be replaced by less 'semioclastic' operators: quotation, reference and stereotype (11, p. 82). The second path would lead to the practice of what Barthes calls the Text. There is not the space here to explore this notion in any depth, which is perhaps just as well, since Text, as a *practice*, does not by definition lend itself easily to critical lucubrations: 'Le texte scriptible n'est pas une chose, on le trouvera mal en librairie. De plus, son modèle étant productif (et non représentatif), il abolit toute critique, qui, produite, se confondrait avec lui . . .' (7, p. 11).

Apart from the radicalization of semiology and ideology, there is a third, related reason given for the shift from 'mythoclastie' to 'sémioclastie'. And this is the most curious of all. *Mythologies* had its emulators, such as Jean-Francis Held in the

columns of *Le Nouvel Observateur* in the 1960s; and Calvet remarks that, strange and rebarbative as Barthes's style and approach may have appeared at the time, 'elles deviendront très vite le bien commun d'une certaine intelligentsia et semblent aujourd'hui relever de l'évidence' (16, p. 161). But this, it seems, was precisely Barthes's problem. He claims in 'La Mythologie aujourd'hui' that fifteen years on there is 'pas un étudiant qui ne dénonce le caractère bourgeois ou petit-bourgeois d'une forme (de vie, de pensée, de consommation)' (11, p. 80). In the same year, 1970, Barthes informs readers of *Les Lettres françaises* that this capacity not only to detect myth but also to denounce it, is now no longer just the preserve of 'students' – even Joe Bloggs can do it: 'tout le monde peut aujourd'hui dénoncer le caractère petit-bourgeois d'une forme' (10, p. 84). In both cases, Barthes's reflex is *to go further*, and this involves, precisely, the radicalization of mythology which he calls *sémioclastie*. These then are the main points around which Barthes's repudiation of *Mythologies* revolves.

The reasons which led Barthes to this radical displacement are clear enough. He wrote in *L'Empire des signes*: 'il est dérisoire de vouloir contester notre société sans jamais penser les limites mêmes de la langue par laquelle (rapport instrumental) nous prétendons la contester: c'est vouloir détruire le loup en se logeant confortablement dans sa gueule' (6, p. 13). And few would doubt that reflexivity is a healthy, indeed necessary, accompaniment to any critical activity: one does not need to evoke 'motes' and 'beams' in order to appreciate the arrogance of a critic who doubts everything save the validity of his own unexamined assumptions. But here again, I wonder whether an undoubted radicality at the level of theory might not disguise a withdrawal from activism at the level of practice. The enterprise of de-mythologizing is already, *pace* Barthes, difficult and demanding enough, but the enterprise of *sémioclastie* is so vast that it looks suspiciously like yet another utopia. Moreover, there is something slightly disquieting about Barthes's desire always to go further: 'La démystification (ou démythification) est devenue elle-même discours, corpus de phrases, énoncé catéchistique; en face de quoi, la science du signifiant ne peut que se déplacer et

s'arrêter (provisoirement) plus loin' (11, p. 80). The point is taken: as predicted in *Mythologies* itself, what started as a subversive tactic has become hardened, frozen into mannerism; demythification has entered the realm of *ce-qui-va-de-soi*. But the above quotation also expresses a desire to be one step ahead, to be, literally, in the avant-garde. Barthes had long before given a scathing assessment of the political nullity of all avant-gardes: 'l'avant-garde, ce n'est au fond qu'un phénomène cathartique de plus, une sorte de vaccine destinée à inoculer un peu de subjectivité, un peu de liberté sous la croûte des valeurs bourgeoises', and 'Il vient toujours un moment où l'Ordre récupère ses francs-tireurs' (3, p. 81).

And so, finally, to the miraculous acquisition by the man-in-the-street of the capacity to denounce myth wherever he might encounter it. This is marvellous news. It is a shame that somebody forgot to tell the millions of Americans who thought that the Gulf war was being fought in defence of Democracy and Freedom. Closer to home, one wonders what became of this piercing lucidity in the case of a British electorate which voted in a 'piggy-bank Poujadist',⁷ three times, in the belief that a new era of Freedom and Choice for the Individual was about to dawn.

These objections all centre on the question of 'point of view'. In 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui' Barthes wrote: 'Si l'on veut rattacher le schème mythique à une histoire générale, expliquer comment il répond à l'intérêt d'une société définie, bref passer de la sémiologie à l'idéologie, c'est évidemment au niveau de la troisième accommodation qu'il faut se placer: c'est le lecteur de mythes lui-même qui doit en révéler la fonction essentielle' (p. 215). This was the sense of the tactical espousal of a Marxist class position in *Mythologies*. Perhaps the notion of *sémioclastie* and the practice of 'Text', impeccable as they may be as theoretical constructs, create a utopian space for *writers*, but in a society where mass illiteracy appears at times to be a government policy-objective, one wonders what space is left for the *reader*, let alone the mystified *receiver*.

⁷ Denis Healey's amusing, if somewhat inaccurate description of Margaret Thatcher.

So where does this leave *Mythologies* today? Statistically, the popularity of *Mythologies* is undiminished; it is still the most widely read of all Barthes's books, both in French and in translation. But this does not tell us very much about how *Mythologies* is read today, about how it is appropriated by its readers. It is something of a truism to say that any given work has as many potential 'readings' as it has readers – this is a view of the literary text, moreover, which the work of Barthes, among others, has done much to promote. Depending on the angle from which one chooses to approach *Mythologies*, it is variously: a seminal work of ideological discourse-analysis; a ground-breaking study in the semiotics of everyday life; a chronicle of the first half of the 1950s: colonial wars and decolonization, the emergence of the 'Third World' (Bandung), the Cold War. It can also be read, now, as kind of repository of collective memory; a sort of *Je me souviens*: micro-memories common to a generation, and which constituted the actuality of that generation: gangster films, advertising jingles, books, exhibitions and plays, a fateful glass of milk, once famous cyclists who have long since dismounted for ever . . . It is also a dazzling display of literary criticism, an object-lesson in how to read – this alone *should* ensure its place on the syllabus of any self-respecting undergraduate literature course. It is perhaps also, some would say, a strange, new kind of novel, with fifty-three chapters and an epilogue. And doubtless more besides.

The rather dismissive tone of Barthes's own retrospective commentaries on *Mythologies* need not substantially affect the freedom of the reader with regard to the text: despite the authority which still seems inevitably to adhere to an author's pronouncements, the latter is essentially in no more privileged a position *vis-à-vis* his own text than any other reader. Moreover, Barthes's 're-reading' of *Mythologies* after 1970 could itself be seen as a dramatization of, yet another of, the lessons taught by that text: that to read is to transform, both the text and oneself as reading subject. The texts which constitute this re-reading of *Mythologies* all signify a desire to gather up the past and recast it in such a way that it can be integrated into a new project, a new image. Or perhaps, paradoxically, in such a way that the temptation of the Image is itself defused . . .

In short, *Mythologies* is not a closed text: no text is, not even the classical one. Two very different ways in which *Mythologies* was appropriated by 'active' readers, within just a few years of its publication, are illustrated by what could be called 'a tale of two GPs'.

In July 1963, *Cahiers de la publicité* published a piece by Barthes on 'Le message publicitaire'. This caught the eye of Georges Péninou, who knew Barthes as the author of *Mythologies*, and who was at that time employed as director of research at France's biggest advertising agency, *Publicis*. Since 1962, Barthes had been director of studies in 'sociologie des signes et représentations' at the prestigious, if rather marginal, *Ecole pratique des hautes études*; Péninou went along to Barthes's seminar in 1964, was impressed, and in due course signed up for a thesis on the semiology of advertising. In addition, and most ironically, Péninou procured a contract for Barthes with Renault to look into the 'semiology of the automobile'. He accepted. Quite apart from the evident irony of the situation – the 'mythologue' snuggling down next to the 'producteur de mythes' – this anecdote illustrates the fact that the influence of a given work is not at all proportionate to the simple number of its readers: 'influence' very swiftly becomes diffuse and apparently anonymous.

That mythology should find itself in the paid service of the very industry responsible for the creation and dissemination of myth is doubtless ironic. It is, furthermore, a classic instance of what the French call 'récupération'. Certainly, Louis-Jean Calvet sees it this way: 'Des annonces publicitaires aux campagnes électorales, de la vente des petits pois à celle des députés, les logothètes [. . .] utilisent en effet gaillardement ce qu'ils croient pouvoir retirer de la sémiologie, au point où l'on entend plus fréquemment ou presque le terme de *connotation* dans les studios de publicité que dans les séminaires de linguistique' (15, p. 155). Whatever one may feel about this (and one is entitled to wonder, incidentally, precisely what Calvet himself was doing, apart from eavesdropping, in these 'studios de publicité' . . .), it seems inevitable. And for Barthes also: if he desired to be recognized, and recognized as a writer, he must have known that recuperation is the price to pay for social recognition, because this is

yet another lesson of *Mythologies*: the movement of mass society is towards vulgarization and homogenization; the only marketable commodities are those which have been socialized through and through.

As coincidence would have it – and where would a writer in search of a nicely rounded conclusion be without coincidence? – the 1964 seminar at the EPHE was also attended by a certain Georges Perec. At the time Perec was an unpublished author. That was to change in 1965 with the publication of his prize-winning first novel *Les Choses*. The influence of *Mythologies* on this book would have been quite manifest, even if Perec had not taken the trouble, which he did, of acknowledging his debt: the two central characters, Jérôme and Sylvie, are mystified to the core of their acquisitive being by the shimmering mirages of the consumer society. They may *inform* themselves by reading *Le Monde*, but they *devour Madame Express*. The slightly sadistic twist is that Perec has them working as market-researchers for advertising agencies! *Les Choses* is a superlative example of precisely the kind of ‘mythe artificiel’ which Barthes thought was probably the only effective way of fighting myth. It also betrays the same ambivalence towards ‘things’ that I noted as a feature of *Mythologies*: on the one hand the beauty and fascination of material objects, on the other the degraded spectacle of reality. The trajectory of Jérôme and Sylvie comes to ground on the emptiness, the hollowness, the nothingness of the Image: for them at least, reality is always elsewhere.

Two ways of reading *Mythologies*, two ways of appropriating the text to very different ends. To be read is to be recognized, but the price of being recognized by Perec is to be recognized by Péninou and *Publicis*.

Perhaps some readers will feel that this confrontation which I have engineered between my two GPs is too pat, too comfortable: an example of the ‘balance’ (p. 241) so stylishly denounced by Barthes himself, and designed to leave me floating above the text in a smugly non-judgemental posture. Perhaps this is true. So, I’ll conclude with my own chosen epigraph for *Mythologies*. From Sartre:

Je ne vois partout que formules vieilles, replâtrages, compromis sans bonne foi, mythes périmés et repeints à la hâte. Si nous n'avions rien fait sauf de crever une à une toutes ces vessies pleines de vent, nous aurions bien mérité de nos lecteurs. (30, p. 348)

Select Bibliography

This select bibliography lists only works which are referred to in the text, or which have been of direct assistance in preparing this book. More extensive bibliographies of Barthes's own works are to be found in *Communications*, 36 (1982), and in Sanford Freedman and Carole Anne Taylor, *Roland Barthes: a bibliographical readers' guide*, New York, Garland Publishing Inc., 1983.

In the time which has elapsed between the completion of my typescript and its publication, two major works on Barthes have appeared, of which it was unfortunately not possible to take account in the present study. They are: Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, Cambridge, 1992; and Andrew Brown, *Roland Barthes. The Figures of Writing*, Clarendon Press, 1992. Furthermore, in October 1993, Editions du Seuil brought out: Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes* (Vol. I, 1942-1965), édition établie et présentée par Eric Marty. This edition contains 16 'mythologies' which had not previously been published in volume form; seven of these date from 1953-55, and the remaining nine were written in 1959. All, bar two, appeared originally in *Les Lettres Nouvelles*.

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