On Barthes’ Biography: A Dialogue

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Abstract
This article presents an interview with Tiphaine Samoyault, author of Roland Barthes, Biographie (2015). There is always a difficulty in approaching the biography of Roland Barthes, who famously gave us the thesis of the ‘death of the author’. Nonetheless, Samoyault’s lengthy study can be considered the closest thing to an ‘official’ biography. Unlike other biographers, she was given access to and granted permission to cite from a wide range of private papers and materials. This inside view has not stopped her from detailing some of the more sensitive sides of Barthes’ life and, importantly, she has been able to reassess aspects of his writings and relationship to other key thinkers of the time and the wider politics. As part of the interview, various extracts from the biography are woven into the dialogue, allowing those unfamiliar with it to gain more direct access to the book itself.

Keywords
1968, Roland Barthes, China, French intellectuals, Neutral, Tiphaine Samoyault

Tiphaine Samoyault’s Roland Barthes, Biographie was published by Éditions du Seuil in 2015, the centenary year of Barthes’ birth. The English edition came out two years later, supported by the Institut français. It is a work that has been widely praised for its scholarship and erudition, and received the French Voices Award for excellence in publication and translation.

There is always a difficulty in approaching the biography of the person who famously gave us the thesis of the ‘death of the author’ and who came to prominence by attacking the ‘old criticism’, urging the need to break with convention at the time to pay attention instead to language itself. Barthes’ interpretive approach was one that openly displayed its ideological positioning (not least to Marxism, existentialism and
psychoanalysis) and in doing so sought to perform the task of criticism, whereby he equally reflected upon his own situation and language vis-à-vis the object of study. It might seem that the only suitable response to writing Barthes’ biography is something along the lines of Marie Gil’s *Roland Barthes: Au lieu de la vie* (2012). Her essayistic approach proceeds to read Barthes’ life as if a ‘text’ – indeed this is the strategy Barthes himself takes up in producing his aphoristic autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977).

A further barrier to writing Barthes’ biography has formerly been the lack of access to archival material. Following Calvet’s (1994) much criticised volume, Barthes’ half-brother, Michel Salzedo, chose to draw a clear line between Barthes’ public and private life. However, from around 2003 onwards, in working with Éric Marty, the estate has taken a very different tack. As this special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* explores, a wide range of new materials has been made available since the early 2000s. Most significantly, this includes Barthes’ final three lecture courses at the Collège de France in the late 1970s. The first of these was only published in French in 2002, and more recently in English by Columbia University Press under the titles of *How to Live Together* (2013), *The Neutral* (2005), and *The Preparation of the Novel* (2011). In addition, *Mourning Diary* was published in 2012 and *Travels in China* in 2013. These later writings have prompted renewed scholarship, captured for example by ‘The Renaissance of Roland Barthes’ conference held in New York in 2013, and the centenary conference ‘Roland Barthes at 100’ at Cardiff University in 2015.1 In French, there has been a whole range of significant publications. Of Barthes’ own writings, this includes a large volume of previously unpublished writings, *Album: Inédits, correspondences et varia* (2015). It is the incorporation of the more recently available works and diaries in conjunction with archival research that really grounds Samoyault’s approach to writing Barthes’ biography. Indeed her careful analysis of the late lectures and seminars and her close study of the different manuscript versions of his books leads to perhaps the most direct and comprehensive account of the biographical facts.

Samoyault’s account might be considered the closest thing to an ‘official’ biography. It was born of what she refers to as a ‘powerful and persuasive suggestion from Bernard Comment’, and with the direct support of Éric Marty and Michel Salzedo. Crucially, unlike Barthes’ other biographers, Samoyault was given access to and granted permission to cite from a wide range of private papers and materials. This inside view has not stopped her from detailing some of the more sensitive sides of Barthes’ life, not least his health and sexual life, but more importantly she has been able to reassess aspects of his writings and relationship to other key thinkers of the time and the wider politics. It is upon these
matters that the following exchange focuses, seeking to pick up from and expand upon key points in the book. At the same time various extracts from the biography are woven into the dialogue, which hopefully allows those unfamiliar with it to gain more direct access to the book itself.

Sunil Manghani: Given the scholarship that has gone into the book itself, I can appreciate that everything you might wish to say on the topic is already available to read. For some, then, this may serve as an introduction to your work, while for others it can hopefully provide some further context and reflection. It is not possible here to cover the whole span of Barthes’ career, and given that the focus of this issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* is on the late works of Barthes, we can focus a little more on the latter half of the book. However, I am interested to hear your thoughts on the significance of Barthes’ early life, blighted as it was by tuberculosis. The recent volume *Seeing Degree Zero* (Bishop and Manghani, 2019) includes a ‘translation’ of Victor Burgin’s projection piece, *Belledonne* (2016), which was commissioned for an exhibition of his work alongside drawings of Roland Barthes (Bishop and Manghani, 2016), which we can return to later. In his work, Burgin renders through CGI techniques the site of the sanatorium at Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet, where Barthes was a patient from 1942 to 1945. In fact, the very same postcard image of this venue (set as it is in the mountain range) reproduced in the biography is used by Burgin in his 3D rendering. Throughout *Belledonne* there are inter-titles which provide commentary on the effects and side-effects of treating tuberculosis as well as numerous haiku, which tell of Barthes’ interest in the form, with one noting how the haiku is best read in a single breath. Taken together, the swirling computer-generated ‘air’ of the mountain range, the references to tuberculosis, and the ‘breath’ of haiku all offer a haunting of a space in which we might project Barthes. In the biography, it is notable that you take the time to cover much of Barthes’ early life, particularly the time he spent institutionalized (largely covering the period of the Second World War). As you say at the start of Chapter 6, ‘New Vistas’:

> [t]he time spent away in the sanatorium gave a particular density to existence: not much happened there, but the experience of isolation and withdrawal fostered autarkic practices of the relation to the self and to books that led him to pay special attention to signs. The sanatorium was also the place of an alternative social life, neither family nor a collective: it was a little community in which people lived together in a society cut off from the rest of the world. (p. 121)

Having worked through the numerous traces of Barthes’ life, how do you view the significance of his early life? Your reference to autarkic practices
and community are certainly resonant with the final lecture courses, not least *How to Live Together* (Barthes, 2013).

**Tiphaine Samoyault:** The reason I devoted two chapters of the biography to Barthes’ sanatorium experience is precisely because, like you, I believe that this is a very important period in Barthes’ development. It is a long period of time too, several years, and it can’t be left out on the grounds that nothing really happens, that in the sanatorium a person is subject to a repetitive and monotonous timetable. Even though significant stretches of time were devoted to rest and inactivity, the period spent at the sanatorium was also rich, all the accounts we have agree on that; social life at Saint-Hilaire du Touvet was intense: there was a cinema, there were opportunities to make music, a journal, a well-stocked library… Barthes learned a lot there and he read a lot. His book on Michelet stems directly from those years, but – and you’re absolutely correct – so does *How to Live Together*, which is about small communities and in which Barthes regularly mentions his sanatorium experience.

I really like the ideas you put forward here. I have argued that the preoccupation with the body, the care that the body required, must have given birth in Barthes to the necessity of inscribing a bodily dimension into his thought. In a place of care, the body is subject to segmentation: one of its parts becomes the focus. This suggests that one can turn one’s own body into an object of analysis, that one can read it like a text. Time is also strictly segmented. It’s possible that Barthes’ relationship to the fragment also connects back to this experience. This is all in his Michelet: the eruptive, fragmentary approach, and criticism that is sensitive to the effects of the body (Michelet’s ‘historical migraines’ for example). In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977: 61), the entry ‘La côtolette’ [The rib chop] is a fable about this dispersal, this fragmentation of the body into several pieces. Relating the removal of a small piece of rib on the occasion of his second pneumothorax operation, carried out in 1945 at Leysin, he subsequently reflects on his relationship to the relic, which is simultaneously distanced, ironic – on account of his Protestant education – and vaguely uneasy. Relegated to a drawer with other ‘precious’ objects, the bone ends up flung from the top of the balcony in the rue Servandoni: the recollection itself oscillates between the image of a romantic strewing of ashes and that of a bone thrown to the dogs.

Your idea that his tuberculosis could have focused his attention on the breath, and that his subsequent passion for the haiku hails from this vital element inscribed so subtly within the text makes complete sense to me.

**SM:** Before going further, it is perhaps useful to clarify aspects of your approach to writing Barthes’ biography. Any such undertaking is challenging, but, as suggested in the introduction here, there is the added difficulty of working with someone so well associated with what it means
to write (and to write about authorship). Early on in the book, you make reference to the idea of ‘Rolandism’:

Barthes suggested the name ‘Marcelism’ for the special interest readers can take in the life of Marcel Proust, distinct from any liking they might have for his style or his oeuvre. This loving approach to the author is made via the disoriented narrative he gave of his own life in his oeuvre. In the same way, we can use the term ‘Rolandism’ to refer to this relation with a subject who returns endlessly to his own life as to a succession of figures. The profound relation between life and writing that is tirelessly staged in the books, lectures and seminars is one explanation for the interest many readers take in Barthes’ life: as if there were some magic key there, some spell that would open up several doors at once, the door of his personal quest and the door of the desire for writing that everyone harbours. (p. 18)

Your response to this problem is to not be tempted by any such ‘Rolandism’ and rather to work methodically with the texts and with the unprecedented access to the personal papers, diaries and correspondence. Stafford (2015: 149) puts it in his review that your account is ‘a bald (and bold) statement of the biographical facts’. He describes it less of a ‘return to l'homme et l'œuvre of nineteenth-century approaches to literature’, but ‘more l'œuvre et l'homme, that is, an acceptance (with regard to Barthes at least) that the writer’s life proves to be as interesting as the writings that remain’ (2015: 148). He too picks out your remark on ‘Rolandism’, as if in agreement, yet still the idea seems to haunt.

I find it noticeable in reading about Barthes that it is very common to find a hermetic meta-writing, with key references often being to Barthes himself. In the early stages of editing this special issue, I had to turn down various pieces that were too evidently writing about Barthes by writing with Barthes. It seems to be a strategy of getting hold of a subject that never seems otherwise to hold. Arguably, despite the complexities of the writings of someone like Derrida, there is still a way of distilling much of his thought. Yet, with Barthes, while seemingly more plain in style, his writings are beguilingly subtle. How would you describe your approach to taking on this project of Barthes’ biography, and how would you characterize your relationship to both the research process and the writing up? Stafford, for example, refers to an interview you gave in Le Monde (21 January 2015, p. 2), in which you regret that, having only been born during the period of ’68, you were not actually able to witness this period. Stafford is somewhat critical of this, suggesting you make little reference to political texts, notably of Marx, that Barthes was reading. I’m ambivalent about this remark, and in fact, as I will go on to discuss, I find your reading of 1968 – particularly through
Barthes’ publication of Sade, Fourier, Loyola (1989) – to be particularly insightful. There is, no doubt, the tyranny here of the biographical facts, of what is obtainable, containable and manageable in writing out someone’s life.

**TS:** Undoubtedly the reason why I took up the commission to write this biography is because it allowed me to repay a debt. A double debt, even: a debt with respect to the years 1960 to 1980, which are the cornerstone of my development, of my political thought and my vision of the world; and a special debt where Barthes is concerned, because he personally liberated me from the weight of the philosophical and literary institution, which I experienced as authoritarian, masculine, stuffy. When I read The Pleasure of the Text (the first text by Barthes that I read, at 16), I realized, for example, that it was possible to express one’s love for literature freely without giving up on thinking literature. His text authorized me to speak, as a woman. And I am very grateful to him for that. Through writing about him, I realized that he freed writing about thought from any tie to identity. And paradoxically, he did this by ceasing to be universalizing. Before Barthes, when anybody said to me that the ‘I’ of philosophical utterance was neutral, universal, I nonetheless experienced it as exclusively masculine and overbearing. Barthes ‘I’, by contrast, even though it starts out from his person and approaches the Neutral in a different way, by making it the movement or the force that travels between one pole or the other of oppositions, strikes me as much more inclusive. That’s my impression in any case.

You’re right to say that with Barthes it is initially tempting to mimic his fragmentary, suggestive and eruptive writing style. From the outset I decided to take the opposite tack. Contravening his desire for a discontinuous biography composed of ‘biographemes’ and notations that cedes all the space to silence, which is what a ‘friendly biography’ – those are his words – might have done, I decided to go against the author, to write a historian’s biography, thorough, continuous. But with this awareness of going against the author, against my subject, I still wanted to be ‘friendly’. How though? By setting out with two postulates: the first was that a life spent writing, reflecting, thinking could be a life of adventure, that there is something captivating and exciting about a life spent explaining the world; the second postulate was the most important: to ask what wealth of goodness, what spirit of gentleness could have given birth to such an intelligent and such a sensitive body of work.

I worked hard, taking the historian’s approach to begin with: spent whole days consulting the archives; moving on to interviews (which weren’t actually that useful because my interviewees all remembered the very same traits, fixed like legends in their memory); reading the work in chronological order of its writing. This is an interesting point and one on which I would like to dwell for a moment. Most of the time
we read authors from the past – even the recent past – in the wrong order, according to spatial or thematic contiguity. If you're writing the biography of a writer or an intellectual, it is interesting to see how the work unfolds over time, it is the temporal contiguities that matter and that are revelatory. I would say that at certain points I shed new light on the work as a result of this chronological reading. During all of this, I had no sense of how I was going to move from the research to the writing.

And then one day it happened: I realized that in order to start writing the truth of his life (or at least what I thought was the truth of his life), I had to cut across the legend. Because since his death Barthes has become a kind of mythological figure. That's why I began by narrating his death, the idea was to cut across that legend so as to be able to write his life. I had at least 20 different stories about Barthes’ death, which is a recent event, with facts that differed enormously from one story to the next, and what do you do with all those stories, obviously stories that not only feature in memories but also in novels, histories, short stories? By beginning with this chapter about his death I was able to start writing. And after that I didn’t stop, it all came very quickly and it was very easy because I was writing ‘in company’. Every morning, when I sat back down at my desk to write, I felt as though I were returning to a friend. And then in the end, when I encountered Barthes’ death again, it was no longer a legend, it was a fact: true, real, concrete. And that was when I turned off my computer, went out into the street and cried.

To come back to the point made by Andy Stafford in his review that the fact that I didn’t witness those years means that I minimize somewhat the profoundly political character of Barthes’ work, I would like to say two things: I endeavoured to inscribe Barthes into a context, paying a lot of attention to the effects of contemporaneous events and encounters: the intercalatory chapters where his life is explored in relation to another person (Gide, Sartre, Foucault, Sollers...I could have added Derrida but his presence is everywhere anyway) are there to indicate that the logic of a life is not only chronological, it is also located in the encounters that one has. I wanted to see how this singular personality, characterized by these forms of retreat and gentleness that are often incompatible with those turbulent, militant and extremely assertive years, inscribes himself fully into a period where the relationship between the political, the theoretical and the creative act was still alive: a situation that still allowed for the figure of the intellectual who thought that he could effect change in the world with his words. The second point is that, for me, Barthes was truly that kind of intellectual. On the one hand, he was strongly Marxist and remained that way throughout his life. On the other hand, he still believed in critical power. But he was political in a different way to his contemporaries: without vocal engagement, he was always convinced that he could only resist and assert through his own means: criticism, writing. His correspondence with Blanchot makes this very clear.
SM: You write about a group of writers being in advance of their own thinking, ‘always overleaping themselves’. This is an evocative phrase. Specifically you refer to Barthes’ engagement with Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida. Kristeva, as you note, ‘developed the distinction between pheno-text (the text as it presents itself to reading) and geno-text (the set of elements that play a part in the writing and genesis of a text)’ (p. 292). And, more importantly, as you suggest, she ‘spoke a new language: she was a woman, a foreigner, she was interested in movements rather than structures, she introduced new concepts (“intertextuality”, “paragram”), and she was political’ (p. 293). Kristeva is instrumental in the shift to what we refer to as poststructuralism, and which Barthes develops with his ‘idea of textual productivity as against the fixity of a structure’ (p. 295). Furthermore:

This marked one first point shared by Barthes and Derrida: they reacted against anything that stabilized and confined meaning, even if Barthes tended towards pluralization while Derrida emphasized the need for a perpetual slippage (not quite the same thing). Although their work was based on completely different presuppositions and corpuses, they were both always in advance of their own thinking, always overleaping themselves. (p. 295)

In addition, Sollers plays an important role:

[He] managed to drag Barthes into some rather extreme activities: in 1968, this had been the Théorie d’ensemble, the theoretical manifesto that had been placed under the dual aegis of Mallarmé and Marx, where a space was defined, concepts were deployed, a history was unfolded and, above all, a politics was expounded: all part of a construction of a link between writing and historical materialism. (p. 354)

Speaking more broadly of the 1960s, you offer a neat summary about the importance of both writing and image:

The importance of the 1960s, leading to the events of 1968, can be seen in the excess constituted by literature and the image, an excess that goes beyond the structuralist project, while providing it with many more objects for study. Fascinated by the infinite openness of writing, and the power that images have to give it a new impetus, Barthes gradually shifted his form of criticism, moving it further away from its pretext, turning it into the personal adventure of his own thought and the quest for an autonomous writing. (p. 302)
However, against the various known narratives about the intellectual community of the time (whose legacy we are still very much indebted to), you also offer the interesting insight of the ‘accidental’ nature of Barthes’ work: ‘If we re-establish the true chronology of his thought’, you write, ‘by following its production in reviews and journals, thereby turning his books into accidents rather than deliberate acts of creation, we can see a figure much less assertive and definitive than may sometimes seem the case’ (p. 296). I wonder if you can offer some further thoughts and reflections about how you see the *milieu* he is part of and also the nature of the ‘production’ of his work?

**TS:** The majority of French intellectuals of that period were from bourgeois backgrounds and are what Bourdieu called inheritors. This is not the case with Barthes, which might explain the nature of his engagement. I see Barthes as an engaged being, but his forms of engagement are different from those of his contemporaries, as I said before. Perhaps it is this worry, this fear of not being legitimate, that distances him from posturing and institutional discourse. He is a fundamentally un-authoritarian person. And this can be seen in the way in which he challenges the architecture of rationality by bringing down two of its pillars: the principle of non-contradiction – Barthes is really not afraid of contradicting himself – and essence. In refusing (by means of thinking the Neutral) to assign an identity to a being or a thing, by refusing to define through contrast, he inscribes movement and prevents any process of essentialization or universalization. By other means, with other corpuses, Derrida does the same thing at the same time. And his background was comparable in terms of displacement: he was an Algerian Jew, and he talks about this eloquently in *The Monolingualism of the Other* (Derrida, 1998).

**SM:** Perhaps we can turn specifically to the time of 1968, and ‘to explain the fact’, as you put it, ‘that Barthes did not feel really concerned by May ’68’ (p. 310). You note Barthes’ age, being 52 at the time, was perhaps one factor leading him to feel disconnected from the young demonstrators. Also, you write how ‘his mistrust of revolutionary theatricality debarred him from playing a role or striking an attitude’ (pp. 310–11). Here, it is also really interesting to see how you position Barthes’ book *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, published in 1971, ‘as one of the major texts on what happened in 1968’ (p. 318). I don’t think this book has been given a great deal of prominence in Barthes’ canon. The books we hear of typically will be *Writing Degree Zero, Mythologies, The Elements of Semiology, The Fashion System, S/Z, The Pleasure of the Text*, and, of course, *Camera Lucida*. There are also the various signature articles, such as ‘The Death of the Author’, ‘From Work to Text’, and ‘The Rhetoric of the Image’. Perhaps one thing about these texts is that they are quite
‘teachable’ and quotable. However, you give quite a bit of attention to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, which is really revealing.

The turning point of May ’68 led to new plans, new directions for writing. In interviews at the time, Barthes insisted on the need not to make a hollow slogan of ‘things will never be the same’, for this would simply pander to the desire for everything to return to the status quo. As Barthes told Pierre Daix, it was necessary to ‘take advantage of every event to “make” the past’ that is, ‘to make everything we had been thinking fall back into the past’ and try to develop it in a way that involved completely rethinking it. Fourier, and Sade as well, constituted those new spaces in which we can think the event and say what this event might ideally have been. (p. 317)

*Sade, Fourier and Loyola* are of course quite counterintuitive names to be placed together, which is perhaps typical of Barthes’ unorthodox thinking. He is interested in these three writers as ‘great classifiers’, but who also break classification through ‘writing’. One phrase you quote from Barthes (from his essay on Sade) is: ‘invention (and not provocation) is a revolutionary act’. And you explain further:

The three writers, *Sade, Fourier and Loyola*, built a repressive ideological edifice, but at the same time they destroyed it, thanks to an excess that Barthes called ‘writing’: this disseminated their power into the details. Attention to these tenuous signs was a way for Barthes to submit them to his own *imaginaire* (clothes, the weather, travel, illnesses, flowers) and to bring language up against silence. [...] When Barthes dealt with these three authors, he was also discovering a new meaning to his experience of the sanatorium. ‘They drew up, as it were, a set of instructions for a retreat: for Sade, this was confinement, for Fourier the phalanstery, for Loyola the place of the retreat. Each time, it was a matter of cutting the new language away, materially – cutting it away from the world that might disturb the new meaning. In this way, they create a pure space, a semantic space. (pp. 319–20)

Personally, I found your reading of *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* very useful, and as I suggest, this text is generally not discussed, or at least not in detail. Perhaps you can offer some further thoughts on the connections you make here, particularly with respect to 1968.

**TS:** 1968, for Barthes, was authoritarian and arrogant, something he hated. Even though he agreed with the demands that were being made
and, even more strongly, with the desire to reinvent society, he fundamentally disliked the means that were being employed. In *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* he reflects on what authority is, what oppression is, and where it can lead. He also tries to think what a utopia might be and how it might avoid degeneration. He is therefore immediately critical and he employs these models not only to keep his distance from what he is living through, what was beginning to ignite all of France, Europe even, but to try to say what the imaginary has to impart instead of rattling off empty words about the changes taking place. I stand by what I wrote about this book in terms of the time period and how it relates to it. Other books published during this period, or books that discuss the period, remain on the level of events. Barthes went further from the outset, convinced that the revolution could only happen through the invention of a new language. Barthes’ approach distances the dominant discourse of ’68 by treating it as speech deprived of a subject (he writes ‘on’ [the impersonal pronoun ‘one’] / ‘*il fut répondu*’ [the reply was]), as loose, purely ideological discourse. But can utopia exist without desire? Barthes launches a direct critique of revolutionary discourse – which is almost always paradoxical because in reducing its utopian dimension it ends up extinguishing the desire for it. What Fourier contributes are other potential forms of radical change that can serve as an alternative (Marxism and Fourierism are regularly placed side-by-side in this text).

SM: I’d like to turn now to the topic of China, which, again, has not been covered elsewhere in great detail, but is an area for which you provide a good amount of context and detail. The relatively recent publication of *Travels in China*, in 2013, has arguably reopened this subject, but still perhaps remains somewhat misunderstood. It is also interesting to think what Barthes might have thought of China today, which is so dramatically different to the country he visited in the 1970s. We know, of course, that Barthes was deeply fascinated by Japan, ‘continuing’, as you note, ‘to learn the language and reading several important works, such as *Zen in the Art of Archery*, as well as Alan Watts’s book on Zen and D. T. Suzuki’s work, to which his attention was perhaps drawn by Georges Bataille’s *On Nietzsche*’ (p. 306). And while he seems singularly put off by China (due to the political circumstances and what he called the ‘bricks’ of ideological discourse), he engages with a wide range of Asian philosophy and aesthetics, which is most evident in *The Neutral* lecture course (which we can return to). As you explain:

Barthes finds another form of absence in the empty subject of classical Chinese thought. He contrasts the wishing to grasp or the wishing to impress of the full subject, the master of the spoken word (the person who takes the floor or grabs the microphone in
big public meetings), with the Zen master – a model to which Barthes sought increasingly to conform, especially in his classes – who sets up the ideal of a not-wishing-to-grasp inspired by Lao Tse: ‘He does not exhibit himself and will shine. He does not assert himself and will impose himself.’ In 1968, Barthes’s political behaviour followed this programme. (p. 308)

Seemingly, we have to get past his immediate reflections on the country. As you nicely put it: ‘Barthes was quite aware of the slightly comical aspect of their tour, which sometimes seemed like Tintin in the Land of the Soviets’ (p. 359). He was also struck by a claustrophobia that ‘lay in a huge repression of sexuality, one that he found frustrating and incomprehensible’ (p. 359). However, you remind us also of the sense of optimism at the time:

In ‘Pourquoi j’ai été chinois?’ (‘Why was I Chinese?’), the self-criticism that Sollers published in March 1981, in issue 88 of Tel Quel, he insisted on the fact that their enterprise had seemed to open up a new future for their tour, which sometimes seemed like Tintin in the Land of the Soviets’ (p. 359). He was also struck by a claustrophobia that ‘lay in a huge repression of sexuality, one that he found frustrating and incomprehensible’ (p. 359). However, you remind us also of the sense of optimism at the time:

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There are then, as you describe it, ‘a few fragile moments of escape in the Travels that set it apart from the notorious report in which Barthes tried to impose some form on his impressions, “Alors, la Chine?”’ (p. 360). I’m interested in your further thoughts on this topic, especially, as I say, with a thought to how Barthes might have viewed China today, and/or a renewed sense of reception of Chinese philosophical and aesthetic discourse. This is notable, for example, with the writings of François Jullien. Indeed, in his In Praise of Blandness (2007), he makes explicit reference to Barthes’ trip to China, and the term ‘blandness’ can in many cases act as a synonym for Barthes’ term of the Neutral. Both these terms, despite their common meanings, can be understood as neologisms, which, as you note for Barthes, was a device he used as ‘a way of unpacking language, of reflecting on it while subverting it’ (p. 383). You reference Michel
Deguy, for example, who calls the ‘neologeme’: ‘not a lexical invention or reinvention, but a new way of taking a term... and stripping it of its negative connotation (an absence of savour) so that it can refer to a pacification or equalization of things’ (p. 384).

**TS:** While I was writing the book I elected not to ask myself the question of what Barthes might have thought about future developments and I also forbade myself from thinking in his place. But the trip to China is the only moment in his history where, as a biographer, I was in conflict with him. I think he must have had all the intellectual means and the sensibility to think the situation differently (as François Wahl did). But he was too centred upon himself, too influenced by Sollers and Kristeva, and he preferred a limp retreat to a truly critical retreat (which was his response in 1968, as I tried to argue).

If I have to make believe, I can imagine that Barthes would first of all have been fascinated by what is happening in China today: by the acceleration, by the combination of economic liberalism and ideological Marxism, by the irrational proliferation of images. And I can say from my own experience that this change means that Chinese students, academics, and intellectuals need Barthes today to understand what is happening to them and to put it into perspective. When you ask French students to tell you which mythologies are current, they find it hard to give you any myths other than globalized ones. If you ask Chinese students the same question (which I have done and which some of my Chinese colleagues have done), they come up with a huge number. I also think he would have been very receptive to developments in technology and IT; some of his practices, especially that of the fichier, are absolutely contemporary with the invention of hypertext. In contrast, I can’t see how the thinkers of that period could have imagined and been able to tolerate the growth and general spread of the liberal contempt that weighs on our world.

Among the contemporary innovations that he would certainly have viewed with interest and curiosity are the changes that the family has undergone in the last few years thanks to family blending and universal marriage, even if he would probably have made fun of the lack of inventiveness of these new models. He was very hostile to the bourgeois model of the heterosexual couple and of the family as a reproduction of bourgeois law. He was a consistent advocate of the horizontalization of relations.

**SM:** One of the things that develops from his ‘readings’ of both Japan and China is Barthes’ long-term interest in calligraphy. As you note, for example, in contemplating a piece of calligraphy by Mao, Barthes ‘compares it with his own painting: “utterly elegant (grassy calligraphy), cursive, impatient, and spacious. Reflections on the “frame”; my paintings: also calligraphic blocks; it’s not a scene cut out, it’s a block moving
forward’’ (p. 360). I’ve been particularly interested in Barthes’ practice of painting and drawing, and indeed, as part of this issue of *Theory, Culture & Society*, there is the English translation of Barthes’ brief statement, ‘‘Colouring Degree Zero’, which is the only direct commentary he offers on his engagement with drawing (and this is set alongside a reproduction of one of his paintings, from 1971). There is a deeper point of interest here about the relationship between theory and practice:

In several areas, Barthes displaced theory towards practice, showed a liking for doing things, for experience, concrete life and matter – a definite change in some of his habits and concerns. Thus, his interest in calligraphy and painting – on which he was writing ever more important articles – came with an intense period of drawing and experimenting with colour. From 1971 onwards, his schedule now included, almost every afternoon, a time for painting. ‘‘Relief (repose) at being able to create something not directly caught in the trap of language, in the responsibility of every sentence: a sort of innocence, in short, from which writing excludes me.’ The modest word ‘liking’ (*le goûter*), and the verb associated with it (*gouter* – to have a taste for something, to like something) now became, along with ‘pleasure’, key elements in his vocabulary. (p. 368)

A key reference point here is *The Pleasure of the Text*, and a certain theme of illegibility; of the move in modern art towards its own destruction. As you explain, ‘‘Barthes described three forms of this process. Either the artist moved to another medium (the writer became a film director or painter, the painter became a writer); or the artist developed a more discursive approach, reducing art to art criticism; or else the artist simply bid farewell to writing once and for all’’ (p. 375). His own interest in painting can be read, then, as a variation of one of these routes. In part, he is interested in ‘‘the aesthetics of the graphic trace and its ritual’, in prehistoric graphism, and also writing being rhythmic rather than meaningful (p. 374). And, as you suggest, it’s his essay on André Masson to which we might turn:

The article on André Masson was to art what *The Pleasure of the Text* was to literature. In it, Barthes developed his ideas about the text, but this time starting out from the artist’s ideographic works. At that time, André Masson used Chinese writing as a source of graphic dynamism. He did not use it as an ideogram that meant something, but in order to experiment on colour and line. Barthes called this Asian period in the painter’s work ‘‘textual’, confirming that, for him, the oriental *imaginaire* and the theory of the text were
interdependent. It was no longer a writing that communicated something, but a ‘body that beats’. The primacy of gesture over word opened the way to a truth conditioned by illegibility. By producing something illegible, Masson ‘detaches writing’s pulsion from the image-repertoire of communication (legibility). This is what the Text desires as well. But whereas the written text must still – and ceaselessly – struggle with an apparently signifying substance (words), Masson’s semiography, directly resulting from a non-signifying practice (painting), achieves from the start the utopia of the Text’. (p. 378)

Your suggestion of Barthes displacing theory towards practice is important. I’m wondering to what extent we consider this a significant change in his thinking, or if we understand it, certainly with regard to his practice of drawing and painting, as mere relief (to bid farewell to writing for brief periods, even just for the afternoon)? In my own account of his drawings, I link the practice to a ‘technology of the self’ (of a quiet means to regulate the self), but also in turn to his interest in the Neutral, linking, for example, to his figure of ‘weariness’, a term always ‘without measure’ (Manghani, 2016).

**TS:** First of all I don’t think there’s a caesura in Barthes’ life and thought around this issue, but rather there were experiences that allowed him to realize what he had thought from the beginning, namely that he was a writer [écrivain]. One has to return to *Critical Essays* (1972: 143–50) to realize this: when he makes the famous distinction between écrivains [authors] and écrivants [writers] in order to differentiate between different types of critical writing, he includes himself squarely in the former category, even though he is busy producing a collection of critical texts! That’s where you see the movement. When he claims to be assigning characteristics, he is actually jumbling them up. And so the figure of the renegade designates a trouble-maker, one who is capable of subverting languages, the writer [écrivain]. Because the writer, the true writer, has no place. A writer who has a place or who occupies one in society is not a true writer, merely an institutional figure. The pursuit of other paths, other forms of expression, is simply a way of expressing – through modesty or through anxiety – that one is on a quest, that one does not strictly identify with what one is doing. Drawing, for Barthes, represented a kind of limit on writing: the sign without the signifier, without the signification that gets in the way of sense. Getting in the way of sense is the drama of language. Writing gets out of sense’s way: the practice of illegible writing in drawing constitutes a stage of emancipation, purification even. You show that there are signs, but no sense: ‘Relief (repose)’, he said, at ‘being able to create something not directly caught in the trap of language, in the responsibility of every sentence: a sort of
innocence, in short, from which writing excludes me.’ The practice of writing, if it is to escape from the tyranny of meaning, is more demanding for him – it remains the horizon.

SM: Given my passing reference above to ‘technologies of the Self’, it is pertinent to come to a specific chapter towards the end of the book on both Barthes and Foucault. There is a rather eloquent portrait of the two of them, which you offer in just a few lines:

Barthes presented himself more than ever in his singularity and his rejection of hysteria. His benevolence was perceived by all, but it did not have the same energy as Foucault’s generosity. It could appear, to those who did not see the fictional dimension of the posture, as a withdrawal into his ‘self’. It is not always easy for other people to see the difference between ‘living in accordance with literature’, as Barthes put it in ‘Fragments pour H.’, and living in accordance with the norms that generally regulate our relations with others. (p. 438)

Both thinkers are concerned with the relationship between language, discourse and power; for both, ‘their relation to discourse, to the theatricality of the spoken word, was uneasy’ (p. 439). However, as you note, Barthes goes further than Foucault in reading the violence of language, leading of course to his well-known statement on language as fascist, with the idea that language does not prevent speech, but rather compels it (p. 440).

The radical nature of the formulation was in line with the radical nature of the response one can bring to language, namely, according to Blanchot, silence: either mystical singularity, described by Kierkegaard to describe Abraham’s sacrifice as ‘an action unparalleled, void of speech, even interior speech, performed against the generality, the gregariousness, the morality of language’; or else ‘the Nietzschean “yes to life”, which is a kind of exultant shock administered to the servility of speech, to what Deleuze calls its reactive guise’. Compared to these sublime gestures, which presuppose a belief that Barthes did not possess, literature appears as the sole place where a language outside power can gain a hearing. (p. 440)

We hear a return again to Barthes’ first publication, *Writing Degree Zero*, and the phrase of a ‘responsibility of form’. Again and again, Barthes takes refuge in the idea of ‘writing’ (as something beyond Literature). It is ‘writing’ and the ‘body’ which Barthes continually circles around. I am interested in your thoughts on the continued currency of these terms, for us now in reading Barthes today.
Writing for Barthes is what brings about movement, upholds the instability of sense to the highest degree. Language gets in the way of everything: it says that a thing is a thing, that somebody is this or that. Writing for him (it is his imaginary, in the truest sense) is what allows language to not be what it is or what it serves.

On that note, let’s turn to the Neutral, combined (fittingly for an endpoint) with Barthes’ mourning. As we know, Barthes wrote his lecture course on the Neutral at the beginning of a period of mourning (which he declares at the start of the course). I mentioned above the figure of ‘weariness’, which interestingly he pits against mourning, as a term that has been categorized and institutionalized: ‘Today, the right to mourning very reduced → right to mourning: to be inscribed in the social claims (utopias?): sick leave for pregnancy, for mourning…’, and by contrast: ‘weariness is not coded, is not received = always functions in language as a mere metaphor, a sign without a referent’ (Barthes, 2005: 17). Of course, as you point out, Barthes did not want his course on the Neutral to be published, but to be left ‘the necessary share of the Rejected Monument’ (p. 441). Similarly, no doubt, he never thought his mourning ‘diary’ would be published; indeed, I assume he never even thought of it as a text in this way. Nonetheless, these publications have the potential to alter our view of his work. The Neutral makes the continual thread from Writing Degree Zero ever more prominent, while Mourning Diary, I would argue, gives us a means to recalibrate the prominence that has been given to Camera Lucida. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest the publication of the three lecture courses gives us an insight into Barthes the ‘philosopher’ (or the reader of philosophy). You reference Éric Marty’s ‘eloquent text’ on the Mourning Diary, in which he emphasizes how ‘Barthes offered a discourse that was quite different from that of Genet or Bataille, a “full light” that was “in this sense more provocative than any transgressive scenario”’ (p. 462); a theme I have explored similarly between Barthes and Bataille, suggesting of a ‘neutral economy’ (Manghani, 2018). In your account of the Mourning Diary, you pick up on Barthes’ experience of ‘wavering’ (a term that could easily fit among the figures of the Neutral):

This appears in the Diary (12 May 1978): ‘I waver – in the dark – between the observation (but is it entirely accurate?) that I’m unhappy only by moments, by jerks and surges, sporadically, even if such spasms are close together – and the conviction that deep down, in actual fact, I am continually, all the time, unhappy since maman’s death.’ For this alternating state, which corresponded very closely to the heartbreak of death, Barthes tried to produce a first theorization in his classes on ‘The Neutral’: always being on both
sides at once, hesitation and indecision can be a discourse or a screen, but they mainly point to the existence of a ‘vibrated’ time where everything is played out as alternation rather than continuity. (p. 436)

In this context, you go on to offer two important considerations that seemingly we can take forward as a contemporary reading. First, is the form of the book, or of writing, in terms of the ‘album’; and second, the neutral as an ethic. On the album you write:

This form was not evidence of a lesser or more minor kind of thinking; but it did represent a different world: ‘Album: perhaps the representation of the world as inessential.’ We need to weigh up this incidental remark, linking it to the contemporary spread of the hypertext: things and ideas are now decentralised, dispersed, infinitized; they can no longer be conceived as essences, but as multiple, permutable and exchangeable items. The appeal of the rhapsodic expresses a certain truth of the world, namely its profound disorganization: whether we break the universe into pieces (Nietzsche) or multiply the way in which it is organized, ‘in any case, the whole will make a disorganization’ (John Cage). (p. 473)

While of *The Neutral*, you write:

Here, Barthes deploys the power and career of the notion that, having been a theoretical proposition (the neutral as ‘zero degree’), became a veritable ethic (against arrogance), leading to an aesthetic (of the jotting, the incident). Although he was, like any white western male, trapped in the rigidity of binarisms and the oppositional paradigms of rationality, his fantasy had always consisted in envisaging forces capable of outplaying them. In writing, in ways of reading, and also in forms of moral behaviour, he had found ways of doing or saying things that would prevent meaning from being caught in categories, language in the definitive, Being in stable identities. In grammar: neither masculine nor feminine; neither active nor passive. In politics: not to decide between two conflicting parties […] The neutral was mainly a utopia, and it defines Barthes at the deepest level; it was a way of dealing with language, the body, the gesture so as to deprive them of their authoritarianism of essence and fixed definitions. (pp. 485–6)

The dilemma of working with Barthes is always the return to utopic thinking. This is the legacy of Barthes, and perhaps our ‘mourning’ for
Barthes is that he was this utopian thinking. It is not something that is easily replicated. However, as a final remark, what are your thoughts on what remains of Barthes, for us? Having worked through the chronology of his life in such detail, what do you feel you personally arrived at with his work in completing the biography?

**TS:** You are correct to speak of utopia. In Barthes the Neutral is active, it’s a means of refusing essence (or of striving for the inessential) and a manner of refusing the violence of choices. Barthes today can continue to show us two things. The first is that political engagement has to extend to language and take the form of tenacious work on and against languages. This explains why, compared with many other contributions from that era, his is still active. Because he exposes surfaces, objects, but at the same time he uncovers those fundamental operations of language that make it a privileged instrument of power, a tool of sclerosis, of the lie and of reification. If, today, the term intellectual is somewhat emptied of its substance because few figures offer true alternatives to the dominant order, Barthes’ attentive, vigilant stance, which rejects overbearing positions, can serve as a model. But I think it is another aspect – this is the second thing – that still has relevance for us today: it’s the compassionate force of literature against evil, exclusion, violence. I say this in the biography: defying the generally held opinion which rejects compassion and celebrates literature ‘without pathos’. Barthes reaffirms the strength of emotion fed by suffering. Suffering perpetually upholds non-sense, which tragedy pits against the sense of Evil and violence. If the modern novel still has truth and a function, it has to adopt this tragic principle of compassion. Barthes recognizes this truth of pathos as reading’s strength and as an absolute necessity of literature.

*Translated by Chantal Wright*

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**Notes**

1. Papers given at ‘The Renaissance of Roland Barthes’ conference held in New York in 2013 can be read as part of a special issue of *The Conversant* (http://theconversant.org). Keynote speakers included Rosalind Krauss and Jonathan Culler. A selection of papers given at the ‘Roland Barthes at 100’ conference, hosted by the School of English, Communication and Philosophy at Cardiff University in 2015, were collated for the inaugural issue of the online journal *Barthes Studies* (http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/volumes/volume-articles/?q=volume-1).
2. All page references to *Barthes: A Biography* are to the English translation, published by Polity (Samoyault, 2017).
3. The exchange presented here between Tiphaine Samoyault and Sunil Manghani was composed via email correspondence. Manghani’s prompts
(which include extracts from Samoyault’s biography on Barthes) were presented in English, and Samoyault’s responses in French were then translated by Chantal Wright. The final composite version was collated and reviewed by both authors.

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Indulgences (2003), La Main negative (2008), and Bête de cirque (2013). Barthes: A Biography, originally published in French by Editions du Seuil in 2015, was released by Polity Press in 2017 and received the French Voices Award for excellence in publication and translation.

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