# BARTHES AND LITERATURE AS DISCOURSE

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*Abstract: As Barthes emphasizes, literature as discourse forms the signifier (the relation between crisis and discourse defines the work, which is a signification); in myth there are two semiological systems: a linguistic system, the language-object (the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system), and myth itself (metalanguage), because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first. There are between the signifier, the signified and the sign, functional implications which are so close that to analyze them may seem futile (this distinction has a capital importance for the study of myth as semiological schema); the materials of mythical speech, however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. The signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other; when it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind (it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains); the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's dispose; the concept reconstitutes a chain of causes and effects, motives and intentions. Unlike the form, the concept is in no way abstract (it is filled with a situation); through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth.*

*Keywords: language, image, discourse, semiology, myth.*

Barthes imagines that the essential gesture of the operator is to surprise something or someone and that this gesture is therefore perfect when performed unbeknownst to the subject being photographed, "The object speaks, it induces us, vaguely, to think. [...] Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks." [1]A narrative does not show anything, it does not imitate; what happens in narratives is from the referential standpoint actually *nothing* (what happens is language alone, the adventure of language). Hirsch writes that the act of understanding is at first a genial, or a mistaken, guess (there are no methods for making guesses, no raies for generating insights). "The methodological activity of interpretation commences when we begin to test and criticize our guesses."[2]

Blackburn maintains that metaphors are typically couched in indicative sentences, "certainly governed by norms of appropriateness, found in complex embeddings, yet certainly not intended as straightforward cases of truths or falsehoods. This is how the expressivist says it is in

[1] Barthes, R., *Caméra Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* Hill and Wang, New York, 1981, p. 38.
[2] Hirsch, E.D.J., *Validity in Interpretation,* Yale University Press, 1967, p. 203.

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more controversial examples, such as commitment to conditional, moral or modal claims." [3]

Baudrillard contends that malls have achieved their commercial success through a variety of strategies that all depend on "indirect commodification", "a process by which nonsaleable objects, activities, and images are purposely placed in the commodified world of the mall. The basic marketing principle is 'adjacent attraction', where the most dissimilar objects lend each other mutual support when they are placed next to each other. [...] This logic of association allows noncommodified values to enhance commodities, but it also imposes the reverse process - previously noncommodified entities become part of the marketplace. Once this exchange of attributes is absorbed into the already open - ended and indeterminate exchange between commodities and needs, associations can resonate infinitely."[4] Shopping with an intense spectacle of accumulated images and themes entertain and stimulate and in turn encourage more shopping. "The themes of the spectacle owe much to Disneyland and television, the most familiar and effective commodifiers in American culture. Theme-park attractions are commonplace in shopping malls; indeed the two forms converge - malls routinely entertain, while theme parks function as disguised marketplaces. Both offer con- trolled and carefully packaged public spaces and pedestrian experiences to auto-dependent suburban families already primed for passive consumption by television."[5]

Norris points out that if texts are open to any number of readings with no possible appeal to standards of validity or truth, then deconstructionists "can hardly complain that opponents have got: them wrong, or that attacks on deconstruction amount to nothing more than a species of reductive travesty."[6] Barthes says that it is not that the Author may not "come back" in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a "guest". "If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions, but a fiction contributing to his work." [7]Cottingham says that the search for integrity, for allowing ourselves to recover, accept, and transform what we are, does' not at ail mean abandoning our rational birthright. "For a human being who has achieved psychic balance, there will always be a dynamic interplay between the Creative forces of the unconscious mind and the power of the self-conscious intellect, mapping, organizing, shaping, making coherent and testable patterns out of the flux of imaginative insight that wells up inside us."[8]

Bourdieu remarks that the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment produce *habitus,* systems of durable transposable dispositions, structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, "as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapt to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them, and, being ail this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor."[9]

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[3] Blackburn, S., "Wittgenstein, Wright, Rorty and Minimalism", in *Mind*, 107,1998, p. 159.
[4] Crawford, M., "The World in a Shopping Mail", in Sorkin, M., (ed.), *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1996, pp. 14-15.
[5] Ibid., p. 16.
[6] Norris, Ch., What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980, p. 136.
[7] Barthes, R., *Image-Music-Text,* Health, S., (tr.), Hill and Wang, New York, 1977, p. 161.
[8] Cottingham, J., Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 165.
[9] Bourdieu, P., *Outline of a Theory of Practice,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977, p. 72.

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Stein stresses that clarity is of no importance because nobody listens and nobody knows what you mean no matter what you mean, nor how clearly you mean what you mean. "But if you have vitality enough of knowing enough of what you mean, some- body and sometime and sometimes a great many will have to realize that you know what you mean and so they will agree that you mean what you know, what you know you mean which is as near as anybody can come to understanding anyone."[10]

Barthes remarks that photography is unclassifiable because there is no reason to mark this or that of its occurrences. "It aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language: but for there to be a sign there must be a mark; deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don't take, which turn, as milk does. [...] In short, the referent adheres." [11]Photography is a kind of primitive theater, "a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the rnotionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead. [...] By attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this-has-been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead." [12]In Photography one can never deny that the thing has been there. "There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the name of Photography."[13]

Barthes points out that we know the original relation of the theater and the cult of the Dead. "The first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead." [14]

Barthes decided to take as a guide for his new analysis the attraction he felt for certain photographs. "For of this attraction, at least, I was certain. What to call it? Fascination? No, this photograph which I pick out and which I love has nothing in common with the shiny point which sways before your eyes and makes your head swim; what it produces in me is the very opposite of habitude; something more like an internai agitation, an excitement, a certain labor too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken." [15]Photographs State the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction: this link between photography and death haunts ail photographs of people. "Everything, today, prepares our race for this impotence: to be no longer able to conceive *du- ration*, affectively or symbolically: the age of the Photograph is also the âge of revolutions, contestations, assassinations, explosions, in short, of impatiences, of everything which denies ripening. And no doubt, the astonishment of *'that-has-been'* will also disappear. It has already disappeared: I am, I don't know why, one of its last witness."[16]

On Barthes's reading, writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where ail identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to ac- ting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins."[17] Barthes claims

[10] Stein, G., *How to Write*, Dover, New York, 1975, p. xxv.
[11] Barthes, R., [1], p. 6.
[12] Ibid., pp. 32, 79.
[13] Ibid., p. 76.
[14] Ibid., p. 31.
[15] Ibid, p. 76.
[16] Ibid., pp. 32, 79.
[17] Ibid., pp. 18-19.

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that when the author has died it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is to reach that point where only language acts "performs"; text ceases to operate as a recording, notation, and representation. It designates a performative, a rare verbal form in which the enunciation has no other content than the act by which it is uttered. For the dead author, "the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin - or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question ail origins."[18]

Barthes points out that language needs special conditions in order to become myth; to purport to discriminate among mythical objects according to their substance would be entirely illusory; every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking ( about things ; myth can be defined neither by its object nor by its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning; pictures are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it. Semiology is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content; the necessity is that which applies in the case of any exact language; any semiology postulates a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified (this relation concerns objects which belong to different, categories, and this is why it is not one of equality but one of equivalence); semiology is not a metaphysical trap (it is a science among others, necessary but not sufficient); myth belongs to the province of a general science, coextensive with linguistics, which is semiology.

As Barthes emphasizes, literature as discourse forms the signifier (the relation between crisis and discourse defines the work, which is a signification); in myth there are two semiological systems: a linguistic system, the language-object (the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system), and myth itself (metalanguage), because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first. There are between the signifier, the signified and the sign, functional implications which are so close that to analyze them may seem futile (this distinction has a capital importance for the study of myth as semiological schema); the materials of mythical speech, however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. The signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other; when it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind (it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains); the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's dispose; the concept reconstitutes a chain of causes and effects, motives and intentions. Unlike the form, the concept is in no way abstract (it is filled with a situation); through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth.

Barthes remarks that the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated; a signified can have several signifiers (this is the case in linguistics and psychoanalysis); in myth the concept can spread over a very large expanse of signifier; there is no fixity in mythical concepts (they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely); poverty and richness are in reverse proportion in the form and the concept. The signification is the myth itself; there is no latency of the concept in relation to the form (there is no need of an unconscious in order to explain myth); the elements of the form are related as to place and proximity; the mode of presence of the form is spatial, while the concept appears in global fashion. The relation which unites the concept of the myth to its meaning is essentially a relation of

[18] Ibid., p. 94.

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deformation; the signification of the myth is constituted by a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness. Myth is a type of speech defined by its intention much more than by its literal sense; the appropriation of the concept is driven away by the literalness of the meaning. The language can produce a whole fragment of the sign by analogy with other signs; the nature of the mythical signification can be well conveyed by one particular simile (it is neither more nor less arbitrary than an ideograph). Any semiological system is a system of values; the myth consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system; articulated language contains in itself some mythical dispositions, the outline of a sign-structure meant to manifest the intention which led to its being used (it is what could be called the expressiveness of language).

Lévi-Strauss argues that the unity of the myth is never more than tendential and projective; it is a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation; unlike philosophical reflection, which claims to go back to its own source, the reflections we are dealing with here concern rays whose only source is hypothetical. Mythological thought manifest itself as an irradiation; by measuring the directions and angles of the rays, we are led to postulate their common origin.

Butler holds that the aim of theory for Baudrillard is to devise a statement about a system that at once follows its internal logic to the end, adds nothing to it, and inverts it entirely, reveals that it is not possible without this *nothing.* "It is a statement that is at once a pure *description* of the system, speaking of it in terms of the real, and a pure *prescription* of the system, demonstrating that it excludes the real. It is a statement that. is at once totally specified to each system examined, and absolutely universal, testifying to the fundamental reversibility at the origin of the world."[19]

Foucault notes that the frontiers of a book are never clear cut, "beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network"[20] . Fantasies are carefully deployed in the hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds. "The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes place in the interval between books. It is a phenomenon of the library."[21]

Agamben notices that it would be the worst misunderstanding of Derrida's gesture to think that it could be exhausted in a deconstructive use of philosophical terms that would simply consign them to an infinite wandering or interpretation. "Derrida enters into the Paradise of language, where terms touch their limits. And he 'cuts the branches'; he experiences the exile of terminology, its paradoxical subsistence in the isolation of ail univocal reference." Grammatology was forced to become decon- struction in order the paradox. "The *experimentum linguae* that is at issue in grammatological terminology does not (as a com- mon misunderstanding insists) authorize an interpretative practice directed toward the infinite deconstruction of a text, nor does it inaugurate a new formalism. Rather, it marks the decisive event of matter, and in doing so it opens onto an ethics."

[19] Butler, R., *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real,* Sage, London, 1999, p. 120.
[20] Foucault, M., *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* Smith, S., (tr.), Pantheon, New York, 1972, p. 23.
[21] Foucault, M,, "Fantasia of the Library", in Bouchard, D.F. - Simon, S., (eds.), *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1977, p. 91.

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Baudrillard affirms that the void of logical reason is reduplicated. Exactly in order to be destroyed, and that it is in the void thus created that laugh and enjoyment burst out. "Freud puts this extremely well: *Entfesselung des Unsinns* — the unleashing of nonsense. But nonsense is not the hidden hell of meaning, nor the emulsion of ail the repressed and contradictory meanings. It is the meticulous reversibility of every term - *subversion* through *reversal."*[22]

Barthes states that a text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. "A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader. [...] The reader is the space on which ail the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin, but in its destination."[27] Blanchot contends that a thought points us constantly back to the presence of absence, to absence as its own affirmation. "Whoever is fascinated doesn't see, properly speaking, what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity; it seizes and ceaselessly draws him close, even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance. Fascination is fundamentally linked to neutral, impersonal presence, to the indeterminate They, the immense, faceless Someone."[23]

Levinas notes that it is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself. "In discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response (acuteness of the present) engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality." Proximity is to be described as ex- tending the subject in its very subjectivity; proximity, the one-for-the-other, is not a configuration produced in the soul. "It is an immediacy older than the abstractness of nature. Nor is it fusion; it is contact with the other. To be in contact is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to suppress myself in the other. In contact itself the touching and the touched separate, as though the touched moved off, was always already other, did not have anything in common with me."

Culler claims that a good first step might be that very combination of exasperation and insight which we feel when we grasp that any attempt to give an account of what Derrida says is a falsification of his project (but that such falsification is un- avoidable).

Levinas notices that humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human: I am a hostage, a responsibility and a substitution supporting the world in the passivity of assignation, even in the accusing persecution. "It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters. The third party is other than the neighbour, but also another neighbour, and also a neighbour of the other, and not simply his fellow. What are the other and the third party for one another? What have they done to one another? Which passes before the other?"[24]

[22] Baudrillard, J., *Symbolic Exchange and Death,* Sage, London, 1993, p. 232.
[23] Blanchot, M., *The Space of Literature,* Smock, A., (tr.), University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1982, p. 27.
[24] Levinas, E., [30], p. 157.

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