

1983

Roland Barthes: A Reminiscence

Stephen Menick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Menick, Stephen. "Roland Barthes: A Reminiscence." *The Iowa Review* 13.3 (1982): 134-140. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2958>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Roland Barthes—A Reminiscence · *Stephen Menick*

IN 1968, YEAR of assassinations, the year of Tet, the year Soviet armor rattled into Prague, the year the students invaded the office of the president of Columbia University and the one with the furry moustache and dark glasses sat behind the desk and smoked the president's cigars—the year that will forever remain the most sixties-ish of the sixties—as a sophomore at a New England college, I went to Paris in the spring.

There were twenty of us on semester abroad, and for three easy courses at the American Center for Students and Artists, Boulevard Raspail, we were young men in Paris. I recall the American Center now in a way that seems more selective, spottier than my recollections of Parisian Paris—only a few items survive, the glossy old floorboards, the broken springs in the club chairs and the feeling of funky wholesomeness about the place, the sturdy brown forearms of some American girls there, athletes with blue eyes as placid and dizzy as kites. I've lost the names of the two teachers loaned to us from the Sorbonne, except that one of them was a Jean-Marie something (to be Jean-Marie was to be inalienably French); the third was Roland Barthes.

Barthes—we taught ourselves to keep it to one syllable, the *s* silent, the *t* hard, and eventually we learned to swallow the *r*—was then beginning to pick up an international reputation, of which I wasn't in the least aware. My first sense of him came when, just arrived, I pronounced his name to my neighbor, a foreign student unlike myself in that France wasn't foreign to her and she was a much more devoted student than I, serious and older-seeming in the European mold; she wore a no-nonsense Russian watch; she was the daughter of a Montenegrin partisan—a Ninotchka with wit, a Ninotchka after Melvyn Douglas took his pratfall—and when she heard Barthes' name she flashed hungrily. I had a famous teacher. I brought Ninotchka to class with me.

In one of those absurd zoomorphic visions we sometimes have of others, something about Barthes—his calmness and his gray coloring—reminded me of an elephant dusting itself after a river bath. The grayness he also shared with Paris in the rain. He was a smallish man with fine matte skin and nice teeth that didn't often show. Ninotchka—and it's worth saying that though in time I hit on countless other diminutives for her, her name really was Nina—noticed his cozy tattersall shirt, his cashmere V-neck, his suede cigarette case.

He spoke on contemporary French intellectual life, but the voice in the classroom doesn't come back as powerfully as bits of the texture of May 1968 in Paris, such as the sound of tear gas grenades carrying one night across the Seine, snapping against the windowpanes as I lay in bed. It was a continuous angry pounding as clustered and heavy as every Second World War air raid I'd never heard, and I was sure there were deaths by the score.

Then one Saturday in late June, in a Latin Quarter where a sort of unofficial curfew had fallen, where almost every time you turned a corner you came upon riot police by the battalion, I visited Barthes at his apartment over the rue Servandoni, a crevice of a street off the Place Saint-Sulpice. (The same street, though I didn't know it then, where had lived Dr. Matthew O'Connor, the fabulous cross-dresser of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*.) I saw only Barthes' studio, a spacious garret under a mansard, tidy, genteel, broken up into little theaters—for work, drawing, music—by plain furnishings. There was a piano and a cot with a tartan comforter. I told him that I should have to return to my country college now that the semester was just about at a close, but that I preferred Paris. He asked if I got along with my parents. The short answer was yes, and he offered me a place in his seminar at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes.

It was a little along the lines of a folktale—the peasant boy wins almost by accident what others have been refused. And there were others, yearly, with entitlements much stronger than mine. I don't know what Barthes saw in me, except that as we sat facing each other, as I told him my story and he quietly corrected my French, his gray eyes recurrently went to my hands. At the time I suspected it was because I was visibly nervous; long after leaving Paris, and after several people had drawn attention to the spidery length and articulation of my hands, it occurred to me that Barthes may have been admiring them. "*Mais pourquoi, Roland, pourquoi est-ce que tu as choisi ce jeune américain?*"—so I imagined some acquaintance of his putting the question to him, with the imagined reply, candid and straightaway, "*Parce qu'il avait des belles mains.*"

Around the end of that year or the beginning of the next, as the French university system convalesced from the events of May, Barthes' seminar began to meet, and I to attend. Thursday afternoons, in a shabby hall off the Place Saint-Germain—the shabbiness and the sense of exile from the Sorbonne proper made it feel engagingly off-off, like experi-

mental theater—Thursday afternoons, Barthes would read aloud his work of the previous week. There was an audience of more than a hundred, auditors, friends, master's and doctoral candidates, sitting if they'd arrived early enough, standing if not, cramming the hall.

His work in progress, eventually published as the book *S/Z*, was an analysis of a little-known story by Balzac entitled *Sarrasine*.

Ten thousand words of a luxuriantly cadenced prose, *Sarrasine* is full of Old World lights and darks, desire and frustration and literal cloaks and daggers. A woman contracts to grant a man a night of love in exchange for information—the deep dark secret of the rich and mysterious de Lanty family. This secret, as the man tells it, goes back many years, to *Sarrasine*, a young French artist who has traveled to Italy to pursue his art and there fallen in love with a beautiful prima donna named *Zambinella*. *Sarrasine* kidnaps *Zambinella* and discovers that the object of his affections is actually a castrato disguised as a woman, whereupon—*Some Like It Hot* this isn't—*Sarrasine* is murdered at the hands of an Italian cardinal who is *Zambinella*'s protector. (And it develops that *Zambinella* is still alive as an obscenely withered old man, one of the de Lanty family, who thus owe their fortune to the sinister cardinal.) But the story of *Sarrasine* and *Zambinella* so repels the listener, the woman, that she breaks her lover's contract with the storyteller; now that he has told this story of castration the story "tells" on him, and by the end of *Sarrasine* the only consummated act has been that of storytelling itself.

Barthes cut *Sarrasine* into somewhat less than six hundred sequences and commented on each, disrobing the voluptuous play of figurative, allusive, seemingly secondary meanings around the strictly literal sense of each sentence, often a single phrase or a single word.

Hearing *Zambinella* sing for the first time, *Sarrasine* suddenly feels a tingling (Balzac's word is *pétiller*) "in the depths of his intimate being, of what we call the heart, for lack of a word!" Clearly Balzac wasn't short of a word, though a straight impoverished reading of this passage and those that follow, which abound in cries and quiverings and have *Sarrasine* convulsed to the point of exhaustion, would have his sex organs sleeping through the whole thing. Barthes gave an explicitly erotic reading, not to subtract from the literal one but to add to it, and to suggest that in literary language—where the workings of language are at their most vivid—meaning is inherently plural. He had a vision of a literature not as literal as road signage ("Soft Shoulders"); his vision

led him to read for connotations, as essential to linguistic meaning as harmonic overtones are to timbre; and he invited his readers to consider that the slash, the cutting in twain, between denotation and connotation might reside, like Sarrasine's passion for Zambinella, on a fallacy.

If Barthes' "free" reading of Balzac seems tame today or in this country, as a literary critic in France he was a kind of Lenny Bruce.

Mass media have always been profane; reading a bit of pop-Freudian fun into the last shot of *North by Northwest*—the train carrying the reunited Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint rushes away into a tunnel—is something any ticket buyer can get away with; but in France before Barthes, any but a literal reading of the classics of literature was sacrilege.

The shrieks that went up following his 1963 book on Racine—the press was peppered with attacks on Barthes, there was talk of caning, nailing, hanging him, wringing his neck, and even of kissing Raymond Picard, the Sorbonne professor who wrote a book called *New Criticism, New Imposture* and argued in it that Barthes was a menace to French national institutions.

French New Criticism, with Barthes as its most salient figure, became a renaissance of sorts, a surge of intellectual energy, of new writing, new journals and translations—among them the writings of Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Sparked by Bakhtin's studies of the carnivalesque side of Rabelais and Dostoevski, there was a revival of interest in the old European comic tradition, and in the late sixties-early seventies a wave of articles and dissertations on that tradition and its echoes in major "serious" literature. Some of us felt that the class definition of fiction—fiction represents what is possible, probable, verisimilar, lifelike—was incomplete, and that just as the study of man took you into the bush and the study of health into hospitals, the study of fiction took you into comedy.

My own research took me to the Historical Library of the City of Paris, whose glorious reading room had tall casement windows on a garden and prettily painted rafters high over our musty heads. The house had been built by Henri II for his mistress Diane de Poitiers. The largesse survived—the male librarians were the most attentive in the world, bringing everything but tea to your table.

I read up on the French carnivals of the Middle Ages, the *commedia dell'arte* and the birth of slapstick, the comedy of insults of the French court fools. The comedy wasn't always limited to the brown crackling

pages. One morning a dirt-poor old woman whose last joy in life seemed to lie in throwing bread to pigeons—it was a sort of sacrament for her—was doing just that in the garden outside the reading room. A man a little less than her contemporary and a good deal fatter, with cheeks that unique purple seen in red Bordeaux that's been left standing for a week, rose from his chair and opened the window a crack and said, "It is forbidden to feed the birds."

But sometimes just opening a window was forbidden. It was an August day, the kind of dusty oriental day in Paris when the wide empty boulevards and the obelisk of Ramses in the Place de la Concorde seemed to sum up the city, and I was suffocating in the reading room beside an elderly scholar with white frontal cowlicks like those of Jacques Maritain. Maybe it was Jacques Maritain. Observing the code of French politeness, which can require murmuring "*Pardon*" to anyone close enough to reach you with a yardstick, I turned to my neighbor and with a silkiness of tone that would have made Adolphe Menjou sound like a guttersnipe, I asked whether he would mind if I opened the window just a little. He sputtered, "It causes drafts."

I last saw Barthes the day I dropped off my seminar thesis at his apartment—my second visit there. I climbed the six flights off the rue Servandoni with the manuscript pressed to my ribs. He didn't yet know what it was about. It had been written in solitude, for which there were more reasons than one—whatever he could tell me, I felt, had been impressed into his books, he was busy with the next one, I reckoned that working any other way than by private trial and error would have cheated me out of a true reflective experience, and I'd been too bashful to approach him. As I got up to his door I could hear over the pounding in my chest—after all, that bashful heart had just done six flights of stairs—the sound of his piano.

He was placing a series of chords, feeling his way. I eavesdropped until, telling myself that he'd probably heard my footsteps coming up the staircase—you always know the acoustics of your own staircase—I knocked.

Imagining that moment now, I expect there to have been a soft pat of a chord, a bit of vexed punctuations registered on the keys for being interrupted, but my better memory says no, just an alerted pause, a retreat to the privacy of silence, that privacy which I supposed was so scarce for him. Then he came to the door and bent to the peephole to see who the eavesdropper was. I didn't know what to do, wave at a glass

pea or look at my nails. Peeping and eavesdropping—half the French novel of manners from Le Sage to Proust in a few seconds. The door opened rapidly. Barthes was wearing a caftan, two of them actually, a bright blue one with a square-cut neck and a white one underneath. I handed him my opus, we spoke a word or two and I left him to his piano and his caftan.

A precious glimpse—Roland Barthes “at home.” The caftan seemed right for the sort of cultivated puttering Barthes must have been engaged in that afternoon. I guessed it was from Morocco, where he was sometimes a visitor. It struck me as having the full value of a souvenir, a recapturing, a little husk-dry air brought back to drizzly Paris in a wrapper of Moroccan cotton. And it seemed to hark back to a French orientalism of the nineteenth century, when a man might have retired to his book-closet of an evening with meerschaum and fez. Shades of Balzac, Rodin’s Balzac draped in his Mother Hubbard, and the skirted length, the state of unprovocative domestic undress, like a ladies’ house coat.

In *Roland Barthes*, a book which was an intellectual self-portrait at middle age, Barthes wrote a kind of snapshot of himself as a houseflower, playing the piano, painting watercolors, indulging in “all the false occupations of a young bourgeois girl of the nineteenth century.” False occupations? An amateur’s occupations. He was a self-described amateur, placing the stress on the Latin root of the word—*amator*, lover.

Progressively the lover declared himself in his writing. In *Roland Barthes* he wrote of having been in love with this or that idea at a given time in his life, described intellectual activity as a kind of sensuality and ideas in sensual terms; defined an idea as an *empourprement de plaisir*, a crimsoning, an empurpling of pleasure—such as must have bloomed on Sarrasine’s heart when he heard Zambinella sing. In the later books—I am thinking mainly of *The Pleasure of the Text*, *Roland Barthes*, *A Lover’s Discourse*—he relied little on argument and demonstration, and the manner became confidential.

He’d always written about literary language, sometimes about modern folklore, as in *The System of Fashion* and *Mythologies*; but in *A Lover’s Discourse* he wrote explicitly of the language of love—found it lacking in our day, and tried to put together a vocabulary for such a language.

He’d opened *Roland Barthes* with the light notice that the reader look upon the Roland Barthes on the page as a character out of a novel. In *A Lover’s Discourse* the mask—or better, the veil, like the see-through

black spiderweb veil on a toque—came off, and he made it clear that the eroticism and the discourse were his own.

Early in 1980 I discovered in the *New York Times* that Barthes was dead of injuries from a street accident in Paris. Reading that the injuries had been to his chest, I thought of the lungs in *Roland Barthes*, those tubercular lungs whose flutterings had dispatched him, in his youth, to the coddled calm of mountain sanatoria.

At the time of his death I was living in a sanatorium of sorts, Yaddo at Saratoga Springs, where a patronage of the arts furthered my aspirations. There were other guests, writers, poets and painters, sharing the black-pine stillness and a generous table. My writing was an embarrassment and I hadn't published a thing and yet I felt fortunate as I had felt fortunate in Paris. A cottony thunder issued from the stove where a red Savarin coffee can simmered to soften the air. The ice on the cabin window resembled fossil ferns from the Carboniferous Age. Alive with current, my typewriter trembled, waiting for the next strike of my fingers.