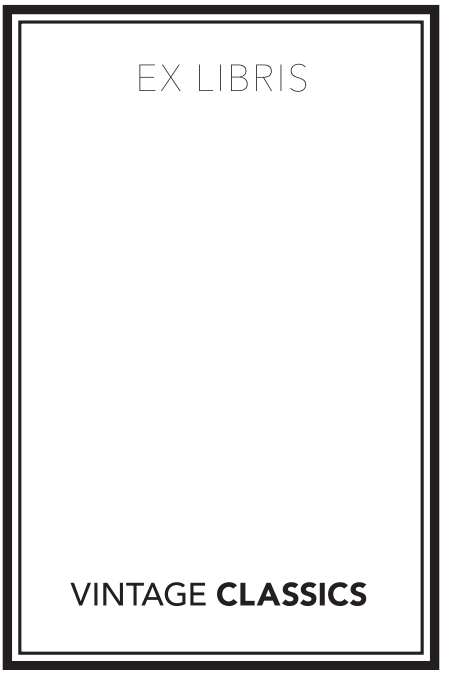
VINTAGE BARTHES

ROLAND BARTHES

by Roland Barthes



ALSO BY ROLAND BARTHES

A Barthes Reader
Mythologies
A Lover's Discourse
Camera Lucida

ROLAND BARTHES

Roland Barthes was born in 1915 and studied French literature and classics at the University of Paris. After teaching French at universities in Romania and Egypt, he joined the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, where he devoted himself to research in sociology and lexicology. He was a professor at the Collège de France until his death in 1980.

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Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
Richard Howard

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Adam Phillips

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Introduction

'No need of a story,'[i] Beckett wrote in 'Texts for Nothing,' 'a story is not compulsory, just a life.' But in an autobiography you can't have one without the other. It is not compulsory, though it goes without saying now, that everyone has a story and will probably want to tell it (and should be free to); that there is every need for a story; that the one thing everyone does have inside them is an autobiography, and that they might even suffer from not telling it. And yet once you start even telling the story of your day, Barthes writes in this book, 'you constitute yourself, in fantasy, as a "writer," or worse still: you constitute yourself.'[ii] You get stuck with the self you have made up; the story becomes compulsory. In an age of autobiography in which life stories — lives recovered in words — have become our inspirational literature, there is always the risk of fixing ourselves. The quest for singularity, the therapy of becoming oneself, might be a form of arrested development; or as Barthes might say, arrested language.

'A certain pleasure is derived,'[iii] Barthes wrote in *The Pleasure of the Text*, 'from a way of imaging oneself as individual, of inventing a final, rarest fiction: the fictive identity.' The idea of an identity of course assumes that there is something, or someone, that one is identical to, as though one's identity is always one's elusive double. For Barthes the only identity is a fictive identity, and we always have various doubles; this fictive identity, Barthes adds ominously, is the way we 'stage our plural.'[iv] Autobiography, then, as an invention, a staging, a fiction. And it has to be rare and final because no one writes more than one. You can't be a professional autobiographer. All writing may in some sense be autobiographical, but only an autobiography tells the conventional story of a life. *Barthes by Barthes* shows us, and sometimes tells us, just how compulsory the conventions can be in the conventional stories of a life.

These stories must, for example, give an account of the parents (in *Barthes by Barthes* the parents are rarely evoked, either as characters or as absences); they must contain childhood memories, the person's likes and dislikes (as *Barthes by Barthes* does, but also, like many things in this book, as a list); there must be something, however understated, about a person's so-called sexuality (in *Barthes by Barthes* there is a quietism, an abstraction in Barthes's allusions to his life as a gay man); and the story must make some sense of a life, find a meaning or a pattern in its inevitable repetitions (in *Barthes by Barthes* repetition is repeatedly discussed, but only as an idea, as an issue). An autobiography must, in other words, be what Barthes called a readerly text, one that doesn't make it too difficult for us, one we know how to read. An autobiography has to tell us a story in which we know where we are.

And yet, as Barthes's narrator writes in this extraordinary book — a book that begins, he tells us at the very beginning, after he has finished it — and in which so many of our expectations about autobiography are undone, 'anyone who speaks about himself gets lost.'[v] Psychoanalysis has always been divided about whether we should be better at losing ourselves, or better at not doing so, but autobiography has traditionally been about the finding and describing of selves. Barthes wants us to bear in mind that the words we have for ourselves leave us at a loss. In other words, *Barthes by Barthes* — at least nominally, an autobiography — is written by someone who wrote in a famous essay of 1968, *The Death of the Author*, that a text 'has no other origin than language itself,[vi] language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins'; and indeed that the text 'is henceforth made and read[vii] in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent.' Barthes by Barthes by no one, or nothing, but language. An autobiography without an author that is the autobiography of an author, of a life lived in writing, in which language, more often than not, is the subject.

But everyone, as we know, has a life story — it is seemingly the most democratic of genres — and everyone's life story is different (though every autobiography, and biography, is similar in that it is

a revelation of uniqueness). It is a convention of these genres that their subjects should be unconventional in some way; autobiography signifies a heroism however ordinary ('my body is not a hero,'[viii] the author remarks in *Barthes by Barthes*, just to make sure the reader doesn't jump to the wrong conclusions). The genre makes its own claims on us; it speaks on our behalf. Indeed, nothing persuades us more of the life of the author than his autobiography. A world without life stories is unimaginable now; taking and making a history is where most of the so-called disciplines and professions start from, though without always being overly aware of what they are doing by doing this ('what right,' Barthes asks appropriately in this book about his past, 'does my present[ix] have to speak of my past?'). The story is compulsory but the meaning of it is not; the subject is not always clear, and clarity has its own conventions (*Barthes by Barthes* is a book about what it is to make something clear). The story can always and only be interpreted, can always be read differently, and evidence never speaks for itself — or rather, as Barthes writes, 'the true violence[x] is that of the self-evident.' An autobiography is a life made only of words; Barthes wants us to wonder why it goes without saying that there must be something (or someone) in it. And, indeed, why we want to recognize ourselves at all?

The obvious, for Barthes, was a fetish, a way of warding something off; a sign of how apathetic we can be about our pleasure. 'That which goes without saying,'[xi] Barthes the semiologist wrote in *Criticism and Truth* in 1966, '… never raises questions of method, since a method is, in a quite contrary way, the act of doubt by which one asks oneself about chance or nature.' As a critic Barthes always read for whatever supposedly was beyond question in a text. That which goes without saying, the obvious, the self-evident, the taken for granted — what Barthes calls *doxa* in *Barthes by Barthes*, 'Public Opinion,[xii] the mind of the majority, petit bourgeois Consensus, the Voice of Nature, the Violence of Prejudice' — is beyond question, which means, for Barthes, beyond interpretation. But what goes without

saying is always said in a language. Semiology, the science of signs that Barthes championed in his own idiosyncratic way, was a reading of culture as a set of languages, and of meaning as something made by a system of signs ('the object of all his work,'[xiii] he writes in *Barthes by Barthes*, 'is a morality of the sign'). A sign system is a consensus in which there has never been an initial agreement; a language is a contract that no one has ever signed. So methods of interpretation are required to make sense of the methods, the assumptions, of language and its effects. It is not a matter of finding what things mean — or, as we say, really mean — but of showing how meaning is made (in contemporary autobiography, for example, the singled-out childhood memories are taken to be the essentially formative experiences, the set pieces that signify The Significant). 'It is necessary to posit[xiv] a paradigm,' Barthes writes in *Barthes by Barthes*, 'in order to produce a meaning and then to be able to divert, to alter it.' Language as a system, and language as loophole. When Barthes came to write an autobiography — *Barthes by Barthes* was published in 1975, the year he was elected a member of the Collège de France, the year he established himself, so to speak — it was always going to be an improvisation.

Reading Barthes's early writing could make you feel that languages were like cults, and that semiology was the only way out; and, indeed, that semiology could be a pleasure to read, that there was a pathos, an eroticism about signs, that semiology was for the sophisticated, not merely for the technically minded. 'It seemed to me,'[xv] Barthes wrote in his *Leçon*, 'that a science of signs could stimulate social criticism,' and it was in *Mythologies*, the book that made him famous — and the book most reprised and referred to in *Barthes by Barthes* — that Barthes performed his eccentric skepticism, his acts of doubt about the *doxa* that he referred to, slightly confusingly, as the myths of contemporary French culture. The Eiffel Tower, Steak and Chips, Striptease, Toys, the World of Wrestling, the Brain of Einstein, French wine, among many others were read as coded messages that needed to be unscrambled to expose the often absurd and exploitative ideologies that informed them.

Interpretation, in Barthes's earlier writing, was a form of disillusionment, the unmasking of a cultural fantasy life that masqueraded as the reality principle; language was something that needed to be exposed. 'It is true that wine[xvi] is a good and fine substance,' Barthes writes in *Mythologies*, and a version of this particular truth is returned to in *Barthes by Barthes*, 'but it is no less true that its production is deeply involved in French capitalism whether it is that of the private distillers or that of the big settlers in Algeria who impose on the Muslims, on the very land of which they have been dispossessed, a crop of which they have no need, while they lack even bread.' Stylishly — without jargon and apparently without method — Barthes used the methods of psychoanalysis, Marxism, and semiology to unmask the props of bourgeois life. Myths were the forms of reassurance the culture used to entrap people in forgetful consumption and political naïveté. 'The very principle of myth,'[xvii] Barthes writes in *Mythologies*, is that 'it transforms history into nature,'[xvii] a process into a fact; 'it abolishes the complexity of human acts,[xviii] it gives them the simplicity of essences'; once something becomes a myth, in Barthes's terms, 'it is natural and goes without saying.'[xix] Myth promotes 'nothing but the popular and age-old image[xx] of the perfect intelligibility of reality.' The Barthes of *Mythologies* was an angrier, more politically outraged writer than the Barthes of the later work (in *Barthes by Barthes* politics is often an irritant, something that is so real to him that he wants to find a way around it). But *Mythologies* is the best introduction to *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* because autobiography as a genre, as Barthes knew, is our modern myth par excellence. Nothing reassures us more about who we are — even when they disturb us, or particularly when they disturb us — than our life stories. Nothing makes us more intelligible to ourselves. But a life story may be a myth we hide our lives in, or hide something about our lives in; not a cover-up, which would suggest there was something essential to be revealed, but a fixation; a fantasy of describing an essential self where there is neither a self nor an essence ('You are a patch-work

of reactions,'[xxi] Barthes describes himself while describing the reader; 'is there anything primary in you?' he asks, perhaps wistfully). There is no avant-garde of autobiography (even though psychoanalysis once promised to be this, the psychoanalytic life story quickly became part of the *doxa)*. It is not news now to say that there is no such thing as the self; it is news, however, to show how this works in the practice of writing. In this book Barthes wants to show us how the self forms and performs itself in language, as what he calls an effect of language; how it, as a plural, is literally made up; how, as Barthes writes, it can 'grasp [itself][xxii] only by means of an image-repertoire,' as a drama of signs.

Barthes's favorite motto, he tells us on several occasions, was *Larvatus prodeo* (I advance pointing to my mask). There is in Barthes's writing an ironic self-consciousness that knows it can't always see what it is showing other people, but is always acutely aware of the audience, and of the reader as part of an audience, as sociable rather than solitary. It is important to remember, when reading *Barthes by Barthes*, his early interest in the theater — at university in Paris he helped found a theater group to perform classical plays — and his lifelong interest in Brecht. Because *Barthes by Barthes* is a staged and stagey autobiography of a Brechtian kind ('While writing *Roland Barthes,'*[xxiii] Barthes said in an interview, 'I wasn't sure at one point that I'd have enough to say, and I considered — if only as a fantasy — inserting passages from Brecht'). It is informed, that is to say, by that wariness of extended, continuous narrative that is essential to the episodic nature of Brecht's epic theater.

Barthes by Barthes is fragmentary for strategic reasons, that are reasons of pleasure. 'Discontinuity of discourse,'[xxiv] Barthes wrote in *Brecht and Discourse* (published the same year as *Barthes by Barthes)*, 'keeps the final meaning from "taking,"' which is then reiterated in *Barthes by Barthes*: 'a superior rule:[xxv] that of the breach (heterology): to keep a meaning from "taking."' If a meaning 'takes' — if a particular image of ourselves, or anything else, begins to stick — if

it becomes settled, definitive, essential, it becomes part of the *doxa* (in *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes contrasts *'doxa*, opinion'[xxvi] with *'paradoxa*, dispute,' what is current with what is contentious). And for Barthes there is a terror of getting stuck, of being immobilized, that is everywhere in his writing and which may or may not have been compounded by his two long hospitalizations as a young man for tuberculosis between 1934 and 1935, and, intermittently, between 1941 and 1947. So *Barthes by Barthes* is an autobiography that can be dipped into and skimmed — cruised, to use Barthes's word. The reader is invited, indeed tempted, to move around in the text, without ever losing the place or the plot.

In *Barthes by Barthes* no meaning, no event, significant or otherwise, is dwelt on — there are no privileged moments that are without question — as though the story of a life would be distorted by the assumption of there being themes, or continuities, or self-evidently important memories, or virtually anything else of which a life is supposed to consist (there is, for example, no mention in the book of Barthes's half-brother; no love affairs are described; and lovers and friends are given initials like so-called patients in psychoanalytic case histories, one of the many languages of autobiography alluded to, and parodied, in the book). In his epic theater, Brecht writes, he 'regards nothing as existing[xxvii] except in so far as it changes, in other words, is in disharmony with itself.' The fragments in alphabetical order of *Barthes by Barthes* — in which an arbitrary system, by replacing the usual developmental story, exposes its arbitrariness — keeps the disharmony going; we can't easily get a picture of the author (or his book), or jump to conclusions, or even come to them. In this autobiography, in which no one is doing anything as conventional as growing up, we keep jumping to new beginnings (the only heir of *Barthes by Barthes* is J. B. Pontalis's remarkable autobiography *Love of Beginnings*, in which the writing of many autobiographies is proposed). Barthes has no truck with autobiography as the successful or failed progress myth called development. He has to, as he says in this book, '*rewrite* myself,'[xxviii] as one might rewrite successive drafts of a book, not with a view to

getting it right but to take up positions in relation to himself. So he writes for and against his pleasures while always insisting on them: perversion for example, is celebrated in this book — 'perversion, quite simply,[xxix] makes happy; or to be more specific, it produces a more' — but Barthes is never an improper writer, there is nothing that sounds like perversion in his book; in a work so much about the body, bodies are rarely described. *Barthes by Barthes* is full of definitions written by someone who goes in fear of definition, and defines the fear: 'to name is to pacify.'[xxx] Positions are taken up but mustn't be allowed to take, as though he also fears fascination, and is wary of how charmed one can be by oneself (he describes *Barthes by Barthes* as 'the book of my resistance[xxxi] to my own ideas'). So the reader, to whom the writer is unusually attentive in this book, is never allowed to settle into a conventional autobiographical narrative, into 'the perfect intelligibility'[xxxii] of a remembered life, into the myth of honesty.

And by the same token, neither is the writer, who is more like a Brechtian actor than a conventional autobiographer. 'The actor,' Brecht writes in *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, a text much admired by Barthes, 'has to discard[xxxiii] whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays. Aiming not to put his audience into a trance, he must not go into a trance himself.' The writer as so-called autobiographer must not identify with the character in his book — must not assume they are the same or even similar — and the audience must not be allowed to identify with him either, or be lulled into a state of inattention; they must be helped, by the writer, to keep their wits about them, to go on having their own thoughts, to go on interpreting — which means to go on being surprised ('The dramatic theatre's spectator,'[xxxiv] Brecht writes, 'says: Yes, I've felt like that too …The Epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it'). The muddles and mystiques of empathy are to be avoided, and the writer must be as conscious as he can be of the kind of appeal he makes to the reader. 'This work [*Barthes by Barthes*] would be defined,'[xxxv] he writes, 'as: *a tactics*

without strategy,' intimating that conventional autobiography is a strategy supposedly without tactics, 'innocently' selling us something essential about a self.

So the reader in *Barthes by Barthes* is continually being reminded that that is what he is. Barthes, who is always (as unobtrusively as possible) pedagogic — and who loves the unobtrusive, and so can only hate violence — is all too often telling the reader, in the nicest possible way, how he should be reading his book; or rather, how the writer depends upon him for his effects. 'The ideal would be,'[xxxvi] he writes in *Barthes by Barthes*, 'neither a text of vanity, nor a text of lucidity, but a text with uncertain quotation marks … This also depends on the reader, who produces the spacing of the readings.' In a text of uncertain quotation marks no one would be quite sure whose words were whose. The reader would have to be alert, not spellbound but bound by something else to keep reading. Barthes was always interested in new kinds of attention, in new forms of attentiveness. His hedonism was a curiosity, not a nostalgia. He wants us to revise our pleasures. And reading and writing are emblems, for Barthes, of these pleasures.

But of course enthusiasm for the new can never be new now. *Barthes by Barthes*, among many other things — and the text is, in one of Barthes's favorite images, kaleidoscopic — is a new kind of book about novelty; novelty as myth, and novelty as an object of desire. About how we might sustain our pleasure without losing our interest, and about how we might sustain our interest without losing our pleasure. Brecht, Barthes said in an interview, 'was the first to provide me[xxxvii] with a theoretical right to pleasure … I discovered in him[xxxviii] that ethic of both pleasure and intellectual vigilance.' In this book that 'consists of what I do not know'[xxxix] — a book of endless disclaimers in which the author is always disidentifying himself — it is this ethic of pleasure and intellectual vigilance that is the sustaining thread. Every fragment in this book is alert to something, and takes pleasure in the attention it gives and takes and takes away.

But the book also takes pleasure in telling the reader what to do (a writer, after all, cannot be unassuming, he has to make his voice felt; on virtually every page of *Barthes by Barthes* there are italics). Even before it really begins — at the beginning before the beginning — there is an instruction that sounds like a stage direction: 'It must all be considered[xl] as if spoken by a character in a novel.' And just in case we forget, the instruction is repeated, with a difference, toward the end of the book, in a section entitled 'The Book of the Self': 'All this must be considered[xli] as if spoken by a character in a novel — or rather by several characters.' 'As if' because it isn't a novel, and it isn't spoken; and, of course, for Barthes, it is no longer self-evident what a character is anyway, other than something made with words, and something plural. Language was always Barthes's obscured object of desire (in an uncharacteristically grandiloquent moment in this book, Barthes refers to himself, so to speak, as 'the visionary and voyeur of language'[xlii]). *Barthes by Barthes* is his celebration of language as possibility. In a society ridden, he once wrote, by two moralities, platitude and rigor, what kind of life stories can be told? 'What he writes,'[xliii] Barthes writes in this book, in his third person, 'proceeds from a corrected banality.' Perhaps our life stories are a banality that needs correcting. The death of the author means the death of the autobiographer. But it also means, at least in *Barthes by Barthes*, with all its fragmented authority, the quicker life of language.

Adam Phillips, 2010

NOTES

i 'No need of a story:' Samuel Beckett, 'Texts for Nothing,' in *Complete Short Prose* 1929–1989 (New York: Grove Press, 1995), text 4 (1955), p. 116.

ii 'you constitute yourself:' Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), p. 82.

iii 'A certain pleasure:' Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 62.

iv 'stage our plural:' Ibid., p.62.

v 'anyone who speaks:' Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p.120.

vi 'has no other origin than language itself:' Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 146.

vii 'is henceforth made and read:' Ibid., p. 145.

viii 'my body is not a hero:' Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 60.

ix 'what right does my present:' Ibid., p. 121.

x 'the true violence:' Ibid., p. 85.

xi 'That which goes without saying:' Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 35.

xii 'Public Opinion:' Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 47.

xiii 'the object of all his work:' Ibid., p. 97.

xiv 'It is necessary to posit:' Ibid., p. 92.

xv 'It seemed to me:' Roland Barthes, 'Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France,' translated from the French *Leçon* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978), in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Sustan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 32.

xvi 'It is true that wine:' Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 68.

xvii 'The very principle of myth:' Ibid., p. 154.

xviii 'it abolishes the complexity of human acts:' Ibid., p. 170.

xix 'it is natural and goes without saying:' Ibid.

xx 'nothing but the popular and age-old image:' Ibid., p. 14.

xxi 'You are a patch-work of reactions:' Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 143.

xxii 'grasp [itself]:' Ibid., p. 158.

xxiii 'While writing *Roland Barthes*:' Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 225.

xxiv 'Discontinuity of discourse:' Roland Barthes, 'Brecht and Discourse,' in *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p. 217.

xxv 'a superior rule:' Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 148.

xxvi *'doxa*, opinion' ... '*paradoxa*, dispute:' Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 18.

xxvii 'regards nothing as existing:' Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 193.

xxviii '*rewrite* myself:' Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 142.

xxix ‘perversion, quite simply:’ Ibid., p. 64.
xxx ‘to name is to pacify:’ Ibid., p. 179.
xxxi ‘the book of my resistance:’ Ibid., p. 119.
xxxii ‘the perfect intelligibility:’ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 14.
xxxiii ‘The actor has to discard:’ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 193.
xxxiv ‘The dramatic theatre’s spectator says:’ Ibid., p. 71.
xxxv ‘This work would be defined as:’ Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 172.
xxxvi ‘The ideal would be:’ Ibid., p. 106.
xxxvii ‘was the first to provide me:’ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, p. 175.
xxxviii ‘I discovered in him:’ Ibid., p. 225.
xxxix ‘consists of what I do not know:’ Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 152.
xl ‘It must all be considered:’ Ibid., p. 1.
xli ‘All this must be considered:’ Ibid., p. 119.
xlii ‘the visionary and voyeur of language:’ Ibid., p. 161.
xliii ‘What he writes:’ Ibid., p. 137.

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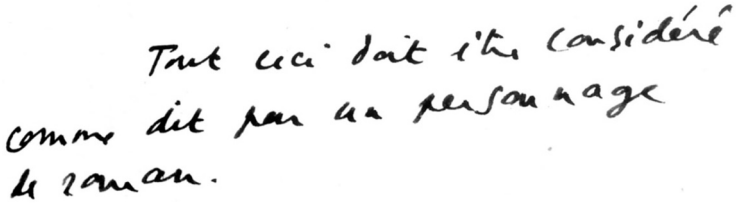

It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.