

## **Roland Barthes: The Corpus and the Corps**

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ROLAND BARTHES:  
THE *CORPUS* AND THE *CORPS*

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*French, Nottingham*

Jonathan Culler, *Barthes*. Glasgow: Fontana Modern Masters, 1983. 128 pp.

Despite banishing the author as civil figure and owner of his discourse, Barthes also, and perhaps more than anyone, taught us to desire the author as the Other dispersed in that discourse. The would-be cohabitation of an academic generation with Roland Barthes is a love story that awaits its chronicler: for some twenty years Barthes accompanied and guided our thinking in a way that made of his death both a personal blow and an intellectual desertion. For Jonathan Culler, however, Barthes had already deserted. Not that Culler, who claims to treat Barthes as a "collection of writings" (p. 114) without true center, would put it this way. But if Barthes were merely Culler's construct, formed to order a set of contradictory fragments, it would be hard to explain the moments of irritation which increasingly punctuate his attempt to account fairly for those writings produced after 1973. "Is this a different Barthes?" (p. 97); "How did Roland Barthes, the critic of bourgeois myth, reach this point?" (p. 116) asks Culler, openly skeptical about the supposedly radical nature of Barthes's final phase, and in particular its wish to turn the reintroduction of old-fashioned concepts into some sort of avant-garde transgression. To Culler it implies rather the "reaffirmation of quite regressive, pre-semiological notions" (p. 121), and Barthes is charged above all with complacently permitting the return of Nature "in the guise of the body" (p. 120).

Stories of Barthes, now that his works are complete, are bound to impose a hypothetical sense on his career, and are bound to encounter the same problems. Is there a unity behind the displacements? Are all strategies theoretical ones? Does one part of the work

hold the key to the rest? Culler's Barthes is essentially a structuralist whose theoretical projects were linked by his continuing demonstration that "where there is meaning, there is system" (p. 77). Culler is determined to defend the structuralist moment as Barthes's most important moment, "the source of his influence, the fruition of projects and attitudes and the springboard for future manoeuvres" (p. 78). Doubtless this is true of Barthes's place in French history of ideas, and doubtless, too, it is appropriate that a contributor to the "Modern Masters" series should point his exemplary clarity in this direction. But the structuralism emphasis leaves Culler simply unable to explain Barthes's final set of values, as he wavers between a search for strategic roles for Pleasure, the Body and the Old Fashioned as a disguised and roundabout means of undermining the Academy's hold on traditional literature, and a less convincing recourse to deconstructive rhetoric, whereby what was once denigrated returns as pleasure, and poor Barthes falls prey to a law of discourse: "when you expose Nature as culture and banish it from one place, it reappears elsewhere" (p. 120). Despite the excellence of this book as an introduction to Barthes's work — Culler is extraordinarily adept at weaving controversial discussions into admirable stretches of exegesis — those enamoured of Barthes himself are likely to be disappointed with its reading of the final period, though they might well draw a compensating interest from the reasons for Culler's inability to accommodate it.

"This perpetual movement that aims not to correct errors but to evade the past, can be irritating to anyone who has read one of Barthes's works and been excited by its vision of things to be done" (p. 12). The vision that excited Culler was, of course, that somewhat nonchalantly tossed off in *Critique et vérité*, the projected science of literature that Culler was to develop into his *Structuralist Poetics*, and which he still describes as Barthes's "most lucid and convincing programme for literary studies . . . an eminently logical and defensible position" (p. 68). Culler used Barthes, and clearly went on wishing to use him, as a springboard for his own ever more sophisticated accounts of the conventional systems that produce meaningful readings of literary texts. He therefore attempts to turn *Le Plaisir du texte* into "fragments of a continuing theoretical enterprise" ("to reflect on boredom is to think about texts and the strategies of reading they require" (p. 99)), but as a theorist finds himself defeated by Barthes's proposed typology of ways of reading Sollers: "suggestive, perhaps witty, but with no theoretical claims and little chance that others will try to integrate it in a theory of reading" (p. 104). That Culler has remained loyal to the poetics project is apparent both in the "reading theory" nature of his current interest in Deconstruction (focus on the marginal must construct the conventions of the system that would exclude it, etc.), and in his refusal

to denigrate the pseudo-scientific Barthes: his insistence that *S/Z* subsumes what precedes it, and that only a caricature of 1960's structuralism could permit a distinction from post-structuralism, since critiques of the sign, the self, and of representation were well under way in the former.

But if Deconstruction is a logical outcome of Barthes's structuralism, it is surely his own different evaluation of all this alert wrestling with meaning that causes Culler's problem with the late Barthes. Culler tends to see the discovery and exploration of *homo significans* as leading to a morally liberating increase in human awareness. For Barthes, however, this awareness results in the moral *impasse* spelled out at the end of *Mythologies*. The political necessity of engagement with society's war of meanings — unmasking the historical interests that masquerade as natural states of affairs — leaves Barthes cut off from the very objects he seeks to protect, leaves him unable to articulate, unless to destroy it, the reality to which he clearly feels a powerful allegiance. In other words, man is alienated from the material world precisely *because* he is caught up in systems of meaning. So that when, in 1979, in a passage which indeed underlines his distance from Culler, Barthes announces the strategic desirability of some relaxation where meaning is concerned — a little less deconstruction of texts, less struggling with the semantic facts of language (despite “snares, feints, tricks and ruses” (1981:310)) — this should not be confused with an anti-intellectual, pre-semiological refusal of meaning and promotion of Nature, for Barthes continues to use Nature in the sense of the law of the majority and to combat the bogus reasonableness of its preferences. Rather it is part of Barthes's long-standing attempt to find ways of outplaying meaning, not by abolishing it or ignoring it (which would be semiologically naïve), but through its *suspension*.

For Barthes, man is condemned to meaning because language is a sign system, and all would-be statements about the world must therefore pass through the screen of the signified. But a realm beyond meaning is the Utopia for which Barthes *always* unashamedly yearned, hence the tension that many of his positions seek to find a way through: “whence a double tactic: against the *Doxa* one must fight for the rights of meaning . . . but against Science (paranoiac discourse), one must uphold the utopia of the suppression of meaning” (1975:90); “it's possible to delight in the codes, yet at the same time to dream nostalgically of their future abolition: like an intermittent outsider, I can enter-into oppressive sociality or step-outside-of it, depending on my mood — desire for integration, desire to keep a distance” (p. 135). Barthes's fascination with the uncertain irony of Flaubert's writing was due to its particular solution to his own uneasy relationship with the *doxa* (its possibility of outplaying the codes without proclaiming oneself exempt from stupidity), while

his discussion of Robbe-Grillet had toyed with literature's potential for "unexpressing" and "designifying" the world that man discovers *already* imbued with meaning (1964:204). But critical attempts to attain a state of "asemy" through self-indulgent and limitless expansion of the signifier are rejected in favor of the move that Barthes finds more "historically correct" (the move of *S/Z*): a "semantic enterism" based on the belief that the liquidation of traditional criticism has to be carried forward "*in* meaning (in the volume of meanings) and not outside it . . . the signified, exemption of which is the materialist task par excellence, is more easily 'lifted' in the *illusion* of meaning than in its destruction" (1977b:208).

If the signified could be "lifted" then might it be possible, after all, to find a direct route to reality? Barthes explores this hypothesis via a figure which appears with increasing frequency in his later work, the *tel* (just so) that will eventually pinpoint the intractable photographic referent of *La Chambre claire*: "absolute Individuality, sovereign Contingency, dull to the point of stupidity, just *So* [*le Tel*] (that particular photo and not photos in general), in short, the *Touché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, untiringly expressed" (1980:15). Like a child pointing at something, a photo says "*there, that's it, that's what it's like!* [*ça, c'est ça, c'est tel!*]" but that's all it says; a photo can't be philosophically transformed (glossed)" (p. 16). *Tel* in just this sense is a central figure of *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*: the loved one "just as he is," escaping judgment, definition, and the "terror of meaning," and likened to *le Texte* (Text), "to which I can affix no adjective: in which I delight without needing to decipher it" (1977a:262–263). But all this goes back at least as far as *L'Empire des signes* (contemporary with *S/Z*), where Barthes, turning enthusiastically to Zen as "an immense practice which aims to *halt language*" (1970:97), celebrates haiku, its "literary branch," for its lack of Western description and definition, for its delicate designation of traits and objects without attribution of meaning. Indeed the triumph of haiku, and the source of its appeal for the Barthes interested in fragments and, increasingly, in lighter, simpler forms of writing, is that it achieves its exemption from meaning through a discourse which is not at all *incomprehensible* (the method of modern Western art), but, on the contrary, perfectly *lisible*: "*that's it, that's how it is*, says the haiku, *it's just like that*. Or better still: *Tel!*" (p. 111) – a utopian, guiltless denotation that has finally succeeded, by giving connotation the slip, in breaking what Barthes calls "the vicious infinity of language" (p. 98).

Had Culler paid closer attention to Barthes's liking for haiku, he would certainly have made accusations about Nature smuggled through in the exotic guise of Zen. The discussion of Barthes's supposed lack of interest in poetry illustrates the extent to which Culler himself exemplifies Barthes's description of the semantically

alert Western critic and reader, who cannot but interpret symbolically, nor resist placing briefness at the service of an even greater symbolic resonance. (Of course Culler deliberately plays this part to demonstrate poetic conventions, but is convincing because he plays it so well.) When Culler claims that “by excluding poetry from his criticism, Barthes attempts to free literature from the richness of meaning associated with it” (pp. 59–60), he significantly, if slightly, misrepresents Barthes’s position. In fact, by making a set poetic form (haiku) central to his ethic of language, Barthes wishes to liberate both literature and reality through the suspension of meaning which its central gesture — *tel* — achieves. Here, ironically, Culler misses the theoretical import of Barthes’s attempt to teach us to read in a new (genuinely Japanese?) manner, a manner crucially linked to his calm promotion of more classical forms of writing. This is a different and more relaxed solution to the problem of meaning, but one which is far from naïve.

As an art form which is not a sign system, music, too, can by-pass the signified, so that its referent, which according to Barthes is the body, “passes into music with no other relay than the signifier” (1982:273). It is unfair of Culler to confuse this stress on the body with the mystification previously denounced in “La grande famille des hommes,” unfair to align it with an unmediated Nature carelessly readmitted through a new — post-1970 — obsession with hedonism and desire (p. 96). On the one hand, as late as the 1978 interview “Encore le corps,” Barthes was still busily relativizing the body, with all his former subtlety, and from all sorts of historical and social perspectives; on the other, the appeal to an individual body outside of the circuits of meaning dates right back to his definition of style in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. Culler also refuses to see a difference between *Paris Match*'s use of the photo of the saluting black soldier to justify the existence of a French Empire, and Barthes's declared sense of wonder in front of the literal emanation of light rays captured by the photo of a slave sale, which drives home to him the horror of the recent existence of slavery in a way which historians' mediations (deprived of authentication because language-dependent) had never achieved. Culler is so out of sympathy with the final Barthes that he uncharacteristically fails to give a very reliable exposition of the content of *La Chambre claire*. When Barthes tries to make a link between the *corpus* that he needs and the *corps* (body) that he sees, this is much more than a play on words. It is the theoretical underpinning of an attempt at direct access to reality.

Culler is wrong to say that Barthes speaks of “states that are simply *there*” (p. 122), for even in 1964 he established a difference for photographs between “a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy could provoke),” and “an awareness of its

*having-been-there*" (1977b:44). Indeed, Culler passes over the fact that Barthes had already reflected upon photography as a sign system, and that worried by its "exceptional power of denotation" (1977b:21), explained by the analogical nature of photos that allows them to be messages without a code, he had tried to demonstrate ways in which they nevertheless develop connotations. If straight denotation, with its proof that a contingent referent once really existed, now becomes the photo's unique essence, it is because Barthes's final wager is to set aside the semiological approach to photography as a system of representation ("the code of perfect illusions" (p. 184)), precisely in order that it might accede to the ultimate *folie* of an absolute and *original* realism, "bringing back to a loving and panic-stricken consciousness the very letter of Time" (p. 183). As representation, as coded *studium*, the photo will inevitably develop connotations. But the alternative perspective of phenomenology ("it's up to me to choose" (p. 184)), grants access to the referent through the very intentionality which Barthes tries to conceptualize through the *punctum*, the supplementary detail that pierces the affective consciousness. Yet the price paid for the return of the referent is, as Orpheus discovered, a simultaneous realization of its death. Culler fails to appreciate that the real that is grasped is simply a ghost, a past and lost reality, even though this metaphysical truth truly haunts Barthes's final essay, casting a retrospective melancholy over his whole work, which makes undue stress on the hedonistic phase seem somehow inappropriate.

Ann Jefferson, also unhappy with Culler's uneasy handling of hedonism and desire, wishes to oppose hedonism to theory, to make it question its scope (1983:761). I should prefer to believe that Barthes *was* trying to theorize his 1970s positions, and that had he lived a little longer, he would have guided us to a better understanding of what was at stake, for us as well as for him, in his final works. Barthes himself implied that he tended to start from positions that he wished to adopt, and that only then would he seek out the currently acceptable theories that might allow personal needs and values to circulate as intellectual objects (1975:181), to be acceptable as theoretical currency, or simply, as Culler nicely puts it, to "*take*" (p. 23). Barthes's interaction with his intellectual context — the Paris scene — might well be thought through in terms of a relationship of desire which goes beyond the deliberately seductive quality of his writing for which Jefferson makes an important claim. Should we respond by trying to theorize his final values on his behalf? Or did Barthes's seduction attempt succeed to such an extent that he finally rendered himself, like the loved one of *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, so singular, extraordinary and *tel*, that he placed himself not only beyond adjectival definition, but also beyond critical evaluation? If so, despite my regret that he did not

try harder with *La Chambre claire*, Culler's uncompromising refusal to be won over is perhaps, in the long run, more theoretically productive than a love affair with no future.

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