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Roland Barthes: Recollections in Gratitude

Abstract

An informal homage in which I recall personal and professional encounters with Roland Barthes and his texts over a period of some twenty-five years, during which I developed increasing respect for the man and interest in his critical practice.

Keywords

Roland Barthes, homage, personal experience

ROLAND BARTHES: RECOLLECTIONS IN GRATITUDE

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If, to paraphrase Renan, admiring someone means recognizing oneself, one's own traits or qualities in that person, admiration is too strong and immodest a feeling to characterize my attitude toward Roland Barthes. If, on the other hand, I may be allowed to restrict the term to the sense of sharing an esthetic as well as an ethical position, of striving along similar paths in the direction of analogous goals, my admiration can hardly be denied. It is inevitably accompanied by my recognizing in him a superior talent, a keener mind, and a broader knowledge.

Like many others in this country, I suppose, I became acquainted with Barthes's writings in the mid-fifties. (The first entries under his name, in Douglas Alden's twentieth-century bibliography show up in the 1958 booklet). I first saw a copy of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* on a table in Justin O'Brien's home in Connecticut; the reaction of my late colleague and friend, who had also been my mentor at Columbia, had been negative. Ironically, mine was to be the opposite. In a way, that book became the catalytic agent that caused me to re-evaluate my intellectual stance and break away from the critical concepts I had absorbed in graduate school.

I had not, however, found a new mentor, someone whose method I could apply, whose writings I would exploit. I suspect that many of those who have, have done so to their own disadvantage; for to extract a specific methodology from his writings, one would have to solidify one moment of his thought, so to speak, to isolate one facet at the expense of the complexities and even contradictions of the whole.

The totality of Barthes's writings constitutes what I should call

a heterogeneous set. Working one's way through that set, one experiences, in Stephen Heath's phrase, a *vertige du déplacement*, one is led over a number of catastrophic folds (as defined by René Thom). Only too often, would-be disciples of Barthes (is it really possible to be a 'disciple' of Barthes?), striving for conceptual stability, have anchored their emulations in a moment (I should perhaps say 'fragment') of his 'displacements': his theory of scription (*écriture*), or his 'structuralism,' or his semiotics, or his textual sensuality. Interesting, no doubt, but Roland Barthes is elsewhere. Alain Robbe-Grillet put it rather well at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1977, even though the fragments he had in mind were of a more minute size: «The Barthesian fragment is constantly slipping off, and its meaning resides not in the items of content that will show up here and there but, on the contrary, in the very instance of slippage.»¹ Substituting *text* and *theory* for *fragment* and *content* gives a fair picture of the functioning of his scription.

I did not meet Barthes until the spring of 1966. The battle of *la nouvelle critique* was raging. What Michel Butor told me then about Barthes's personality, about his being shocked and distressed by the pamphlet that fired the controversy, spurred a desire to see him. I soon made an appointment (we had exchanged letters a few years earlier) and climbed what was almost an *escalier dérobé* leading to the small apartment where he worked, above that of his mother, on the rue Servandoni. I had failed to lure him out to a neighborhood café for an apéritif; as I would find out later, it was very difficult to lure him away from his territory for any reason whatsoever. In his den, he was most kind and gracious, agreeing with most of what I said about literary criticism. As I left, taking with me an inscribed copy of *Critique et vérité*, which had just been published, I realized that a good deal of what I professed I had learned from him. No wonder he offered so little in the way of contradiction! Actually, his graciousness shone through the manner in which he conducted the dialogue as much as in the substance of his statements.

In the fall of the same year I saw him at the Johns Hopkins University on the occasion of the colloquium on «The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,» to which he had been invited. After Barthes had read his paper, Georges Poulet, who had presented his own contribution earlier, rose to express both pleasure and melancholy—the latter on account of «a sort of misunderstanding»² that existed between them; he added, «it seems

to me that we are at the same time very close and yet separated by an abyss.»³ Barthes was quite moved by Poulet's remarks, and he said so. It was indeed an emotion-laden moment at the conference. Four years later, when I reviewed the published proceedings, I wrote Roland Barthes and reminded him of the incident. The answer I received was most characteristic of him.

And what you say concerning Poulet has nearly discomposed me, for, basically, I experienced the same feelings you did, although apparently for different reasons: because where so-called modernistic positions are involved I do not at all feel militant. I have, how should I put it, a too Heraclitean (if that isn't too pretentious a word) sense of things not to know that I am myself caught up in the motion that engulfs everything; I don't know how to explain this to you: confronting those who work differently, I do not feel liberal (for writing is never that, one can never cheat with its affirmative nature), but completely *laxist*. Furthermore, since I like and admire Poulet, I really don't have any wish to set myself up against him (and perhaps he would have in the end preferred it); that is why I dislike colloquia: everyone there is prey to a ubiquitous theatricality that is set up in them.⁴

Many of his qualities are manifest in those lines: sensitivity, modesty, sense of proportion, comprehension—coupled with the realization that writing is basically a coercive activity. Not only writing but, as he subsequently argued in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (January 1977), the very language we use, day in, day out. We are, however, bounded in language and cannot step outside of it; hence the value of literature, which does, in spite of what he wrote in the letter I just quoted, allow us to cheat language out of its coerciveness: «Such beneficial cheating, such dodging, such magnificent inveigling that allows one to hear a particular language located beyond power's realm, within the splendor of a permanent revolution of language.»⁵ He understood literature neither as a set of masterpieces nor as a university discipline but as the practice of scription.

As indications of the respect in which I have held Barthes's critical practice, I now point to a series of verbal gestures that also amounted to a series of failures. Four of them, to be precise. In September of 1966 I suggested that he give a talk at the Maison

Française of Columbia University; in March of 1970 I asked whether he might be interested in a full-time professorial position at Columbia; toward the end of April of the same year I proposed a different arrangement—one in which he would share the position with Michel Butor, each spending alternate years in our department (I already had Butor's agreement, but it was conditional on Barthes's acceptance); finally, I proposed a fall-semester rotation. Invariably the response was negative, even though it was qualified with warm apologies and feelings of regret. «It would be a great honor for me...and I am embarrassed that you could have thought of me...I have responsibilities that I cannot shirk. I am very touched by your proposal...but, alas, the obstacle remains...(...what would happen to the dissertations that I am sponsoring?)...I convey to you my real gratitude for such a trustful idea. Thanks again for the so trustful efforts that you undertake with such kindness...the administrative obstacle remains.»⁶ I do not doubt that others, in other American universities, have made similar efforts: it may be a consolation for them to know that they were not alone in their lack of success. To be sure, there are French university members who, somehow, were able to overcome or brush aside those «administrative obstacles»; that Barthes would not do so suggests a deeper, personal reason for his refusals—even if those he put forward were surely genuine. Indeed, in his final letter of regrets, which he could no longer support with administrative arguments, that reason was acknowledged: «To be sure, the new arrangement is an excellent one, but it is still too much for me: my mother is advanced in years and I do not wish to leave her for more than ten days or so.»⁷ To his credit, Barthes neither denied affective ties, as some intellectuals tend to do, nor did he become annoyed when an insensitive American placed him in a situation that compelled him to choose between curt refusal, disdainful silence, or disclosure of what I should have implicitly understood on my own. To the contrary, that letter, like the others, ended on the same kind and unassuming note. «Forgive me for running the risk of disappointing you. Let us remain in touch, if you please,...»⁸ I still marvel at the tone of those letters; that a person of such prestige and accomplishments could write as though he had none testifies to superior intrinsic qualities.

In spite of his aversion to round tables and the like, Barthes eventually allowed his work to become the topic of a colloquium with his name included in its title. The meetings of *Prétexte*:

Roland Barthes were held at the Centre Culturel International in Cerisy-la-Salle during the last week in June of 1977, and the proceedings were as unorthodox as Barthes himself. Unlike what happened at other colloquia, the one during which the novels of Claude Simon were discussed, for instance, when the writer sat among the audience, intervening on occasion, while scholars dissected and analyzed his work, Roland Barthes sat up front, facing the audience, orienting the course of the discussion as much as the actual chairman did. He set the tone of those seven days; he was soft-spoken, mellow, allusive, understanding, and even an impish Robbe-Grillet could not provoke much antagonistic sparkle. Benign as he might appear, however, he was definitely the master, a position that was reinforced by the presence of many of his seminar students, with their casual deference, coupled with what was close to adulation. His situation as a writer-critic who was also an eminent professor was a paradoxical one. Nevertheless he did not take it for granted—witness his musing upon it in an essay published in the fall, 1971, issue of *Tel Quel*. In that essay, he had proposed, wistfully, «In short, within the very limits of the teaching space as given, the need is to work at patiently tracing out a pure form, that of a *floating* ...; a floating which would not destroy anything but would be content simply to disorientate the Law. The necessities of promotion, professional obligations..., imperatives of knowledge, prestige of method, ideological criticisms—everything is there, but *floating*.»⁹

He was in New York for a brief period of time in November, 1978. He had been invited to speak at the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University, and that is where I saw him last. He appeared in better health than he had been at Cerisy (he had written me, «Cerisy, as far as I am concerned, is far removed; anyway, I was imperfectly present, worried because I had left my mother»),¹⁰ although he had lost his mother in the meantime and had been deeply affected by her death. He talked about Proust and about himself; he spoke of the death of the novelist's mother. Listening to Barthes, one felt that such a death had triggered the birth of the writer of *A la recherche du temps perdu*; no more socialite outings, no more essays—only the novel and the solitude of the cork-lined room. One also had the impression that Barthes envisioned a new writing future opening up in front of himself. Proust, however, was in his mid-thirties when his mother died; Barthes, when he passed away, was in his early sixties.

In *La Chambre claire*, a book made posthumous by a traffic accident, he spoke of his grief. «People keep thinking that my grief is deeper on account of my having lived all my life with her; but my grief sprang from *the kind of person she was*; and it is because she was that kind of person that I lived with her.»¹¹ After referring to Proust's suffering, under similar circumstances, he concluded, «...for me, Time does away with the emotion of the loss (I do not cry), that is all. For the rest, everything has remained unchanged. For what I have lost is not an Image (the Mother), but a being, and not a being but a *quality* (a soul): not the indispensable but the irreplaceable. I could live without the Mother (we all do, sooner or later); but the life remaining to me would without fail be *unqualifiable* (without quality) until the end.»¹² I understood from mutual friends that Barthes, by 1979, had gradually been losing interest in many things; as a result, I did not try to see him that summer—a cowardly attitude, I suppose. When he was struck by a van early in 1980 he suffered severe injuries, but they need not have been fatal, even when one considers the damage to his lungs resulting from long bouts with tuberculosis during the thirties and forties. I cannot help feeling that he had by then lost the necessary will to recover.

On the inside back cover of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* one reads the following exchange: «What will you write now? Could you still write something?—One writes with one's desire, and I have a never-ending desire.»¹³ Perhaps a failure of desire preceded the failure of will; perhaps it was accompanied by a realization that the new form of writing he envisioned in 1978 was beyond his reach. Whatever happened, I am reminded of the following statement found toward the end of his text on Michelet («the book of mine about which, on the one hand, people talk the least and, on the other, the one I endure the best»),¹⁴ a writer Barthes admired as much as he disliked Racine: «It is thus all of Michelet's discourse—meaning all his work—that carries him, torn apart, far from his paradise: he was perhaps the first writer of our modernity who could only celebrate an impossible discourse.»¹⁵ Today, I can only be grateful for the existence of Barthes's 'impossible' scription.

NOTES

1. «Le fragment barthésien glisse sans cesse et son sens se situe non pas dans les morceaux de contenu qui vont apparaître ici et là, mais au contraire dans le fait même du glissement.» «Pourquoi j'aime Barthes,» *Prétexte: Roland Barthes* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 10/18, 1978), p. 257.

2. *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*,» Macksey and Donato, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 145.

3. Op. cited, p. 145.

4. «Et ce que vous me dites de Poulet m'a presque bouleversé, tant, au fond, j'ai éprouvé les mêmes sentiments que vous, bien qu' apparemment à l'autre bout de la chaîne; c'est qu'à l'égard des positions dites modernistes, je ne me sens nullement militant; j'ai un sentiment, comment dire? trop héraclitéen (si ce mot n'est pas trop prétentieux) des choses pour ne pas me savoir moi-même pris dans le mouvement qui dévore tout; je ne sais comment vous expliquer: face à ceux qui travaillent différemment de moi, je ne me sens pas libéral (car l'écriture ne l'est jamais, on ne peut jamais tricher sur sa nature affirmative), mais entièrement *laxiste*. Comme de plus j'aime et j'admire Poulet, je n'ai vraiment aucune envie de m'opposer à lui (et peut-être l'eût-il finalement préféré); c'est pour cela que je n'aime pas les colloques: tout le monde y est victime du théâtre général qui y est mis en place.»

5. «Cette tricherie salutaire, cette esquivé, ce leurre magnifique, qui permet d'entendre la langue hors-pouvoir, dans la splendeur d'une révolution permanente du langage.» *Leçon* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 16.

6. «Ce serait pour moi un grand honneur...et je suis confus que vous ayez pu penser à moi...j'ai des responsabilités que je ne puis interrompre.» Je suis très touché par votre proposition...Mais, hélas, l'obstacle demeure...(que deviendraient les thèses dont j'ai la direction?)...Je vous dis ma réelle reconnaissance pour votre idée, si confiante.» Merci encore des efforts si confiants que vous assumez avec tant de gentillesse...l'obstacle administratif demeure.»

7. «Certes le nouvel aménagement est excellent, mais c'est encore trop pour moi: ma mère est âgée et je ne désire pas la quitter plus qu'une dizaine de jours.»

8. «Pardonnez-moi de risquer vous décevoir. Restons en contact, je vous prie,...»

9. «En somme, dans les limites mêmes de l'espace enseignant, tel qu'il est donné, il s'agirait de travailler à tracer patiemment une forme pure, celle du flottement (...); ce flottement ne détruirait rien; il se contenterait de désorienter la Loi: les nécessités de la promotion, les obligations du métier (...), les impératifs du savoir, le prestige de la méthode, la critique idéologique, tout est là, *mais qui flotte*» cited in *Image, Music, Text*, Transl. Stephen Heath). (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 215.

10. «Cerisy, pour moi, est loin; j'y étais d'ailleurs imparfaitement présent,

soucieux d'avoir laissé ma mère.»

11. «On veut toujours que j'aie davantage de peine parce que j'ai vécu toute ma vie avec elle; mais ma peine vient de *qui elle était*; et c'est parce qu'elle était qui elle était que j'ai vécu avec elle.» (Paris: Gallimard, Seuil, Cahiers du Cinéma), p. 117.

12. «...pour moi, le Temps élimine l'émotion de la perte (je ne pleure pas), c'est tout. Pour le reste, tout est resté immobile. Car ce que j'ai perdu, ce n'est pas une Figure (la Mère), mais un être; et pas un être, mais une *qualité* (une âme): sans la Mère (nous le faisons tous, plus ou moins tard); mais la vie qui me restait serait à coup sûr et jusqu'à la fin *inqualifiable* (sans qualité).» *Le Chambre claire*, p. 118.

13. «Quoi écrire maintenant? Pourrez-vous encore écrire quelque chose? —On écrit avec son désir, et je n'en finis pas de désirer.» (Paris: Le Seuil, «Ecrivains de toujours,» 1975).

14. «Le livre de moi, d'une part, dont on parle le moins et, d'autre part, que je supporte le mieux.» *Prétexte: Roland Barthes*, p. 260.

15. «C'est donc toute la parole de Michelet —c'est-à-dire toute son oeuvre—qui l'emporte, déchiré, loin de son paradis: il a peut-être été le premier des auteurs de la modernité à ne pouvoir que chanter une impossible parole.» *Michelet par lui-même* (Paris: Seuil, 1954), p. 161.