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ROLAND BARTHES

The Rustle  
of Language

*Translated by Richard Howard*



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## From Work to Text

A change has lately occurred, or is occurring, in our idea of language and consequently of the (literary) work which owes to that language at least its phenomenal existence. This change is obviously linked to the present development of (among other disciplines) linguistics, anthropology, Marxism, psychoanalysis (the word *link* is used here in a deliberately neutral manner: no determination is being invoked, however multiple and dialectical). The transformation of the notion of the work does not necessarily derive from the internal renewal of each of these disciplines, but rather from their intersection at the level of an object which traditionally proceeds from none of them. We might say, as a matter of fact, that *interdisciplinary* activity, today so highly valued in research, cannot be achieved by the simple confrontation of specialized branches of knowledge; the interdisciplinary is not a comfortable affair: it begins *effectively* (and not by the simple utterance of a pious hope) when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down—perhaps even violently, through the shocks of fashion—to the advantage of a new object, a new language, neither of which is precisely this discomfort of classification which permits diagnosing a certain mutation. The mutation which seems to be affecting the notion of the work must not, however, be overestimated; it is part of an epistemological shift, more than of a real break of the kind which in fact occurred in the last century upon the appearance of Marxism and Freudianism; no new break has occurred since, and we might say that for the last hundred years we have been involved in a repetition. What History, our History, allows us today is merely to displace, to vary, to transcend, to repudiate. Just as Einsteinian science compels us to include within the object

studied the *relativity of reference points*, so the combined action of Marxism, Freudianism, and structuralism compels us, in literature, to relativize the relations of *scriptor*, reader, and observer (critic). Confronting the *work*—a traditional notion, long since, and still today, conceived in what we might call a Newtonian fashion—there now occurs the demand for a new object, obtained by a shift or a reversal of previous categories. This object is the *Text*. I know that this word is fashionable (I myself am compelled to use it frequently), hence suspect in some quarters; but this is precisely why I should like to review the main propositions at whose intersection the Text is located, as I see it; the word *proposition* must here be understood more grammatically than logically: these are speech-acts, not arguments, “hints,” approaches which agree to remain metaphorical. Here are these propositions: they concern method, genres, the sign, the plural, filiation, reading, pleasure.

1. The text must not be understood as a computable object. It would be futile to attempt a material separation of works from texts. In particular, we must not permit ourselves to say: the work is classical, the text is avant-garde; there is no question of establishing a trophy in modernity's name and declaring certain literary productions *in* and *out* by reason of their chronological situation: there can be “Text” in a very old work, and many products of contemporary literature are not texts at all. The difference is as follows: the work is a fragment of substance, it occupies a portion of the spaces of books (for example, in a library). The Text is a methodological field. The opposition may recall (though not reproduce term for term) a distinction proposed by Lacan: “reality” is shown [*se montre*], the “real” is proved [*se démontre*]; in the same way, the work is seen (in bookstores, in card catalogues, on examination syllabuses), the text is demonstrated, is spoken according to certain rules (or against certain rules); the work is held in the hand, the text is held in language: it exists only when caught up in a discourse (or rather it is Text for the very reason that it knows itself to

be so); the Text is not the decomposition of the work, it is the work which is the Text's imaginary tail. Or again: *the Text is experienced only in an activity, in a production*. It follows that the Text cannot stop (for example, at a library shelf); its constitutive moment is *traversal* (notably, it can traverse the work, several works).

2. Similarly, the Text does not stop at (good) literature; it cannot be caught up in a hierarchy, or even in a simple distribution of genres. What constitutes it is on the contrary (or precisely) its force of subversion with regard to the old classifications. How to classify Georges Bataille? Is this writer a novelist, a poet, an essayist, an economist, a philosopher, a mystic? The answer is so uncertain that handbooks of literature generally prefer to leave Bataille out; as a matter of fact, Bataille has written texts, or even, perhaps, always one and the same text. If the Text raises problems of classification (moreover, this is one of its "social" functions), it is because it always implies a certain experience of limits. Thibaudet used to speak (but in a very restricted sense) of limit-works (such as Chateaubriand's *Life of Rancé*, a work which indeed seems to us to be a "text"): the Text is what is situated at the limit of the rules of the speech-act (rationality, readability, etc.). This notion is not rhetorical, we do not resort to it for "heroic" postures: the Text attempts to locate itself very specifically *behind* the limit of the *doxa* (is not public opinion, constitutive of our democratic societies, powerfully aided by mass communications—is not public opinion defined by its limits, its energy of exclusion, its *censorship*?); taking the word literally, we might say that the Text is always *paradoxical*.

3. The text is approached and experienced in relation to the sign. The work closes upon a signified. We can attribute two modes of signification to this signified: either it is claimed to be apparent, and the work is then the object of a science of the letter, which is philology; or else this signified is said to be secret

and final, and must be sought for, and then the work depends upon a hermeneutics, an interpretation (Marxist, psychoanalytic, thematic, etc.); in short, the work itself functions as a general sign, and it is natural that it should represent an institutional category of the civilization of the Sign. The Text, on the contrary, practices the infinite postponement of the signified, the Text is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier; the signifier must not be imagined as "the first part of the meaning," its material vestibule, but rather, on the contrary, as its *aftermath*; similarly, the signifier's *infinitude* does not refer to some notion of the ineffable (of an unnamable signified) but to a notion of *play*; the engendering of the perpetual signifier (in the fashion of a perpetual calendar) in the field of the Text is not achieved by some organic process of maturation, or a hermeneutic process of "delving deeper," but rather by a serial movement of dislocations, overlappings, variations; the logic governing the Text is not comprehensive (trying to define what the work "means") but metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy (if it failed him, man would die). The work (in the best of cases) is *moderately* symbolic (its symbolics runs short, i.e., stops); the Text is *radically* symbolic: *a work whose integrally symbolic nature one conceives, perceives, and receives is a text*. The Text is thus restored to language; like language, it is structured but decentered, without closure (let us note, to answer the scornful suspicion of "fashion" sometimes lodged against structuralism, that the epistemological privilege nowadays granted to language derives precisely from the fact that in it [language] we have discovered a paradoxical idea of structure: a system without end or center).

4. The Text is plural. This does not mean only that it has several meanings but that it fulfills the very plurality of meaning: an *irreducible* (and not just acceptable) plurality. The Text is not coexistence of meaning, but passage, traversal; hence, it depends not on an interpretation, however liberal, but on an explosion, on dissemination. The plurality of the Text depends, as a matter

of fact, not on the ambiguity of its contents, but on what we might call the stereographic plurality of the signifiers which weave it (etymologically, the text is a fabric): the reader of the Text might be compared to an idle subject (who has relaxed his image-repertoire): this fairly empty subject strolls (this has happened to the author of these lines, and it is for this reason that he has come to an intense awareness of the Text) along a hillside at the bottom of which flows a wadi (I use the word to attest to a certain alienation); what he perceives is multiple, irreducible, issuing from heterogeneous, detached substances and levels: lights, colors, vegetation, heat, air, tenuous explosions of sound, tiny cries of birds, children's voices from the other side of the valley, paths, gestures, garments of inhabitants close by or very far away; all these incidents are half identifiable: they issue from known codes, but their combinative operation is unique, it grounds the stroll in a difference which cannot be repeated except *as difference*. This is what happens in the Text: it can be Text only in its difference (which does not mean its individuality); its reading is semelfactive (which renders any inductive-deductive science of texts illusory: no "grammar" of the text) and yet entirely woven of quotations, references, echoes: cultural languages (what language is not cultural?), antecedent or contemporary, which traverse it through and through, in a vast stereophony. The intertextuality in which any text is apprehended, since it is itself the intertext of another text, cannot be identified with some *origin* of the text: to seek out the "sources," the "influences" of a work is to satisfy the myth of filiation; the quotations a text is made of are anonymous, irrecoverable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without quotation marks. The work disturbs no monistic philosophy (there are antagonistic ones, as we know); for such a philosophy, plurality is Evil. Hence, confronting the work, the Text might indeed take for its motto the words of the man possessed by devils: "My name is legion, for we are many" (Mark 5:9). The plural or demonic texture which sets the Text in opposition to the work may involve profound modifications of reading, pre-



cisely where monologism seems to be the law: certain "texts" of Scripture, traditionally adopted by theological (historical or anagogical) monism, may lend themselves to a diffraction of meanings (i.e., finally, to a materialist reading), while the Marxist interpretation of the work, hitherto resolutely monistic, may become more materialist by pluralizing itself (if, of course, Marxist "institutions" permit this).

5. The work is caught up in a process of filiation. What is postulated are a *determination* of the world (of the race, then of History) over the work, a *consecution* of works among themselves, and an *appropriation* of the work to its author. The author is reputed to be the father and the owner of his work; literary science thus teaches us to *respect* the manuscript and the author's declared intentions, and society postulates a legality of the author's relation to his work (this is the "author's rights," actually a recent affair, not legalized in France until the time of the Revolution). The Text, on the other hand, is read without the Father's inscription. The metaphor of the Text is here again detached from the metaphor of the work; the latter refers to the image of an *organism* which grows by vital expansion, by "development" (a significantly ambiguous word: biological and rhetorical); the metaphor of the Text is that of the *network*; if the Text expands, it is by the effect of a combinative operation, of a systematics (an image, moreover, close to the views of contemporary biology concerning the living being); no vital "respect" is therefore due to the Text: it can be *broken* (moreover, this is what the Middle Ages did with two nonetheless authoritarian texts: Scripture and Aristotle); the Text can be read without its father's guarantee; the restoration of the intertext paradoxically abolishes inheritance. It is not that the Author cannot "return" in the Text, in his text, but he does so, one might say, as a guest; if he is a novelist, he inscribes himself there as one of his characters, drawn as a figure in the carpet; his inscription is no longer privileged, paternal, alethic, but ludic: he becomes, one can say, a paper author; his life is no

longer the origin of his fables, but a fable concurrent with his life; there is a reversion of the work upon life (and no longer the contrary); the work of Proust and Genet permits us to read their lives as a text: the word *bio-graphy* regains a strong, etymological meaning; and thereby the sincerity of the speech-act, a veritable "cross" of literary ethics, becomes a false problem: the *I* that writes the text is never anything but a paper *I*.

6. The work is ordinarily the object of consumption; I intend no demagoguery by referring to what is called a consumer culture, but we must recognize that today it is the work's "quality" (which ultimately implies an appreciation of "taste") and not the actual operation of reading which can make differences between books: "cultivated" reading is not structurally different from reading on trains. The Text (if only by its frequent "unreadability") decants the work (if it permits it at all) from its consumption and recuperates it as play, task, production, practice. This means that the Text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection into the work, but by linking the two together into one and the same signifying practice. The distance that separates reading from writing is historical. In the period of strongest social division (before the instauration of democratic cultures), reading and writing were *equally* class privileges: Rhetoric, the great literary code of that time, taught *writing* (even if what was ordinarily produced were discourses, not texts); it is significant that the advent of democracy reversed the watchword: the (secondary) school prides itself on teaching *reading* and no longer writing. In fact, *reading*, in the sense of *consuming*, is not *playing* with the text. "Playing" must be taken here in all the polysemy of the term: the text itself "plays" (like a door that "plays" back and forth on its hinges; like a fishing rod in which there is some "play"); and the reader plays twice over: he *plays at* the Text (ludic meaning), he seeks a practice which reproduces it; but, so that this practice is not reduced to a passive, interior *mimesis* (the Text being

precisely what resists this reduction), he *plays* the Text; we must not forget that *play* is also a musical term; the history of music (as practice, not as “art”) is, moreover, quite parallel to that of the Text; there was a time when, active amateurs being numerous (at least within a certain class), “to play” and “to listen” constituted a virtually undifferentiated activity; then two roles successively appeared: first of all, that of the *interpreter*, to which the bourgeois public (though it could still play a little itself: this is the entire history of the piano) delegated its playing; then that of the (passive) amateur who listens to music without being able to play it (the piano has effectively been replaced by the record); we know that today post-serial music has disrupted the role of the “interpreter,” who is asked to be in a sense the co-author of the score which he completes rather than “expresses.” The Text is a little like a score of this new kind: it solicits from the reader a practical collaboration. A great novation this, for who *executes* the work? (Mallarmé raised this question: he wanted the audience to *produce* the book.) Today only the critic executes the work (pun intended). The reduction of reading to consumption is obviously responsible for the “boredom” many feel in the presence of the modern (“unreadable”) text, the avant-garde film or painting: to be bored means one cannot produce the text, play it, release it, *make it go*.

7. This suggests one final approach to the Text: that of pleasure. I do not know if a hedonist aesthetic ever existed (eudaemonist philosophies are certainly rare). Of course, a pleasure of the work (of certain works) exists; I can enjoy reading and rereading Proust, Flaubert, Balzac, and even—why not?—Alexandre Dumas; but this pleasure, however intense, and even when it is released from any prejudice, remains partly (unless there has been an exceptional critical effort) a pleasure of consumption: for, if I can read these authors, I also know that I cannot *rewrite* them (that one cannot, today, write “like that”); and this rather depressing knowledge suffices to separate me from the production of these works, at the very moment

when their distancing founds my modernity (to be modern—is this not really to know that one cannot begin again?). The Text is linked to delectation, i.e., to pleasure without separation. Order of the signifier, the Text participates in its way in a social utopia; before History (supposing that History does not choose barbarism), the Text fulfills if not the transparency of social relations, at least the transparency of language relations: it is the space in which no language prevails over any other, where the languages circulate (retaining the *circular* meaning of the word).

These few propositions do not necessarily constitute the articulation of a Theory of the Text. This is not merely the consequence of the presenter's inadequacies (moreover, in many points he has merely recapitulated what is being investigated and developed around him). This is a consequence of the fact that a Theory of the Text cannot be satisfied with a meta-linguistic exposition: the destruction of meta-language, or at least (for it may be necessary to resort to it provisionally) calling it into question, is part of the theory itself: discourse on the Text should itself be only text, research, textual activity, since the Text is that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, and no subject of the speech-act in a situation of judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder: the theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing.

*Revue d'esthétique*, 1971

# Mythology Today

Some fifteen years ago, a certain idea of contemporary myth was proposed. This idea, which on its first appearance was hardly developed at all (the word retained an openly metaphoric value), nonetheless included several theoretical articulations. 1. Myth, close to what Durkheimian sociology calls a "collective representation," can be read in anonymous statements of the press, advertising, mass consumption; it is a social determinate, a "reflection." 2. This reflection, however, in accord with Marx's famous dictum, is *inverted*: myth consists in turning culture into nature, or at least turning the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the "natural": what is merely a product of class division and its moral, cultural, aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as a natural consequence; the quite contingent grounds of the statement become, under the effect of mythic inversion, Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, Public Opinion, in a word, the *Endoxa* (the secular figure of the Origin). 3. Contemporary myth is discontinuous: it is no longer stated in extended, constituted narratives, but only in "discourse"; at most, it is a *phraseology*, a corpus of phrases (of stereotypes); myth disappears, but the *mythic* remains, all the more insidious. 4. As speech (this was, after all, the meaning of *muthos*), contemporary myth issues from a semiology which permits the "correction" of mythic inversion by decomposing the message into two semantic systems: a connoted system whose signified is ideological (and consequently "straight," "non-inverted," or, to be clearer, even by speaking a moral jargon, *cynical*), and a denoted system (the apparent literalness of the image, of the object, of the sentence), whose function is to "naturalize" the class proposition by giving it the guarantee of the most "inno-

cent" of natures: that of language (age-old, maternal, academic, etc.).

This was how myth today appeared, or at least appeared to me. Has anything changed? Not French society, at least on this level, for mythic history is on a different time scale from political history; nor the myths, nor even the analysis; there is still a great deal of *the mythic* in our society: equally anonymous, slippery, fragmented, garrulous, available both to an ideological criticism and to a semiological dismantling. No, what has changed in the last fifteen years is the *science of reading*, under whose scrutiny myth, like an animal long since captured and observed, nonetheless becomes a *different object*.

A science of the signifier (even if it is still being elaborated) has in fact taken its place in the work of the period; its goal is not so much the analysis of the sign as its dislocation. With regard to myth, and though this is still a task which remains to be accomplished, the new semiology—or the new mythology—can no longer (or will no longer be able to) separate so easily the signifier from the signified, the ideological from the phraseological. Not that this distinction is false or ineffectual, but it has become mythic itself: any student can denounce the bourgeois or petit-bourgeois character of a form (of life, of thought, of consumption); in other words, a mythological *endoxa* has been created: demystification (or demythification) has itself become a discourse, a corpus of phrases, a catechistic statement; confronting which a science of the signifier can only be displaced and stop (provisionally) farther on: no longer at the (analytic) dissociation of the sign, but at its vacillation: it is no longer the myths which must be unmasked (the *endoxa* now undertakes that), but the sign itself which must be perturbed: not to reveal the (latent) meaning of a statement, of a feature, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning; not to change or to purify symbols, but to contest the symbolic itself. What is happening to (mythological) semiology is a little like what happened to psychoanalysis: it began, necessarily, by establishing lists of symbols (a loosened tooth = the castrated subject, etc.),

but today, much more than interrogating this lexicon which, without being false, is no longer of much interest (except to amateurs of the psychoanalytic vulgate), it examines the very dialectics of the signifier; semiology began in the same way by establishing a mythological lexicon, but the task facing it today is rather of a syntactical order (which articulations, which displacements constitute the mythic fabric of a mass-consumption society?); initially, we sought the destruction of the (ideological) signified; now we seek the destruction of the sign: "mythoclasm" is succeeded by a "semioclasm" that is much broader and raised to a higher level. The historical field is thereby extended: it is no longer French society, but far beyond it, historically and geographically, the whole of Western (Greco-Judeo-Islamo-Christian) civilization, unified in one and the same theology (essence, monotheism) and identified by the system of meaning it practices, from Plato to *France-Dimanche*.

The science of the signifier contributes a second correction (or a second extension) to contemporary mythology. The world, taken obliquely by language, is written, through and through; signs, constantly deferring their foundations, transforming their signifieds into new signifiers, quoting each other to infinity, nowhere come to a halt: writing is generalized. If society's alienation still compels us to demystify languages (and notably that of the myths), the means of this combat is not—is no longer—a critical decipherment, it is *evaluation*. Faced with the world's writing systems, the tangle of various discourses (didactic, aesthetic, propagandistic, political, etc.), we must determine levels of reification, degrees of phraseological density. Shall we succeed in specifying a notion which seems to me essential: that of a language's *compactness*? Languages are more or less *dense*; some—the most social, the most mythical—present an unshakable homogeneity (there is a power of meaning, there is a war of meanings): woven of habits, of repetitions, of stereotypes, of obligatory fragments and key words, each one constitutes an *idiolect* (a notion which twenty years ago I designated as *writing*); today, more than myths, it is idiolects which we must distinguish,

describe; mythologies are succeeded by a more formal, and thereby, I believe, more penetrating, idiolectology, whose operative concepts are no longer sign, signifier, signified, and connotation, but citation, reference, stereotype. Thus, the dense languages (such as mythic discourse) can be apprehended in the cross fire of the trans-writing whose still literary "text," antidote to myth, would occupy the pole, or rather the region—airy, light, open, spaced, decentered, noble, free—where writing deploys itself against the idiolect, i.e., at its limit, and combats it there. Myth in fact must be included in a general theory of the language of writing, of the signifier, and this theory, supported by the formulations of ethnology, psychoanalysis, semiology, and ideological analysis, must extend its object to take in the *sentence*, or better still, to take in *sentences* (the plural of the sentence); by which I mean that the mythic is present wherever *sentences are turned*, where *stories are told* (in every sense of these expressions): from interior monologue to conversation, from the newspaper article to the political speech, from the novel (if there are any left) to the advertising image—all utterances that can be included in the Lacanian concept of the *image-repertoire*.

This is no more than a program, perhaps in fact no more than a "desire." Yet I believe that, even if the new semiology—mainly concerned, recently, with the literary text—is no longer applied to myths of our time since the last text of *Mythologies*, in which I sketched an initial semiotic approach to social speech, it is at least conscious of its task: no longer merely to *reverse* (or to *correct*) the mythic message, putting it right side up, with denotation at the bottom and connotation at the top, nature on the surface and class interest deep down, but to change the object itself, to engender a new object, point of departure for a new science; to shift—making due allowance, of course, for differences in importance, and according to Althusser's scheme—from Feuerbach to Marx, from the young Marx to the great Marx.