

## RB POLYGRAPHE

BETTY R. MCGRAW AND STEVEN UNGAR

*Kansas State University - University of Iowa*

Following a procedure derived from current practices of deconstruction, it would be plausible to begin this issue by entertaining the question of the preface, especially since Roland Barthes is known to have written so many of them in his career. Or perhaps it would be plausible to begin this preface with the question of the issue. If you have been reading Roland Barthes, you know that attempts to bring together the various stages of his evolution as writer and critic meet with frustration. Barthes has always advocated the need and the privilege of changing or turning intellectually...from one theoretical position to another or (in the words of Gregory Ulmer) from one tutor text to another. As a result, there is no global definition to account for this constant shift and its vertigo of paradox or issue *sans issue*. Stephen Heath is correct to argue that Barthes's writings are caught in a whirlpool or force of displacement which opposes the mapping out of a continuous transition. But Josué Harari is also correct when he claims that the Barthes of the 1970s cannot be understood without accounting for the Barthes who wrote the first sections of *Writing Degree Zero* in the wake of World War II. Ultimately, the global approach toward Barthes breaks into something closer to a double figure of relay between the breaks and gaps of difference on one side and the illusion of a single «life» or career on another.

Barthes has always professed a philosophy of pluralism in support of the discontinuous and fragmentary. The very thought of subsuming his writings into a biographic mold would therefore be offensive to him in its false integration of the subject. As he writes in the *Roland Barthes*, «The only biography is of an unproductive life.» The biography and life inferred from the fragmentary

writings transcend that of the historic figure, placing the correlative notion of autobiography in its proper role as the writing of a fiction. From Jean-Jacques Thomas's interesting perspective, Barthes's fictional autobiography is a manifestation of the preservation instincts (*pulsions de vie*) whose function is to delay the powerful seduction which death exercises on the subject. To the extent that discourse becomes a means of protecting the subject from its inevitable demise, Barthes's later writings would suggest, therefore, both a celebration of life and an attraction with death.

What to do with Barthes? One might well choose to do nothing at all by claiming that the writings of a critic are unlike those of a novelist or poet. Thus, following a number of possible arguments, Barthes's writings might not warrant study as a work (*oeuvre*), or conversely, they might be closer to a mode of writing for which no suitable method of analysis exists. The distinctions between critical and literary writings formerly sketched as a neat break between primary and secondary texts have come under scrutiny and attack from a number of perspectives associated with structural analysis and critiques of it embodied in the figures of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault. Clearly such distinctions no longer apply to Barthes's writings.

Our goal in organizing this issue of *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* has been to combine the biographic and contextual approaches described above in order to arrive at what would be closer to the plurality of the writings. As Barthes advises his potential student in «Par où commencer?» (1970), a primary function of reading is to reveal the play of the text as ambiguity and plurality of meaning. With Heath, we agree that a number of factors complicate the easy assimilation of Barthes's writings to the standard categories of literary history. At the same time, we are struck by the presence of a historical project in Barthes's attempts to relate problems of description and interpretation to literary and social institutions. Thus, as Tom Conley forcefully notes, the ultimate sense of Barthes's statement that photography is a «message without a code» can only be grasped in the imaginary ties between daily life and the banalities of exploitation. Because that exploitation is anything but banal, a constant reading of social signs as ideology updates any fixed meaning in a process which is that of historical change itself. To be more precise, it is Barthes's evident concern with the historical dimension of writing—how it evolves or breaks and what those breaks might signify for a given social com-

munity—that projects a similar reading of his writings and allows us to invoke a genealogy with tentative ties to Sartre, Brecht, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Lacan.

In 1953, Iris Murdoch wrote that to understand Jean-Paul Sartre was to understand something about the (then) present time, because his self-conscious attempts to remain contemporary give to his writings the style of their historic moment. The same can be said of Barthes. Although some 10 years younger than Sartre, Barthes responds in his earliest writings to Sartre's manifesto call in the 1947 *What Is Literature?* for a literature of political commitment. But although the two overlap, Barthes's «age» is not identical with that of Sartre, as initial ties to Gide, Proust, and Sartre yield to others with Hjelmslev, Lévi-Strauss, Saussure, Benveniste, and Foucault. At the same time, however, Barthes's critical practice retains residual qualities of the earlier phases which remain visible in the later writings. For those who have come to identify Barthes as a mandarin of transition and modernity, his writings often resonate with an untimeliness closer in critical values and scope to Flaubert, Gide, or Proust than to Sollers, Kristeva, or Sarduy. In this sense, Barthes remains very much a modernist writer, unable to shake off the force of a classical temperament.

In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1977, Barthes describes a new form of his ongoing project of sign study, a final stage of his semiology which he terms *sémiotopie* and which is predicated on historical change:

The pleasure of the imaginary sign is conceivable now due to certain mutations, which affect culture more than society itself; the use we can make of forces of literature I have mentioned is modified by a new situation. On one hand and first of all, the myth of the great French writer, the sacred depository of all higher values, has crumbled since the Liberation; it has dwindled and died gradually with each of the last survivors of the *entre-deux-guerres*; a new *type* has appeared, and we no longer know—or do not yet know—what to call him: writer? intellectual? scribe? In any case, literary mastery is vanishing; the writer is no longer center stage. On the other hand and subsequently, May '68 revealed the crisis in our teaching. The old values are no longer transmitted, no longer circulate, no longer impress; literature is desacralized, institutions are impotent to defend and impose it as the model of the

human. It is not, if you like, that literature is destroyed; rather it is no longer *protected*, so that this is the moment to deal with it.

Barthes's own desacralization of literature is not only apparent in the theoretical eclecticism to which we have already alluded, but also in his subject matter. Since the early seventies, Barthes's writing has responded to a variety of stimuli, ranging from a text of Goethe to a travel episode (see the article by Lynn Higgins), three gardens outside a house in Bayonne (in the article by Frances Bartkowski), the photograph of his mother in a winter garden, and many more. To these unrelated experiences, Barthes has given the name «biographemes»—a sort of artificially created fetish attached onto a love-object. As early as in 1971 in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Barthes applies the technique of the biographeme to such diverse objects as Sade's white muff, Fourier's flowerpots, and Ignatius's Spanish eyes. The result has been a progressive breaking away from the continuity of traditional narrative in favor of a condensed and fragmentary style of writing. Roland Barthes provides a lengthy discussion of fragments which opposes their force to their signification, emphasizing the self-reflexivity and *jouissance* which subtend them. Fragments, he adds, are characterized by their separation from one another—forming a sort of encyclopedia—but also by their inner gaps and lacunae which amount to more than instances of *asyndeta* and *anacolutha*. As a result, any order imposed on them is arbitrary. Alphabetical? Chronological? By what affinities—elective or selective—should the fragments be linked? Barthes concludes that order distorts reality. He imagines an anti-structural criticism which would not look for the work's order but its disorder. Obviously, we have come a long way from the historically grounded concept of the literary masterpiece whose *raison d'être* rested on a class-conscious society.

Barthes never did write *the true novel* he said he hoped to write. As late as 1977, during a colloquium at Cerisy-la-Salle, he seemed to be struggling with something of a paradox. On the one hand he indicated that his urge to paint those whom he loved could best be satisfied by writing a novel. On the other hand, he feared that a tedious imitation of narrative codes would abolish the love permeating the figural style of the fragments he hoped to write. What attracted Barthes to a fragmentary writing, in addition to its obvious anti-structuralist advantage, is that it multiplies the sur-

faces of contact and pleasure: «Liking to find, to write *beginnings*, he tends to multiply this pleasure: that is why he writes fragments: so many fragments, so many beginnings, so many pleasures.» (RB, p. 94) Thus the inscription of affect finds its perfect form in the fragment.

The multiplication of incipits relating to the experience of *jouissance* (or *punctum* in *La Chambre claire*) has yet another, even greater function. It can unveil what Lacan calls the Real (not to be confused with reality): the foreclosed element of the unconscious often approached but seldom grasped. *Jouissance* and fragmentary writing promote moments of self-knowledge by implicating the (writing) subject within the text, a concern with utterance which had been displaced during the heroic period of structuralism. Indeed, Barthes's recent practice of writing focuses on the unspeakable (the *in-dicible*) self-knowledge, that residue of all articulation, customarily foreclosed in Symbolic activities. To be sure, the knowledge sought by Barthes's materialist subject is not sanctioned by academic orthodoxy since it takes form in a figural style featuring both seeing (in the preface to *Erté*), and loving (in *A Lover's Discourse*). To the questions raised at the beginning of this preface—«what to do with Barthes?»—we can respond that the best and most pleasurable thing to do is to prolong his discourse as the contributors of this issue have done.

A year after the death of Barthes, the suitable way to write on, in, or with his writings is via the double figure traced by the slash of letter Z: a split or break within which we would locate the polygraphies to follow. Within these writings, we propose two approaches and a number of variations on the personal and the critical. In the *Letters to Milena*, Kafka writes of a Chinese book in which a man on the point of death reflects on what is about to occur, comparing his thoughts to an extended song which can never equal its object. A student chides him for talking so much about death without ever getting around to dying. (Would Lacan call this a «passage toward the act»?) The man replies that he will inevitably die and that the difference between meditation and act is only that of a few words. Kafka comments: «That is correct; it is wrong to laugh at the hero on stage who sings a melody as he dies. We all spend years singing as we lie dying.»

At the close of a 1963 essay republished in *Writing and Difference*, Derrida sketches a critique of formalist methods which subsume individual writings in the cause of larger models of

description, analysis, and interpretation. Instead of form and significance, Derrida asserts force and the irreducible singularity or *différance*. For most American readers today, Derrida's challenge to tradition and scholarship is in evidence as a major threat to the values of the New Criticism of the past 40 years. Derived from the history of philosophy, Derrida's strategy of deconstruction is a counterpart—irreducible and singular—to what Barthes refers to as the desacralization of literature. Not that literature is destroyed; rather it is no longer *protected*. And so in the spirit of plurality and difference which Barthes shared with Derridean deconstruction, we propose the following collection as a *polygraphie* because...this is the moment to deal with it. Our only regret is that Barthes is unable to share this moment with us.